

TRINITY FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

Cardiphonia

Sounds of the Heart: Reflections on the Christian Life

Childbirth and Birth Control: Is There a Clear Biblical Perspective?

Timothy M. Shorey
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Series Introduction

This *Cardiphonia* series is presented to provide *pastoral counsel with pastoral heart* for today's Christian. This is part of my intentional pastoral commitment to serve more effectively the theological and character growth of those in my care. I've created this medium to help shine more of *the whole counsel of God* into your hearts.

With its title derived from two Greek words—one meaning *heart* and the other *sounds*—our *Cardiphonia* series expresses the *heart sounds* of the pastoral leadership of Trinity Fellowship Church. In the course of life and ministry, pastors hear God speak through Word and circumstance, and gain perspective for the lives of those entrusted to their care. As they meditate on God's Word and care for God's people, God places within their hearts passions, burdens and joys that are intended for God's church. The *Cardiphonia* booklets attempt to serve both the pastoral team and the congregation of TFC by transferring such joys and concerns from our hearts to yours.

I offer this series in *faith* that God will bless any truth it expresses *and* will guard His church from any error that might creep in. I present it with the prayer that it will help provide more spiritual food for the Lord's flock in ways that will bless and strengthen those I love. May the blessing of God rest upon you as you hear these heart sounds expressed.

Yours in Christ,

Tim Shorey
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Childbirth and Birth Control: Is There a Clear Biblical Perspective?

Introduction

In the course of my pastoral care I have interacted with couples often about children, family size, and birth control related questions. My answers have tried to strike a balance between two fundamentally opposing points of view in an attempt to promote what I believe is a more biblical, more middle ground perspective.

This middle perspective isn't an effort to ride the fence or please everyone,¹ but rather to be faithful to what the Bible *says* and does *not* say. In other words, I've tried to be faithful to God's Law as I understand it by neither ignoring what it says, nor adding to what it says. This has been no easy task, since the opposing viewpoints tend to be strong and insistent.

On one side of the issue is today's cultural attitude regarding children. This is marked by basic disinterest, selfish disregard, unbelieving fear, perverse disgust, and a hedonistic *me-centered* mindset. Consequently, more times than not I've needed to encourage couples to place a biblical value on children and to have faith for as many children as possible.

But along the way I have encountered another point of view which needs a careful response. While I have high respect for this perspective (I largely agree with it *in spirit*), it too needs some biblical adjustment. This is the view diametrically opposed to the cultural view prevalent in our times.

This opinion holds that there should be *no use* of contraceptives for the purposes of "controlling" the timing and/or number of children a couple has.² This strong pro-children, pro-life, and pro-family conviction is one which fits well with my own

¹ I have no illusions in this regard. To ride the fence is cowardice; to try to please everyone is futility. I expect my convictions on this matter to offend folks on both sides of this debate.

² This viewpoint is the one held by Roman Catholicism and some conservative evangelicals. It has gained something of a movement status through groups connected to *Quiverfull*, and the writings of people like Mary Pride and Nancy Campbell.

The traditional Roman Catholic view is expressed by Pope Pius XI in the words: "Any use whatever of marriage, in the exercise of which the act by human effort is deprived of its natural power of procreating life, violates the law of God and nature, and those who do such a thing are stained by a grave and mortal flaw" (*Casti Connubi*).

convictions on many matters. But I do not believe its strongest claims can be fully supported by the written Word of God, and is therefore in danger of becoming another form of all too common legalism.

While the *no contraception* viewpoint has enjoyed a long and honorable history,³ I do believe it goes beyond the clear teaching of the Word of God. And while I

³ There seems to be no denying that this view has been a strong, if not the consensus view of Christians throughout church history, as the following citations (from Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control*) would show:

- *"Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted"* (Clement of Alexandria, A.D. 195, *The Instructor of Children*).
- *"[Some] complain of the scantiness of their means, and allege that they have not enough for bringing up more children, as though, in truth, their means were in [their] power . . . or God did not daily make the rich poor and the poor rich. Wherefore, if any one on any account of poverty shall be unable to bring up children, it is better to abstain from relations with his wife"* (Lactantius, A.D. 307, *Divine Institutes*).
- *"If anyone in sound health has castrated himself, it behooves that such a one, if enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who willfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men this canon admits to the clergy"* (*The First Council of Nicaea*, A.D. 325).
- *"I am supposing, then, although you are not lying [with your wife] for the sake of procreating offspring, you are not for the sake of lust obstructing their procreation by an evil prayer or an evil deed. Those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame. Sometimes this lustful cruelty, or cruel lust, comes to this, that they even procure poisons of sterility [oral contraceptives]"* (Augustine, A.D. 419, *Marriage and Concupiscence*).
- *"[T]he exceedingly foul deed of Onan, the basest of wretches...is a most disgraceful sin. It is far more atrocious than incest and adultery. We call it unchastity, yes, a sodomitic sin. For Onan goes in to her; that is, he lies with her and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination, spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed. Accordingly, it was a most disgraceful crime. . . . Consequently, he deserved to be killed by God. He committed an evil deed. Therefore, God punished him"* (Martin Luther).
- *"The voluntary spilling of semen outside of intercourse between man and woman is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is doubly monstrous. For this is to extinguish the hope of the race and to kill before he is born the hoped-for offspring"* (John Calvin).
- *"Those sins that dishonor the body are very displeasing to God, and the evidence of vile affections. Observe, the thing which he [Onan] did displeased the Lord—and it is to be feared; thousands, especially of single persons, by this very thing, still displease the Lord, and destroy their own souls"* (John Wesley).

There are those who would argue that the historical perspective is not so one-sided as it might seem. Wayne House writes: *"Christians in all ages have generally practiced some form of birth control, whether through medical devices or by more natural means, such as restricting intercourse to certain periods of the*

tremble to disagree with great spiritual leaders of the past, I cannot in good conscience fall into line fully with their dogmatic opinions in this matter. In the final analysis, while due weight and respect must be given to church history, *the question has to be argued and answered with Scripture as our final court of appeal.* In this paper I hope to articulate an in-between view, one that will reject what Al Mohler calls the “contraceptive mentality” of the first view, while simultaneously embracing the *spirit* of the second viewpoint although *not* embracing its letter.⁴

As will be clear, I stand with my brothers and sisters in their high regard for the call *to be fruitful and multiply*, but in the light of other biblical responsibilities couples must consider, and in the absence of any biblical commands explicitly or implicitly forbidding all forms of birth control, I will need to caution against anything like a mandate against the use of non-abortive contraception.⁵

month, or through coitus interruptus...” (*Should Christians Use Birth Control?*, Christian Research Institute). He goes on to write: “*Legal scholar John Noonan, in his authoritative work on contraception, has provided abundant evidence that such [methods] were also used in Christian Europe during the medieval period (AD 450-1450) and the premodern period (AD 1450-1750).*”

⁴ It is the *letter* of this view that I find most troubling. I am very concerned about the legalistic tone of much that I have read by those who hold to this persuasion. They speak dogmatically about matters about which I cannot bring myself to legislate. Lacking full biblical mandate or clear biblical definition as to the specifics connected to some of these issues, I must resist all attempts to make these well-intentioned and even good perspectives into Law. I do not believe we can legislate when God has not specifically done so in His Word.

