



A Modest Proposal

I'm not sure how many people actually read these articles. If truth be told, I write them because I like writing as much as anything else. But I imagine this TBB will be more read and discussed, and perhaps disagreed with, more than most.

I want to talk about contraceptives, specifically the Pill. If you don't want to read about birth control or you don't want a young person in your family reading about birth control, then be sure to put this article in the appropriate place.

I have a modest proposal for all Christian couples, married, engaged, or soon to be: think, research, and pray carefully about birth control. I am not against birth control, though I admit some disease with trying to prevent conception. We've used it on occasion in our marriage and I don't counsel engaged couples to avoid it. Presently, I am not against birth control. What I am against is the thoughtless use of birth control. I have always been bothered by the fact that so few Protestants give birth control a second thought, or even a first thought.

Most Christians throughout history have been opposed to birth control and most Protestants were until fairly recently. Yet over the past ten years as most of my friends have gotten married I can count on one hand the number of Christian friends—godly, sincere, biblical Christians—who even pondered for a moment (aloud at least) whether they should use birth control or not. Rare is the Protestant Christian who ever considers that birth control might not be the right choice. True, Christians disagree about birth control. But Paul doesn't tell us to ignore the issue when it's debatable. He instructs us to think and pray and glorify God and let "each one be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

My position on birth control is best summarized as hesitant but not opposed. The arguments for birth control make sense to me: couples need to adjust to married life first; older couples may have health problems; the timing may seem to be off; trusting God doesn't mean we can't be wise with our bodies. These are good arguments. And the arguments against birth control make sense too: God is sovereign over conception; God will supply our needs; children are always viewed as blessings in Scripture; the wisdom of the past stands against contraception. So what to do? Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind. In the end, Trisha and I decided to use birth control on occasion because (1) we felt like the Catholic approach to natural family planning wasn't any more natural (1 Corinthians 7 warns against abstinence within marriage) and (2) it seemed wise to us to be married at least a short time before conceiving (turned out to be less than a year, about which we have no regrets).

But we didn't come to this conclusion lightly, and I'm still probably light on the "fully" part of convinced. We read and talked and prayed a lot. We searched our hearts. We didn't want to be selfish and we didn't want the attitude that children would dash all our hopes and dreams for the first years of married life. We wanted to trust God.

But I'll be the first to admit trusting God with conception (i.e., not using birth control) in our situation is relatively easy. We are both open to a large family (we have two kids and a third on the way). We own a house that is not yet full. We have a steady income (at least we did before this TBB!). We have no serious health problems. Trisha's pregnancies

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have not been overly difficult and she does not seem to get pregnant very quickly after giving birth. So even when I feel hesitant about birth control for us, I have a hard time feeling as hesitant for others whose circumstances are not as fortuitous.

Nevertheless, regardless of your situation, think, research, and pray about contraception. Be fully convinced in your own mind, or at least as convinced as you can be. There are few issues more important than sex, marriage, and children. It's not a Catholic thing to think about birth control.

And while you are thinking about birth control in general, I urge you to think about the Pill in particular. The Pill is the popular term for a variety of oral contraceptives (OC's) or birth control pills (BCP's). They are sometimes called combination pills because they contain both estrogen and progesterin. Every year, the pill is used by 14 million American women and around 60 million women worldwide.

The Pill is sometimes prescribed for reasons other than birth control and the ethical considerations in those situations may be different, but most often women take the pill to avoid contraception. The question debated among Christians is whether the pill sometimes act as an abortifacient. That is, does the pill have the potential to terminate the life of a zygote (the single cell the results from a fertilized egg)?

Respected Christian groups like Focus on the Family's Physicians Research Counsel and the Christian Medical and Dental Association have issued non-statement statements, arguing that as of yet no consensus exists on the issue. Both of the aforementioned groups recognize differing opinions among Christians, and in light of what they consider inconclusive evidence one way or the other, urge more research and study.

Others have found the evidence more conclusive. Christian author Randy Alcorn (not an M.D.) has published a 115 page booklet explaining why he believes birth control pills do sometimes cause abortions. For years, Alcorn's wife used the pill and as a pastor, Alcorn recommended it to newlyweds. So changing his mind was not easy, but over time he did.

According to Alcorn and the physicians he cites, the pill works mainly by prohibiting ovula-

tion, but it also works by thinning the line of the uterine wall (endometrium), making the implantation of a fertilized egg less likely. The Physician's Desk Reference states with reference to the contraceptive pill, Ortho-Cept: "Although the primary mechanism of this action is inhibition of ovulation, other alterations include changes in the cervical mucus, which increase the difficulty of sperm entry into the uterus, and changes in the endometrium which reduce the likelihood of implantation." The Pill works in three ways, Alcorn argues: preventing ovulation, preventing sperm penetration, and preventing zygote implantation.

Granted, in the vast majority of cases, an egg will not be fertilized. But sometimes it will. And using the pill makes successful implantation of the new life less likely. Alcorn documents journal articles, MRI results, ultra sound technology, and reproductive endocrinologists who confirm that (1) endometrial thickness is related to functional receptivity and (2) the Pill thins the endometrium.

A number of doctors support Alcorn's thesis, while others, like those who issued a pro-life Ob/Gyn's statement, have called the "hostile endometrium" notion a myth. Both Alcorn's defenders and the Ob/Gyn's statement can be found on Alcorn's website epm.org. Click on "ProLife" and scroll down the page to find a number of articles on birth control.

For Trisha and I, even the possibility of terminating a fertilized egg made us skittish about the Pill. We've never used it, though many of our Christian friends have. I encourage every couple in URC using or contemplating the Pill to research the issue for themselves. Consult a physician and ask about the possible abortifacient affects of oral contraceptives. The issue is obviously more complex than a one page summary from your non-medically trained pastor.

Many Christians have little awareness of any controversy surrounding the Pill. This article is not meant to shame those who have used or are using the Pill. This is not a litmus test for leadership, fellowship, or anything else. But at the very least, we owe it to ourselves, our children, and the Lord to prayerfully consider the rights and wrongs of the pills we take and prescribe.