

In this essay, C. E. Cerling, Jr., a United Methodist clergyman, re-examines abortion and contraception in the light of biblical revelation.

Abortion and Contraception in Scripture

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is the examination of the biblical teaching relating to the problems of abortion and contraception. This examination it is hoped will provide a necessary foundation for discussions of the problems in the ethical realm, particularly the problem of whether abortion is equivalent to murder. Before one can consider the problems in terms of specific situations it is necessary to establish general principles that can be applied to all situations.¹ By focusing attention on the problems of overpopulation, poverty, and other matters relating to these problems, one moves from the area of theology to situation-dominated ethics.²

Is it fair to ask of documents as old as the Bible questions concerning abortion and contraception, questions that appear to have such modern origins? The questions are fair, because they are not really questions unique to the present age. Noonan,³ who gives the most thorough discussion of the early Church's attitude toward contraception as it developed historically,⁴ devotes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. J. W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964), p. 232 states that ethical principles may even present situations where a principle is more important than a life. But he also affirms the importance of difficult cases to test one's ethic (p. 199).

² J. W. Montgomery, "How to Decide the Birth Control Issue," *Christianity Today X* (March 4, 1966), 9. William E. Hulme, "A Theological Approach to Birth Control," *Pastoral Psychology XI* (April, 1960), 26-7. It should also be added that these secondary considerations may force re-examination of one's original position because of factors not considered in scripture because not applicable to the biblical milieu.

³ J. T. Noonan, Jr. *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), chapter one.

⁴ Noonan writes from the Catholic perspective, but since much of the teaching of the Church is the teaching of the Catholic Church during the early years of development, treatment from the Catholic perspective is valid. See also Lloyd Kalland, "Views and Positions of the Christian Church--An Historical Review," *Birth Control and the Christian*, eds. Walter O. Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1969), 417.

much of his first chapter to a discussion of methods of contraception and abortion in the ancient world. Whole treatises were written on the topics in cultures having intimate contact with the children of Israel.⁵

A paper on the biblical teaching on birth control automatically excludes any discussion of birth control for the unmarried. The Bible never entertains the idea that sexual intercourse apart from the marital relationship is justified (Ex. 20:14; I Cor. 6:13-20). For this reason the morality of birth control for the unmarried is like the question of whether a bank robber should use a Ford or a Plymouth as his getaway car. The more important question is whether he should ever rob a bank. The question of birth control for the unmarried is also a question of protection in sin, a question never raised.

The question of abortion for the unmarried poses a different problem. Abortion for those involved in pregnancies induced by rape or forced incest and those women whose health would be endangered or who may produce a genetically damaged child should be considered under the sections dealing generally with abortion. This discussion, though, will also not consider the problems involved in the pregnancies of women who have co-operated in illicit intercourse, except for cases covered by the problems stated above. Unmarried women involved in illicit intercourse are not a subject for this study for the same reasons as given in the preceding paragraph concerning contraception and the unmarried.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN POSITION ON CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION⁶

One cannot discuss the biblical teaching on contraception without considering at the same time the teaching of the Church and its development.⁷ Traditional teaching needs to be understood in the light of scripture (sometimes misunderstood), the philosophical climate, the religious climate, and current medicinal practices.⁸ For example, Paul writes in Romans 1:26-7 of "unnatural

⁵ See below pp. 48-49.

⁶ Noonan, *Contraception* ch. one, on whose work this section is based, treats the development of the Catholic Church's teaching from the dawn of the Church age until the modern era.

In this paper the patristic material is examined first because it shows the source of many present day attitudes. We can also see how and to what the fathers reacted in forming their teaching to see if our teaching should be formed through the interaction of scripture and ideas similar to those of the fathers.

Since the I.U.D.'s status as contraceptive or abortifacient is still being debated, further medical research needs to establish where it should be included.

⁷ Generalizations about the Church do not indicate that the author thinks all churchmen agreed on a given position. What is assumed is that the majority of people writing on a topic agreed on a basic core of teaching that can be fairly called the teaching of the Church.