⁵ I would of course oppose the use of any birth control device or drug that is abortive of a live fetus. Al Mohler writes: “*Christian couples must ensure that the really contraceptive in effect, and not abortifacient. Not all birth control is contraception, for some technologies and methods do not prevent the sperm from fertilizing the egg, but instead prevent the fertilized egg from successfully implanting itself in the lining of the womb. Such methods involve nothing less than an early abortion. This is true of all IUDs and some hormonal technologies. A raging debate now surrounds the question of whether at least some forms of the Pill may also work through abortifacient effect, rather than preventing ovulation. Christian couples must exercise due care in choosing a form of birth control that is unquestionably contraceptive, rather than abortifacient*” (Al Mohler, *Can Christians Use Birth Control?*).

Mark Driscoll has a very helpful overview of various birth control methods in his book, *Religion Saves*, Chapter One. In that chapter Driscoll cites a two-year extensive study of the effects of the birth control pill conducted by *Focus on the Family’s Physicians Resource Council*, under the leadership of Dr. James Dobson. Their conclusion was: “*Pro-life physicians who have carefully and conscientiously studied this issue have come to different conclusions regarding the interpretation and implications of the relevant scientific data. After two years of extended deliberation and prayer, the PRC has not been able to reach a consensus as to the likelihood, or even the possibility, that these medications might contribute to the loss of human life after fertilization. The majority of the experts to which Dr. Dobson has spoken feel that the pill does not have an abortifacient effect. A minority of the experts feel that when conception occurs on the pill,*

I should add that this paper is not meant to be an exhaustive scholarly work so much as a simple and I hope careful attempt to consider various biblical texts and theological perspectives connected to the debate.⁶ Should any find even this short

there is enough of a possibility for an abortifacient effect, however remote, to warrant warning women about it” (Focus on the Family, Position Statement: Birth Control Pills and Other Hormonal Contraception).

⁵ In preparation for this paper I have read the following (in whole or in part): *Birth Dearth or Bring on the Babies: Biblical Perspectives on Family Planning*, by Daniel Doriani; *Does the Bible Permit Birth Control?* by John Piper; *Multiplying Faithfully*, in *Reforming Marriage*, by Douglas Wilson; *Humane Vitae*, by Pope John VI; *Evangelium Vitae*, by Pope John Paul II; *Phony Matrimony*, by Christopher Oleson, in *Touchstone, A Journal of Mere Christianity*; *Birth Control*, in *Religion Saves*, by Mark Driscoll; *Should Christians Use Birth Control?*, by H. Wayne House, Christian Research Institute; *Position Statement: Birth Control Pills and Other Hormonal Contraception*, by Focus on the Family; *Birth Control*, by Sam Storms, *Enjoying God* website; *Christian Ethics Series*; *Contraception*, in *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, by John Jefferson Davis; *Birth Control*, in *Ethics for a Brave New World*, by John and Paul Feinberg.

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presentation too heavy or long for their tastes, I would argue that such a momentous matter should not be considered without at least some careful reflection. A few pages are not too much to read to prepare the mind and heart for decisions on such weighty matters.

The Childbirth Mandate

I begin with the biblical mandate regarding childbirth because this is the concern I have with the first view above, and because it will establish my common ground with the second view alluded to already.⁷

Genesis 1:28

I realize that there is debate as to whether Genesis 1:28 is a command (which it sounds like) or a blessing (which it may well be).⁸ I am not sure that the *blessing* possibility excludes a *command* dimension since there are, as will be seen, biblical imperatives regarding child-birth.

In any case if this is a blessing it is communicating what is to be the perspective of the human race: bearing children is a profound blessing if not solemn and joyful duty. This text should shape all our thinking about having children. It should create nothing but a *joy and privilege mentality* when considering procreation.

⁷ For those who do not know me, I am 50+ year old husband (married to the same wonderful wife for the past 31+ years), a father of six, a grandfather of six (and counting), a home-schooling dad, and a pastor for 27+ years. I am strongly pro-life, pro-large family, and pro-children. At the same time, let it be known that my wife and I have used various forms of birth control. I think, based on these varied facts, that the views expressed in this paper can make some claim of at least moderate objectivity; so at least I hope.

⁸ Excellent Bible scholars differ in their understanding. As will be evident in this work, I will not consider these two views mutually exclusive, since I believe that a benediction can have imperative or at least *mindset-shaping* force. Even if Genesis 1:28 is a benediction first, announcing God's *blessing* on the human race, both its prominence in the text and the assumed joy that such a blessing is meant to produce result in an implied command or at least *divine expectation* that humans will have a pronounced *attitude* of joy, expectancy, and desire regarding having many children. If God promises the *blessing* of great fruitfulness, *it is clear that we should want and pursue that blessing!*

Whether interpreted as a promised blessing or a divine command, the words “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (given here in Genesis 1 at the beginning of time and again in Genesis 9:6 after the flood), cannot be dismissed as an early statement for the human race with no abiding significance for us today. This mandate/blessing carries permanent relevance for all time (as 1 Timothy 5:14 and notes will show). God has placed us here to fill and to rule the earth; a duty/blessing not yet fulfilled in anything like meaningful ways.⁹

I recognize that many rightly suggest that these creation words should be understood in light of New Covenant revelation to include a call to spread the kingdom of God through gospel witness and to be fruitful in the bearing of *spiritual* children. I have no quarrel with such interpretations. In fact I embrace them wholeheartedly.

However, I believe it would be an overly narrow interpretation to suggest that this is *all* these words involve, or that these words no longer carry any of their original significance. In my opinion, humans are *still* to *rule* the earth bringing all of its resources under the dominion of man, and they are still to *fill* the earth, producing as many children as possible (all things considered) to be image bearers of God for the glory of God.¹⁰

The creation calling/blessing regarding human *multiplying* leaves couples with no option but to try to leave the earth *more populated* through children than it was when they married. The Hebrew word means to *increase* or *abound*. Any good concordance will reveal that the word refers almost without exception, to numerical *increase*. This signifies that unless God, for reasons known only to Him, renders a

⁹ It probably goes without saying that I disagree sharply with those who argue that the world is overpopulated. Current problems with hunger and human deprivation are not the result of human overpopulation but of human sin. Tyrannical oppression of the poor and hungry, human waste of natural resources and space, and industrial and lifestyle excesses are all among the reasons why some humans are impoverished and hungry. There is still much land and an astonishing supply of resources untapped on planet earth for the sustaining of many more people than are presently alive. (For an interesting evaluation of population related matters and the benefits of ongoing population growth, see Davis, pp.57-59.)

¹⁰ The commands to “rule and fill the earth” are among what John Murray calls “creation ordinances” (*Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*). Creation ordinances are commands that were given at the moment of creation, which, therefore, are relevant for all humans for all time, unless clearly abrogated by God at a later time.

couple childless or limits them to only one or two children,¹¹ each couple should aim for more.¹²

Psalm 127, 128

These two psalms celebrate the blessing of a *full quiver* of children, also called multiple *olive shoots* around the table. Children are to be seen as a heritage and gift from the Lord. We are to consider them a joy, a glory, a varied assortment of sharpened arrows ready for use in battle for the kingdom of God, and a marriage harvest to be pursued with all eagerness and anticipation. And a woman who bears children is a *fruitful vine* to be cherished above all telling.

While no one knows for sure how many arrows constitute a full quiver, the metaphor clearly suggests a sizable number. And while we cannot say with certainty how many *child-fruits* make a mom a *fruitful vine*, the imagery clearly suggests the idea of *abundance*. Any objective reading of these Psalms forces the conclusion that if God should so ordain it for a family, an abundance of children is a gift to be pursued, cherished, and valued.

It is a sign of the perversity and degradation (terms *not* too strong) of our times that children, and a woman who bears many of them, are not celebrated in a Psalm 127 or 128 kind of way today. In fact, today such a mother often is either scorned or pitied or criticized by her contemporaries. *Is it not an unspeakable perversity to consider the wonder of child-birth, the glory of children, and a life devoted to their nurture and care inferior or degrading?*

¹¹ I believe the command of Genesis 1 to *multiply*, together with the other texts to be considered makes the standard of at least three to four children the normative biblical *minimum* number for children, all things considered. There *may* be *voluntary* exceptional qualifications to this general rule such as: concerns about the health of the mother; demands or dangers of ministry calling; a clear and present lack of competence for more children (due to *severe* physical, intellectual, emotional, relational, and/or parental deficiencies). Even in such cases great care must be taken to discern whether the answer is fewer children or a change of circumstances or even ministry calling wherever possible, so that the childbirth mandate may be obeyed.

¹² “*We were all created to do as our parents have done, to beget and rear children. This is a duty which God has lain upon us, commanded and implanted in us, as is provided by our bodily members [i.e.-it is simply what most of our bodies are made to do!], our daily emotions and the example of all mankind*” (Martin Luther, brackets added).

Romans 1:31 speaks of the *heartlessness* that creeps into a society when consciously it has rejected God. The Greek word used refers to a loss of *natural affections*, and is connected to maternal and parental instincts to care.¹³ When God turns a culture over to its sin (Romans 1:28) the result is that instead of loving children as nature instinctively tells them to, humans neglect and despise them. It is *unnatural*—we can say, *un-human*—not to desire and have strong affections for children. But due to a present hardening of human hearts due to sin, more and more adults are becoming sub-human after this fashion.

It is astonishing that men and women today will actually consider a career or a bigger house or a fancier car or a dream lifestyle or even a ministry calling of greater worth than a human child. They ascribe to objects, money, personal unencumbered freedom, and transparently empty trifles *greater value* than bearing and raising children. This is the tragic state of contemporary human society.

As Christians, we are to stand against the culture and follow God and nature in loving and caring for children, and wanting as many of them as we possibly can. This is the clear message of Psalms 127 and 128.

Malachi 2:13-16 and 1 Corinthians 7:12-14

In Malachi, the prophet solemnly warns against divorce and he gives one reason why God hates it so: God is seeking *godly offspring*.¹⁴ God loves children and wants to see them grow up in strong and stable families where they can receive the steady spiritual influence of covenantally faithful moms and dads.

¹³ The Greek word signifies "*without natural affection*" (a, negative, and storge, "love of kindred," especially of parents for children and children for parents (Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words). The word describes "those in whom the natural affection for...children is suppressed" (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*; see also C.E.B. Cranfield in his *International Critical Commentary on Romans*).

¹⁴ Jeremiah 29:4-6 is an interesting parallel text. In the following words God commands His people who were in exile to keep on multiplying, presumably because it is as His people have a *many children mindset* that the heritage and influence of true religion will continue, even in a pagan land. The text reads: "*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.*"

There is a striking similarity between the argument of the prophet in Malachi and of the apostle in 1 Corinthians. In both places we see that marriage is intended to result in *holy* children, something about which God cares very much.¹⁵ God wants us to stay married, have children, and raise them well. And since we are to be like God and obey God, *we should make sure* to stay married, have children and raise them well.¹⁶

1 Timothy 2:14, 15

Here the apostle declares a marvelous truth about motherhood and child-bearing. Women who are called to bear and raise children¹⁷ by God's grace find great purpose and fulfillment in it. Paul makes the startling statement that they are "*saved through childbearing*".

While he obviously does not mean that they are *saved* from their sins or justified in God's sight, he must mean something very positive. There is some sense in which mothers experience salvation, rescue, a wellness and a fullness through child-bearing. Women who are given children to raise either:

- Are rescued from feelings of inferiority that might arise from the earlier prohibition against teaching men (1 Timothy 2:12); or they—
- Are delivered into their God-ordained glorious niche in which they are able to affect others for God; or they—

¹⁵ I am aware of the position endorsed by Horace Bushnell (*Christian Nurture*) and embraced by others that argues for Christians having large families so they can populate the earth with Christian children. Some even have calculated how quickly that could be done if every family were to have five children. One has to see that while there may be some pragmatic logic to views such as these they cannot be pushed further than that into anything like divine Law.

¹⁶ Since children are God's normal design and desire for marriage (as these texts prove) it should be obvious that so-called "gay marriage" is oxymoronic. Marriage has by design, as one of its purposes, the bearing of children. On this basis alone, since two people of the same sex cannot have children it should be clear that they may not become married in God's sight. But by the same token, heterosexual couples should beware lest they commit a similar violation of God's intent in marriage by getting married but choosing to forego being fruitful and multiplying.

¹⁷ The Greek word speaks of more than the mere *bearing* of children (though on its own that is a wonderful honor beyond any that can be imagined). The idea of *child-raising*, of care, of the whole role of maternal nurture is included in the term.

- Are released from other demands to discover their high calling in which they live and work out their salvation; or they—
- Experience through the patience-requiring, self-renouncing, other-centered raising of children the means of grace through which they escape (are *saved* from) many sins such as selfishness, pride, and self-sufficiency; or they—
- Will know freedom and great joy in raising up children who know and love Christ; or they—
- Experience some measure of all the above.