⁸ Noonan, ch. two.

acts." The early Church fathers thought that "natural" was the obvious function of an act; they thought the function of sexual relations that is most natural is the procreation of children.⁹ This view is now considered a misinterpretation, but it was used to develop the view of sex that dominated the Church for almost two thousand years.

Current medical practice also affected the development of early Church teaching. Contraception and abortion were treated together because of the difficulty of differentiating them in the early stages of pregnancy.¹⁰ Many of the contraceptive methods used were powerful enough to cause an abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. By combining this difficulty with the known fact that abortion and contraception were frequently connected with the work of magicians,¹¹ it is easier to understand why the Church condemned such practices.

An interpretative principle that one can occasionally see operating in the Church also played a part in the development of the early Church's teaching; this is the principle of maximization. Maximization occurs when a weak or easily misunderstood passage is explained and used as the basis for a strong stand on a controversial subject. The interpretation of Genesis 38 (Onanism) is an example. A passage that is not clear was used to condemn contraception.¹²

The patristic age generally had a pessimistic view of marriage.¹³ It would appear that the Church fathers took I Corinthians 7 to heart without the corrective of Ephesians 5. This low view of marriage, combined with the above interpretation of Romans 1:26-7, resulted in a view of sex that was purely functional; therefore intercourse is frequently condemned if it is primarily for pleasure. Since the act is functional, and contraception would interfere with that function, one would only use contraception if one wanted to engage in sex relations for pleasure--something strongly condemned. And if pleasure were not one's intention, covetousness could be the only other reason for prohibiting children, because limiting the size of one's family would be economically advantageous, and covetousness is also wrong.

Abortion was equated with murder very early in the patristic period. In its explanation of the "Two Ways" the Didache represents abortion as murder along

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-5. This view was held even through the 19th century. Herschel Wilson Yates, Jr. "American Protestantism and Birth Control," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1968), ch. three.

¹⁰ Noonan, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² Other passages used in this way are Romans 1:26-7 and I Thess. 4:4. An example more familiar to most people would be the maximization that has taken place in the Roman Catholic Church with regard to Jesus' statement to Peter at Caesarea Philippi. This passage is weak and easily misunderstood as support for papal infallibility, but it is used to justify it.

¹³ Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 24.

with the exposure of infants.¹⁴ This is readily understandable if one reads the septuagint translation (really rewording) or the Hebrew of Exodus 21:22-23¹⁵ where accidental abortion is punished by the death penalty. Naturally, if accidental abortion deserves death, then intentional abortion should deserve no lesser punishment.

The Jewish understanding of the purpose of intercourse may also have influenced the Church fathers. The Halakah consistently interprets Genesis 1:28 as a command to have children.¹⁶ A functional understanding of intercourse is also seen in Philo, who expressly condemns intercourse that is not specifically for procreation.¹⁷ With such an attitude current in rabbinic and Philonic Judaism it is not surprising that the Church fathers (Clement, Justin, Origen, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Jerome to name a few) similarly viewed intercourse. Noonan, speaking of the development of the early Church's understanding of the purpose of intercourse, writes:

The construction was not a purely theological enterprise. It was not undertaken in a vacuum, removed from other religious, philosophical, and social strivings. The state of medical knowledge was one factor in the development of theory on marital intercourse. The predominant institutional modifications of monogamous marriage in Roman society, namely, slave concubinage and easy divorce, affected the values which Christians would stress in marriage. Contemporary Jewish thought and contemporary Stoic thought formed other patterns limiting the impact of the Gospels. Gnostic speculation created a current to which Christians reacted.

Within the intellectual and social context of the Roman Empire, the vital acts of selection, discrimination, emphasis, and application of the Biblical texts were performed. In this collaboration between the Christian community and the written word, under the pressures generated by Roman life, the teaching on contraception took place.¹⁸

Stoicism influenced the Christian view by eliminating emotion as a legitimate part of life.¹⁹ The rationale for intercourse then, almost by necessity,

¹⁴ "Didache," *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. and ed. J. B. Lightfoot (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), p. 124.