What exactly Paul means is much debated, but this much is clear: *child-bearing and raising form a high calling that elevates a woman greatly.*¹⁸ Paul's perspective flies in the face of contemporary attitudes and calls on Christian women and couples to adjust their hearts accordingly. To think of having and raising children as restrictive, burdensome, and perhaps even some form of inferior home-bound slavery is simply to think unbiblically. It is to think counter to the clear teaching of this text of God's sacred Word.¹⁹

¹⁸ James Hurley's lengthy statement about this verse is helpful: "*Twentieth-century cultural developments make the selection of child-bearing as the part to represent the whole seem inappropriate or strange. Public opinion is increasingly against the bearing of children. Both men and women often look upon children as a problem and a burden. In some circles the bearing and raising of children is viewed as a prime means of reducing women to bondage. This sentiment is sometimes expressed in the remark 'keep 'em barefoot and pregnant'. It is easy to see that Paul's remarks here will be abrasive if received from such a perspective. We have already considered biblical attitudes toward child-bearing. The bearing and raising of children were considered by women and men alike to be activities of surpassing personal and social worth. The bearing of children was a central element in the definition of womanhood and in the fulfilling of God's calling to mankind. The selfishness of our twentieth century, which does not want its enjoyment of pleasures undercut by the financial and personal obligations entailed in raising a family, was not common in the first century. In his day the bearing of children which Paul selected as a part to represent the whole of the high calling of women was a valued activity which women embraced with joy and with pride and for which they were deeply respected*" (James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*).

¹⁹ It is interesting that a secular voice is now added to corroborate the Apostolic voice of Paul. Author Charles Murray in his book *Human Accomplishment* considers why relatively few women populate the high ranks of business and the rest of society, and he offers this explanation along with all the politically-correct expected ones about *motherhood*. He writes: "*Exceptions exist, but, as a rule, the experience of pregnancy and birth appears to be a more profoundly life-altering experience for women than becoming a father is for men. So closely is giving birth linked to the fundamental human goal of giving meaning to one's life that is had been argued that, ultimately, it is not so much that motherhood keeps women from doing great things outside the home as it is men's inability to give birth that forces them to look for substitutes*" (p. 287).

1 Timothy 5:14

This apostolic word turns the doctrine of his earlier statement into a command.²⁰ Unless called to singleness, young women are to marry and *bear children*.²¹ The Greek word is in the same family as the one used in 1 Timothy 2:15. Here the indicative of chapter two becomes an imperative. Having and raising children is not an option for those who are married; it is a command.²²

Titus 2:4

The command here is for young women to be taught and trained to be *child-lovers* (the Greek word combines the word for *children* with a word for *affectionate love*). It is part of godly womanhood to be a lover of her children. Of course this implies a *desire* for children along with a *high priority affection* for them once they are born.

Conclusion

From all these texts it is clear that there is a mandate from God—issued at creation, but still in force in the New Testament era—to desire many children and to cherish them as one of life’s high privileges, honors and responsibilities.²³

²⁰ The Greek term is an imperative, giving this exhortation absolute moral divine authority.

²¹ Since the Bible is clear that the actual opening of the womb to have children is an act of God, sometimes withheld for reasons of Providence, it is obvious that a woman who marries and tries unsuccessfully to have children has not violated this command. Nor is she in some way *inferior* to those who have children. The reasons for childlessness are among the mysteries of God’s plans that remain secret to Him.

²² “Here it is clearly implied that the general creation mandate to procreate (Gen. 1:28) still applies in the Christian era. The new life in Christ is not so ‘spiritual’ that the propagation of the race through human sexuality is transcended...While voluntary celibacy is recognized in the New Testament, neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer envisions any Christian couple voluntarily remaining childless for the duration of marriage. God still desires ‘godly offspring’ (Mal. 2:15) as a fruit of Christian marriage” (Davis, pp.48, 49).

²³ “The church should insist that the biblical formula calls for adulthood to mean marriage [unless called by God to remain single] and marriage to mean children...[T]he church must help this society regain its sanity on the gift of children. Willful barrenness and chosen childlessness must be named as moral rebellion. To demand that marriage means sex--but not children--is to defraud the creator of His joy and pleasure in seeing the saints raising His children” (Al Mohler, brackets added).

This makes *chosen childlessness* a sin to be repented of and renounced. It makes the bearing of as many children as possible the way of obedience and joy. No couple should choose to be married who does not with that choice choose to be fruitful and multiply.²⁴

Is Childbearing *of the Essence of Marriage*?

It should be clear from what has been written that I believe that having children is a vastly important aspect of marriage. I affirm without reservation that any couple who chooses to be married but (without clear and compelling reason) chooses *not* to be fruitful and multiply is disobedient to the clear command of Scripture, and should repent. I also affirm that each Christian couple should aim to leave the world more populated with people—in this case *godly offspring*—than it was when they were first married.

In saying all this I am standing with those who oppose birth control when it is used with selfish, disobedient, and unbelieving agendas. I embrace the place of children as *a* (though not *the*) primary purpose of God in establishing marriage in the first place.

I would go so far as to say that to get married without the goal of having children (if the couple is of the age when child-bearing is possible) is to fall far short of the biblical mandate and model. It is selfish and worldly, failing to fulfill God's desire for godly offspring and for the spreading of His kingdom through families.

But with that said, I must differ with those who conclude that “bringing forth a family is *of the essence* of marriage”²⁵ and that any sexual intimacy that precludes

“The Bible is pro-child, Christendom has always been pro-child, and consistent Christians must be pro-child today” (Daniel Doriani, “Birth Dearth or Bring on the Babies: Biblical Perspectives on Family Planning”).

24 “First, we 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” (Al Mohler, Ibid.)

²⁵ Christopher Oleson, in an article entitled *Phony Matrimony*, found in *Touchstone*, January, February, 2009.

the conception of a child through contraceptive devices or drugs is wrong.²⁶ Contrary to Mary Pride's assertion, God has nowhere commanded that all sex be at least "potentially fruitful".²⁷ I cannot agree with Christopher Oleson when he writes: "...spouses are not [by implication he means not ever] *deliberately to frustrate the procreative significance of their sexual faculties...[T]he conjugal act is never to be divorced from the procreative significance of that act*".²⁸

Oleson ties marriage to the having of children so closely that he concludes that when a couple shares intimacy *without* the possibility of conception they deny the very *essence* of marriage. Contraception is, in his view, of the same immoral nature as same-sex marriage because it allows for marriage and sex without the possibility of children.

My concern is with the proposition that "bringing forth a family is of the *essence* of marriage". I do not believe it is. Children are *an* important reason for marriage in the mind of God, but not *the* primary reason. I believe there are at least three major reasons given for marriage. It is not the purpose of this paper to expound on these so I can only mention them briefly.

A Drama of Love

According to Ephesians 5:22-33 marriage was created to be a drama portraying the love and covenantal union between Christ and the Church.²⁹ I believe that

²⁶ Mary Pride argues, "*God commanded that sex be at least potentially fruitful (that is, not deliberately unfruitful).... All forms of sex that shy away from marital fruitfulness are perverted*" (Mary Pride, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality*).

²⁷ To assert that God has commanded that sex *always* be open to fruitfulness is to read too much into the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. It is, I fear, a legalistic over-read of the command, for the mandate does not address the question of what a couple may decide to do with respect to the number and/or spacing of children *once they already have been fruitful and multiplied*.

²⁸ Oleson, *Phony Matrimony*, (brackets added).

²⁹ "*Unbeknownst to the people of Moses' day (it was a 'mystery'), marriage was designed by God from the beginning to be a picture or parable of the relationship between Christ and the church. Back when God was planning what marriage would be like, He planned it for this great purpose: it would give a beautiful earthly picture of the relationship that would someday come about between Christ and His church. This was not known to people for many generations, and that is why Paul can call it a 'mystery.'* But now in the New Testament age Paul reveals this mystery, and it is amazing...This means that when Paul wanted to tell the Ephesians about marriage, he did not just hunt around for a helpful analogy and suddenly think that 'Christ

covenantal union is of the essence of marriage (Malachi 2:14; Proverbs 2:16, 17) because it mirrors the very reason for marriage: to dramatize the covenantal union between Christ and His people.

A Partnership in the Kingdom

According to Genesis 1:26-30 and Genesis 2:15-25 Adam was made to rule the earth with great care and skill. But as he began the work it was clear that he was not up to the task on his own, so God made a “helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18).

When God said: “It is not good for man to be alone” He was not referring to the *unhappiness* of Adam’s aloneness, but to the *inadequacy* of his aloneness. It wasn’t that Adam needed companionship so much as Adam needed assistance. There was a planet to rule, and he needed help. Marriage was created to form a partnership to advance God’s kingdom purposes in the world.³⁰

Filling the Earth

and the church’ might be a good teaching illustration. No, it was much more fundamental than that: Paul saw that when God designed the original marriage He already had Christ and the church in mind. This is one of God’s great purposes in marriage: to picture the relationship between Christ and His redeemed people forever” (George Knight).

John Piper adds: “The most ultimate thing we can say about marriage is that it exists for God’s glory. That is, it exists to display God. Now we see how: Marriage is patterned after Christ’s covenant relationship to the church. And therefore the highest meaning and the most ultimate purpose of marriage is to put the covenant relationship of Christ and his church on display. That is why marriage exists. If you are married, that is why you are married...Staying married, therefore, is not about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant” (John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage*, p.25)

³⁰ This is precisely what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 11:9 when he says that “woman was made for man”. Paul is not saying that woman is made to serve man’s whims or pleasures or egotistical agenda or *king of the roost* machoism; she is made to fill up man’s inadequacy in his kingdom work.

Matthew Henry’s winsome words are worth citing here (with my comment added parenthetically): “*The woman was made of a rib out of Adam, not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him and near his heart to be beloved by him” (and at his right hand to be his right hand partner with him).*

Of course, Genesis 1:28 tells husbands and wives to be fruitful and to multiply, implying that one goal of marriage is children, as already stated. But it would be mistaken to conclude from this that this is of the essence of marriage. This cannot be so, since in God's purposes so many married people are childless (by His choice, not theirs), and there is no biblical indicator that their childlessness negates or even in any way diminishes their marriage.

It is an unnecessary inference to conclude that since child-bearing is *one* purpose for marriage and the conjugal act, it is the *only* or *main* purpose for them; or as Mr. Oleson has suggested, the *essence* of either. In fact, I would argue that the essence of marriage (in general) and of the conjugal act (in particular) is not procreative but unitive; not reproductive, but relational; not covenantal offspring, but covenantal love.

Intended for Love, Pleasure, and Purity

I am impressed with the fact that the major Bible texts on human sexuality seem to emphasize the pleasure and love dimensions of intimacy rather than any procreative potential. It seems that sex was intended by God largely, though not exclusively, for pleasure, love, and covenantal intimacy.³¹ This is in stark contrast to the perspective of some I've known personally and others in church history who have viewed sex as a *necessary evil* at best.³²

³¹ It is a remarkable evidence that sex was created for pleasure (at least as much as for any other reason) and also of the Creator's pleasure-giving kindness, that sexual pleasure *is* in fact, so *pleasurable!* It didn't have to be that way. If sex was only or even primarily for procreative purposes, then God could have created us simply with an irresistible urge to procreate with no pleasure component at all. As it is, He went far beyond that: He created sensations and parts of the body which have only one purpose: pleasure. They have no procreative function at all.

³² E.G.-The early ascetics/church fathers (like Jerome) viewed marriage and sex as inferior to celibacy/virginity. Jerome is quoted as saying that the only good that came from marriage is that it "gave me virgins" (i.e.-celibate men and women to serve the church).

As recently as the 1930s, at a major Protestant conference, it was agreed that sexual relationship "*even in marriage must be regarded as a regrettable necessity. Except where children are desired, married persons should remain celibate after marriage, as before*" (*TIME Magazine*, March 30, 1931, emphasis added to indicate my shock at such biblical ignorance).

I believe this view of sex grew out of an early church reaction to cultural evils as well as a theological compromise with Platonism and Stoicism,³³ philosophies that taught that the realm of the spirit was honorable and good while the realm of the physical was inferior at best, and in truth, evil. Physical reality was disdained and consequently physical pleasures were demonized.

This is not biblical or Christian theology; it is in fact a direct assault on the biblical doctrine of creation—that God created the entire physical/material realm as *good* and He did so *for* our thankful enjoyment.³⁴

The Song of Solomon

³³ *“The Roman Catholic understanding of contraception developed as a reaction against the widespread promiscuity and general decline in family life that characterized the Graeco-Roman world into which the church was born. Adultery, divorce, abortion, infanticide, declining fertility rates, and childlessness were common during the declining centuries of the Roman Empire. In the face of such social trends, the church strongly affirmed the sanctity of the marriage bond and the duty of procreation as an essential aspect of marriage.*

“According to Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215), for couples to have sexual relations in marriage ‘other than to procreate children is to do injury to nature’ (Pedagogus 2.10-95.3). Clement and other Christian writers of the period were responding not only to tendencies in pagan society to deny the procreative dimension of marriage, but also to ‘Christian’ Gnostics who were also denying the role of procreation in matrimony, or were taking very libertine views of what ‘Christian freedom’ in sexual matters meant. It was in this context that the fathers adopted the Stoic view (e.g. Musonius Rufus, Reliquiae, sec.63), that procreation was the purpose of sexual intercourse, and that any other purpose was contrary to nature and therefore wrong” (Davis, pp. 40, 41).

It is at least interesting to note that a resurgence of anti-contraception conviction has emerged in recent decades precisely at a time when cultural trends against family and children (*adultery, divorce, abortion, infanticide, declining fertility rates, and childlessness*) have been on the rise as well. Is it possible that Christians today are once again being reactionary in their conclusions rather than biblically measured? Are we at risk of creating laws and attitudes regarding some of these matters that grow out of our fear of and reaction against the world, rather than a careful and balanced understanding of the Word?