¹⁵ Exodus 21:22-3 reads in the RSV, "When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. If any harm follows (replaced in the LXX by '-But if it be formed ... ') then you shall give life for life."

¹⁶ Raphael Loewe, *The Position of Women in Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), pp. 36-7.

¹⁷ Philo, *De Josepho*, 9.43 and *De Abrahamo* 137.

¹⁸ Noonan, pp. 45-6. Yates attempts to show similar influences in the early 20th century that helped change attitudes toward contraception.

¹⁹ Noonan, pp. 46-8. This influence is directly tracable in extant writings of both the Church fathers and certain Stoic writers. Seneca writes that "All love of another's wife is shameful; so too, too much love of your own. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not affection. Let him control his impulses and not be borne headlong into copulation. Nothing is fouler than to love a wife like an adulteress. Certainly those who say

became procreation rather than love or pleasure. At the same time the influence of Gnosticism caused another reaction. Reacting to the licentiousness of some Gnostics and the asceticism of others, the fathers took a middle ground. By combining reaction and the overvaluation of virginity, intercourse became understood as simply a procreative act.²⁰

Preceding the fourth century there is no clear-cut condemnation of contraception in any official manner, although there are less clear references.²¹ The view that came to dominate in the Church was formed by Augustine in reaction to the Manichees and as a result of incidents in his personal life.²² Along with his theology, his view became for a while the teaching of the whole Church. No official change in the attitude of the Church in any of its major branches took place until a Lambeth conference of the Church of England in the early 1930s declared contraception acceptable under certain limited conditions.²³

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION

It is difficult to deal with the problems of abortion and contraception in the Old Testament because of the nature of Old Testament culture. The children of Israel considered children a blessing and sterility a curse.²⁴

Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of sons is their fathers (Prov. 17:6).

Lo, sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:3-5).

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord (Psalm 128:3-4).

... and Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; ...' (Genesis 16:2).

that they unite themselves to wives to produce children for the sake of the state and the human race ought, at any rate, to imitate the beasts, and when their wife's belly swells not destroy the offspring. Let them show themselves to their wives not as lovers, but as husbands." (Seneca, *Fragments*, ed. Friedrich G. Haase (Leipzig, 1897), no. 84. See also Jerome, *Against Jovinian* 1.49).

²⁰ Noonan, pp. 56-72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 95.

²² *Ibid.*, ch. four.

²³ Bailey, p. 257.

²⁴ Might the fact that there is no word for bachelor in the Old Testament be an indication (although not proof) of the value placed on marriage and its attendant relationships in Old Testament times? Lucien LeGrand, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (New Y6rk: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 29.

Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, 'Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' (Genesis 30:2).
... and although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the Lord had closed her womb (I Sam. 1:5).

Children are a means of perpetuating the family name and the covenant people.²⁵ With attitudes such as these being common in Israel, it is difficult to imagine how contraception and abortion could become problems. They may have been rejected without even being seriously considered.

PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

Much of the discussion surrounding the problem of contraception deals with the creative intent for marriage. Was marriage created by God for the purpose of the procreation and education of children or was the purpose of marriage companionship? Genesis 1:28 and 2:18 seem to conflict at this point. It has generally been the teaching of the Catholic Church that the primary purpose for marriage and intercourse is the procreation and education of children. Until the early years of this century Protestantism generally concurred in this opinion. Now almost all Protestants would say that companionship is more important than procreation.²⁶ Piper writes, "Although the Biblical writers are aware of the intimate connection between sex and propagation sex is not regarded primarily as a means for procreation of children. The reason that woman was created is that God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2:18)."²⁷ He then goes on to state that Genesis 1:28 is not to be taken as a command, but as a blessing given to the original couple.²⁸ Piper rightly states that "All that the Bible has to say concerning sexual life is incomprehensible if we try to understand it as based on the will to propagate."²⁹ The intent of the Creator then appears to have been companionship, sex being an important subordinate creative intent.³⁰

²⁵ Piper, p. 33.

²⁶ Thieliicke, pp. 204-5 states that procreation is a secondary reason for marriage. If the primary purpose, companionship, will be destroyed by the exercise of the secondary purpose, then the secondary purpose may be ignored.