It is always best to keep in mind this rule of thumb: the correction to an *abuse* of anything (in this case the world’s attitudes toward sex or children or the use of contraception) is not usually a *non-use* of it, but the *right* use of it. The early church did not get this right in its overall attitudes toward sex (the world’s abuse of sex led the church to an anti-sex perspective); is it possible that we are at risk of the same mistake regarding the use of contraception?

³⁴ See for example 1 Timothy 4:1-5 and Hebrews 13:4.

In Solomon's eight chapter song-celebration of marriage love and sexual joy, it is significant that there is not—to my knowledge—even one mention of children as a goal of the intimacy. It is not even clear that the possibility or desirability of offspring even registered in the thinking of these two lovers.

Unless there's a symbolic reference to children that I'm missing in the midst of Solomon's song of sheer erotic covenantal marriage love, I think this is significant. *The Song* celebrates sexual intimacy and love with no connection to children at all. That's because one major reason for sexual pleasure is the sealing of the marriage union with profound pleasure and joy.

Proverbs 5:18-19

This text says essentially the same thing as Solomon's song implies. Sexual intimacy with one's spouse is meant for exhilarating joy and intoxicating pleasure. There is again no mention of procreation here. Of course the silence in this regard does not necessarily imply that procreation should not be in view. It just doesn't seem to be in Solomon's view either in *Proverbs* or in *The Song*.

What seems to be in view primarily (if not exclusively) is the love and pleasure aspects of sex. What seems to be prominent is not: enjoy intimacy with your wife so you can have children, but enjoy intimacy with your wife so you can share mutual love and pleasure. In Solomon's view, sex is *intended for pleasure*.³⁵

1 Corinthians 7:2-5, 9

Here Paul argues for the necessity of marriage for purity's sake, with no mention of children. People who are going to face raging temptations in being single should do what they can to get married so they can satisfy their sexual needs and desires in the holy context of marriage. In Paul's view, sex is *intended for purity*; again *procreation* is not even mentioned.

³⁵ I'm borrowing a phrase here from Ed and Gaye Wheat's book *Intended for Pleasure*, a book worth reading if a couple wants to pursue fullness of pleasure in married sexual relationship.

He also implies by his reference to “conjugal *rights*”³⁶ and in his command that spouses not “deprive”³⁷ each other that there is very much a personal pleasure component to sex (that has no stated reference to procreation) that must be satisfied or else one is defrauding his/her spouse of what is rightfully owed.

Paul does not argue for sexual activity for the sake of procreation; he argues for it to preserve purity and to grant what rightfully belongs to another. He implies that sex is not a necessary evil “regrettably” to be tolerated, but a sweet kindness generously to be shared.³⁸ It is a kindness pledged in the covenant of marriage.

Conclusion

The point of all this is that sex is intended at least as much for pleasure, purity, and covenantal love as it is for having children. It is reading into Scripture to suggest that sex cannot be enjoyed without procreation being possible in the act.³⁹

Because human sexuality *can* produce children does not mean that having or being open to having children is *of the essence* of the sexual experience.⁴⁰ The Bible

³⁶ The Greek speaks of *kindness due or owed*. In the context it is the kindness of sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Spouses are to be kind to each other in bed; they owe it to each other to please each other through sexual enjoyment and satisfaction.

³⁷ The Greek word is a synonym for “steal”. A spouse is stealing from his/her covenanted sexual partner when legitimate sexual pleasure is withheld.

³⁸ Given the prevalence of male insensitivity and sexual obsession, I should add that men must be careful here not to read this as a *carte blanche* for demanding sex from their wives any time they want it. Paul’s other commands to “nourish and cherish” one’s wife (Ephesians 5:28, 29) and to live with their wives “in an understanding way, showing honor” (1 Peter 3:7) need to balance this text with a commitment to pursue love with one’s wife with due consideration of her needs, condition, and care.

³⁹ “For most evangelicals, the major break with Catholic teaching comes at the insistence that ‘it is necessary that each conjugal act remain ordained in itself to the procreating of human life.’ That is, that every act of marital intercourse must be fully and equally open to the gift of children. This claims too much, and places inordinate importance on individual acts of sexual intercourse, rather than the larger integrity of the conjugal bond...The focus on ‘each and every act’ of sexual intercourse within a faithful marriage that is open to the gift of children goes beyond the biblical demand. Since the encyclical does not reject all family planning, this focus requires the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ methods of birth control. To the evangelical mind, this is a rather strange and fabricated distinction. Looking at the Catholic position helps, but evangelicals must also think for themselves, reasoning from the Scriptures in a careful consideration” (Mohler, *Ibid.*).

seems with some emphasis to promote sexual pleasure for the sake of its relational effects on the marriage itself, quite apart from its procreative potential.⁴¹

If Scripture made clear that having procreation (or at least the potential of conception) in view is of the essence of the conjugal act, then the discussion about birth control of any kind (artificial or natural) would be over. Couples simply would have to trust God with no regard for timing, and with no matters of personal choice or wisdom involved at all. But if, as I believe, that case can *not* be made from Scripture then further considerations need to be factored in.

What about Natural Law?

Many would argue that while *Scripture* may not mandate that sex and procreation invariably be connected, *nature* does.⁴² Those opposing birth control argue that nature reveals that the goal of sex is conception, which means that to engage in sexual relations without conception being at least a potentiality is to act *unnaturally* (i.e.-contrary to nature, and by implication, to nature's God).

⁴⁰ Some argue that since male sperm "can" produce human life (i.e.-they have the potential of human life in them) it is wrong to spill them in sexual activity with no possibility of conception. They suggest that it violates the sanctity of human life to "waste" *potential* life in this way. But this is to make God guilty in His creative design since in every sexual act millions of sperm are "wasted", even when one leads to conception. Clearly the fact that a sperm has the potential to begin life does not mean that it *is* human life. *Potential* is not the same as *actual*—and that distinction is huge.

⁴¹ This is probably the place to include a word about Onan and the strange episode of Genesis 38:8-10. While many see God's judgment of Onan for "wasting his seed" as a divine punishment for having sex without allowing for conception, that is missing the point. In my opinion the sin of Onan was not that he spilled his seed, but that he failed to perform ancient *kinsman redeemer* duties. These required that a man, when possible, raise up offspring for a brother who had died without children. I realize that some argue that the punishment of death for this kinsman redeemer offence seems to go beyond what is required elsewhere in the Law, but that is to miss an important reality about sin, *any* sin. Sin in any form is worthy of death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23), and there are times when God will interrupt our normal human experience of His forbearance to remind us of that. By exacting the death penalty for this sin immediately, even when He normally did not do so, God intended to remind His people of how seriously God takes this sin, and of what every sin deserves (similarly God does not normally require immediate death for every lie, but in Acts 5:1-11 He does so to remind us of how bad lying really is). God's punishment of Onan for failing to be a kinsman redeemer was simply a reminder of how sinful that act was. It like all sin, was worthy of death.

⁴² See Feinstein and Feinstein, pp.174ff for a discussion of this topic.

In my view, one should always be cautious with both the concept and application of *natural law*. It is a moral category which lacks clarity and precision (especially when compared to *Scriptural Law*). I would never be comfortable binding anyone's conscience to imprecise dictates based on fallible conclusions of fallen man regarding the fuzzy moral revelations made in nature. At best, perceived natural moral laws can have only a supplemental role in confirming the clear moral laws of God's Word.

That said, I do wonder what nature and natural law actually say to us. If we are to take this as our guide, does it not in fact say something quite different than what is supposed by some? *I would suggest that nature might actually build a fairly strong case for sexual pleasure in marriage with no procreation in view.* Consider the following three observations:

1. Sex in marriage is profoundly pleasurable and relationship strengthening, quite apart from any procreation possibility. God made it that way in His natural realm.
2. The woman's *clitoris* has only one known function: pleasure. It serves no procreative purpose at all, begging the question: why did God make it if not for pleasure alone?
3. The average woman has periods every month and then a 20-30 year period at the end of life during which sexual desire and pleasure continue *while no possibility of conception does.*

I wonder if these facts may suggest that nature's God intended us to realize that while sex has a procreative purpose that is not by any means the required or even normative role of sex.

Consider it this way: if for the sake of argument we grant to natural law Divine authority, is it not essential that we understand and honor the *whole* of that law?

Doesn't natural law actually teach us two things? One: sometimes human sexuality is to be enjoyed with pleasure, relationship, purity, *and* procreation in view. Two: sometimes human sexuality is to be enjoyed with pleasure, relationship, purity, and *no* procreation in view.

Given the Scriptural data above I cannot help but wonder if this lesson from nature corroborates what God says more explicitly in His Word. Sex is in fact *intended for pleasure* both in times when procreation is possible and in those many times and periods when—by God's natural order of things—it is not.

The Cultural Mandate

Part of the original commission to man and woman is the command (what theologians call the *cultural mandate*) to rule the earth and *have dominion* over nature. This has been understood rightly to mean that humans are called by God to bring all of nature under their rule, to master the forces and resources of nature for the glory of God.

Oddly enough—at least some might think—I believe that this cultural mandate has implications for our discussion on birth control. Conception is one part of the created order over which God has called us to have dominion. I know of no biblical truth that *excludes* the natural process of conception from the nature that man is commanded to rule. If God has given man the ability to manage conception (without aborting it⁴³) then why should man not use that ability so long as he has obeyed or is committed to obeying all the *be fruitful and multiply* related commands?

In fact, could it not be argued that if man has the ability, without destroying human life, to manage conception according to principles of wisdom, but chooses not to, that he is *failing to obey* this Genesis 1 mandate? If there are factors that suggest that it is neither wise nor of maximum benefit for the kingdom of God to have an indefinite amount of children without any management of the timing or number of them, would it not be a failure to obey the cultural mandate to *rule* nature if one *lets* nature take its course?

To be sure, every married couple should plan to multiply the human population as commanded by God. But is it not entirely conceivable (pun intended) that along with that commitment, they can exercise dominion over nature in deciding how many to have or how far apart to space them?

Don't All Use Birth Control?

⁴³ There is a vast difference in my mind between taking steps to preclude conception and taking steps to abort it. The first exercises dominion over nature as God commands, while the second seeks to play God by destroying life which God created. Any birth control mechanism which aborts a baby-in-or-on-the-way-to the womb is nothing short of murder.

Unless I am mistaken, it seems to me that nearly all, if not all married couples I know (even those who oppose contraception) are living by the cultural mandate as it relates to conception. They may not use artificial birth control but they do use birth control nonetheless.

Rhythm and other *natural family planning* methods for managing the number and timing of children are exercises in dominion. Whatever their personal reasons may be, couples who use these methods are choosing to control as best they can their reproductive lives. Isn't a couple seeking to influence the outcome (i.e.-failing to trust God alone with the matter of child-birth⁴⁴) when they are intimate at a certain time because they want to conceive, and/or refrain from intimacy at another time because they hope to avoid conception?

I do not oppose these methods, but I do believe that there is *no real moral distinction* between them and other more artificial (non-abortive) methods. Are not those who choose to use them making their choices based on principles of wisdom or health or other factors, just like those who use artificial methods? Is there really any difference?

Factors in Guiding the Number and Timing of Children

I would conclude that birth control is one aspect of fulfilling the cultural mandate. That means that *in my view it is legitimate for Christian couples to exercise some measure of God-given authority/dominion over the natural process of conception.*

With that in view, we are left with the question of number and timing. As I approach this I am conscious of a strange discomfort of soul. In arguing for the legitimate *use* of contraception, I find myself strongly objecting to its *abuse*.

In other words, while I must defend the use of contraception as a God-endorsed exercise of dominion over nature, *I cannot defend the common reasons* given for its use in our culture today. While conscientious Christians have the freedom to make

⁴⁴ I insert this parenthetically because those who oppose birth control often argue that couples need simply to *trust God* in the timing and number of children. My argument is that if it is a failure to trust God if one uses artificial birth control measures, how is it any less a failure to trust God if one uses “natural” measures? The distinction is, in my view, groundless and false.

decisions of their own, I am gravely concerned over the reasons and attitudes that are shaping most of those decisions.

Too many are deciding on the number and timing of children based on the very same factors that the world uses. They have worldly aspirations for a certain lifestyle or career or comfort and convenience level, all of which preclude them from having all the children that God wants them to have.

Furthermore they are controlled by unbelief, fear, and anxiety, doubting God's ability to provide the basic needs they would have in raising a larger family.

God says to be fruitful and multiply. God says to have a full quiver and a fruitful vine. God says to love and cherish children, and to consider them a divine heritage and a woman's great honor. God says He wants godly offspring. God says that He wants us to raise as many godly children as we can to be arrows sent out into the world for His glory and cause.

All these factors indicate to me that Christian couples ought to have as many children as their health, housing, time, energy, money, and kingdom responsibilities will allow. To be even more direct, taking the biblical data into account, it seems that the vast majority of Christian couples starting out should hope and expect to have more children than the two children per household the culture sees as ideal.

But there is more to consider.

Humble, Honest, Faith-filled Wisdom

In my opinion, once a couple has fulfilled the duty to multiply⁴⁵, in faith that God will provide the grace and resources needed to obey this basic command, they are

⁴⁵ If I am pressed on the question of number, I would suggest that a minimum of three or four children is what the Bible's evidence points to as a Christian norm. I cannot legislate that since there is nowhere in the Bible where a number is given (though I do believe the arguments cited lead to this conclusion). That said, I'm sensitive to the fact that some reading this may have decided not to have any children or may have stopped at one or two. How are they to respond to my conclusion that the Bible norm is meant to be more? I encourage them to find grace in the gospel of Christ. Jesus died for all our sins—those we have committed willfully or ignorantly. If there has been a failure to obey the mandate to multiply, grace is free and full for this like it is for any other sin we may commit. Go to God and ask forgiveness, and then get on with life, fully confident in the forgiving grace of God, and fully assured that He has much kingdom work for you to do. Know too that you can have many spiritual children through witness and church life; a blessing not to be despised!

not only free, but *responsible* to proceed with godly, humble, honest, faith-filled, and wisdom-guided discernment from there out. From that point on it becomes their choice (a choice for which they will answer to God) to determine the spacing and number of their remaining children.⁴⁶

These decisions should be:

- *God-centered* (consciously done for the glory of God as per 1 Corinthians 10:31, with much prayer and a deliberate commitment to choose only what will give God the most glory and display His grace and goodness most brightly);
- *unselfish* (not concerned about whether additional children might cramp our lifestyle or frustrate one's career or other aspirations);
- *faith-filled* (not doubting God's ability to provide far more than one can imagine);⁴⁷
- *reverent* (fully conscious that every decision is made in the sight and company of a holy God before Whom we will one day stand, a God who knows the real reasons why we make the choices we do, and will hold us accountable for them);⁴⁸
- *kingdom-minded* (genuinely concerned first and foremost to discern what will serve the advance and edification of the Church most effectively as best we can tell, always mindful that there are other ways to have children—i.e. there are spiritual children to birth and raise as well);⁴⁹

⁴⁶ It should go without saying of course, that God is sovereign. He has a way of intervening in such matters by opening wombs that are thought shut. He knows how to circumvent our attempts to manage nature when He has purposes of His own for our lives. When this happens the “surprise” child should be loved and cherished like all others.

⁴⁷ Generally speaking, couples can afford more children than they might think. A commitment to a simple, luxury-limited lifestyle that rejects the world's standards and definitions of *need* will permit more children in the budget than the world would conclude. I know careful thrifty people who are providing for 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 children and more, on a salary half of what people caring for two children have! That's said, it should be added that a couple who is unemployed, under-employed or unable to provide for the basic needs of their present family should be very careful before adding to their number (1 Timothy 5:8).

⁴⁸ This is the guiding principle in all areas of Christian liberty (that is, in all matters in which we do not have explicit or implicit command from God as to the rightness or wrongness of any action. See Romans 14:7-12).

⁴⁹ I should not decide to have either a couple of children or even a lot of children just because I *want* one or the other. The interests of the kingdom of God must factor into this decision. John Piper has this in mind when he writes in opposition to absolutely no birth control advocates: “*It is very important to delight*

- *spiritual disciplines-aware* (mindful that Christ calls His people to both personal and congregational spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible reading and study, fellowship, worship, evangelism, etc. When an indiscriminate number or spacing of children precludes the regular practice of these disciplines one has to wonder about the wisdom of that number or spacing;
- *children-focused* (attentive to the children we already have, to make sure that we are able to care thoroughly and completely for the physical, spiritual, and full-orbed development of those already in our charge);⁵⁰
- *wife and mom-attentive* (careful to understand the needs, and physical and spiritual condition of the mother so as not to endanger the welfare of either);⁵¹
- *husband-surrendered* (husbands should approach this decision with the assumption that if birth control is decided upon *they* will be the ones

in the reality that ‘children are a gift of the Lord.’ But some people go further and argue from this that since children are gifts from God, it is wrong to take steps to regulate the timing and number of children one has. ..In response, it can be pointed out that the Scriptures also say that a wife is a gift from the Lord (Proverbs 18:22), but that doesn’t mean that it is wrong to stay single (1 Corinthians 7:8). Just because something is a gift from the Lord does not mean that it is wrong to be a steward of when or whether you will come into possession of it. It is wrong to reason that since A is good and a gift from the Lord, then we must pursue as much of A as possible. God has made this a world in which tradeoffs have to be made and we cannot do everything to the fullest extent. For kingdom purposes, it might be wise not to get married. And for kingdom purposes, it might be wise to regulate the size of one’s family and to regulate when the new additions to the family will likely arrive. As Wayne Grudem has said, ‘It is okay to place less emphasis on some good activities in order to focus on other good activities’” (John Piper, “Does the Bible Permit Birth Control?”)

⁵⁰ The work of true parenting is hard work demanding everyday and all day labor. Given the multi-faceted task of raising children in the ways of God and in safety from worldly influences, all in conjunction with the many hours of labor needed in a culture like ours to provide for their basic needs, a couple needs to ask: “How many children can I raise effectively and thoroughly in the things of God, with the time and resources available to me? What does wisdom say about this?” Remember that *God is not looking so much for a gang of offspring as godly offspring*. It is not so much the number of children as the character of children that God desires. To have many children, several of which fail to rise up as strong men and women of God due to parental inability to nurture them all with adequate spiritual care, is actually to replenish the enemy’s army, not God’s.

Factoring into this is Peter’s call to husbands to know their wives well and live with them accordingly (1 Peter 3:7). While I would argue that husbands and wives need to seek faith for having as many children as they can fully parent, it is crucial to discern that some wives simply may not bear and raise as many children as others, all things considered.

⁵¹ Couples must take into account such spiritual factors as the wife/mom’s need for quiet, devotional time with God and the exercise of other spiritual gifts and callings beyond motherhood. They must also consider various factors like disease and the physical condition of the mother (and maybe already born children) in determining whether the risks involved in having more children are too great. To have more children when such risks are great (and ability to avoid conception exists) may not be trusting God so much as *testing* God, something we are prohibited from doing.

surrendering themselves to the process; as the leader of the marriage they are the ones who should lead the way in putting the happiness and pleasure of their wives *above* their own).⁵²

With all these factors in mind, and having received counsel from wise, Biblically-guided advisors, the final decision must be left to each couple. That decision is a matter of liberty and each will stand or fall before the Lord. Lacking a clear Scriptural mandate regarding the *number and timing* of children we are left to make our own decisions humbly, and then to leave others to make theirs.

Conclusion

Needless to say, this is a topic of deep emotional and spiritual impact. Childbirth and child-raising, together with concern for the next generation, are fundamental human, not to mention *biblical* priorities. So it is not surprising that debates over the topics at hand stir strong feelings.

I hope that in this reflection, I have helped to advocate a biblical pro-life, pro-family perspective without going beyond the actual teaching and commands of God's Word. It'll be up to each person and couple to decide whether I have succeeded in this attempt.

May God give each of us grace and humility as we pursue the mind of God in this tremendously important matter.

⁵² I have heard women say that they struggle with birth control because it is one more thing to which they feel their husbands dictate that they must submit. I had a college professor tell me that if birth control is used, the husband is the one who should gladly suffer the loss of convenience and pleasure in the process; that, after all is what *love* is willing to do, and leaders should lead the way in love.