²⁷ Piper, p. 30.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 32-3.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁰ Charles Edward Cerling, Jr., "A Wife's Submission in Marriage, (Unpublished master's dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1968), pp. 11-13. See also James Patrick Lyons, *The Essential Structure of Marriage* (Washington: Catholic University Press of America, 1950), pp. 18-19. Erhardt Paul Weber, "A Christian Theology of Marriage," (Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1961), pp. 35-8. Ebbie C. Smith, "The One-flesh Concept of Marriage; A Biblical Study," (Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1961), pp. 15-39. Piper, p. 137.

Genesis 1:28 does pose a problem. This verse, usually understood as a command, seems to suggest that all couples should have three or more children. (For two to multiply they have to become three.) But is this verse a command? It is imperative in mood, but this mood is used for blessings along with the indicative.³¹ There are eight other places in Genesis³² where the introductory formula, "blessed ... and said . . ." is used with the imperative. Therefore it would appear that Genesis 1:28 is a blessing rather than a command; but it would also appear from this verse that the Creator intended that each couple should produce children.³³ The blessing suggests one of the major purposes of marriage, although procreation is not the purpose of marriage. If it were, the marriage of the sterile and aged would probably have been condemned.

CONTRACEPTION

Leviticus 15:18 may have a bearing on the question of contraception. Waltke interprets the verse to mean that ejaculation without procreative intent is acceptable.³⁴ If this passage refers to *coitus interruptus* his interpretation is sound. Although the author agrees with Waltke³⁵ other interpretations are possible. The passage may be referring to sperm that runs from or does not fully enter the vagina and therefore soils either garments or skins. It may also refer to a nocturnal emission while one is sleeping with his wife, since *akhabh* will bear either the rendering "sleep" or "intercourse."

The single most misunderstood passage on the whole topic of contraception is Genesis 38. What was the sin of Onan for which he was killed by God? The traditional interpretation of the Church has been that Onan was condemned for *coitus interruptus*. No modern commentator supports this view. One must go to 19th century works to find support for such a position.³⁶ Onan's sin is variously

³¹ W. J. Harrelson, "Blessings and Cursings," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 446.

³² 9:1; 14:19; 24:60; 28:1; 35:9; 48:3; 48:15; 1:22 (slightly different).

³³ See also Genesis 9:1, 7. Arguing from the meaning of Gen. 1:28 (although this is not directly stated) Kenneth R. Kantzer, "The Origin of the Soul as Related to the Abortion Question," *Birth Control and the Christian*, eds. Walter O. Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1969), 553, argues that abortion is wrong because it goes contrary to the intent of the Creator as here revealed. If what he says is true, it is equally an argument against birth control, which also frustrates the intent of the Creator for a short period of time.

³⁴ Waltke, p. 19.

³⁵ Waltke errs in including vv. 16-7. The discussion should be limited to v. 18, since vv. 16-7 refer only to nocturnal emissions. The inclusion of vv. 16-7 clouds the issue under discussion.

³⁶ C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, I, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., n.d.), 340.

explained as mockery of the responsibilities of levirate marriage,³⁷ to a simple statement that he was condemned not for contraception but for an act (undefined) which God condemned.³⁸ Even the article in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states that Onan's sin is unclear.³⁹ The only fact on which all commentators now agree is that Onan was not punished for practicing contraception *per se*.

Except for the practice of *coitus interruptus* and anal intercourse most moderns would assume that few, if any, other contraceptive means were known.⁴⁰ Noonan gives many examples of methods of contraception found in the ancient world.⁴¹ In particular he refers to Egypt where the children of Israel spent some 400 years. Although the means range from the exotic (a willow bark potion mixed with the burned testicles of a castrated ass) to quite simple devices (a swab of wool coated with honey inserted into the vagina), some must have been effective in at least moderate degrees. Some of these means (particularly potions) have been tested on rats in modern medical laboratories and found to be effective in inducing temporary sterility. The effectiveness of the methods used is also demonstrated by occasional complaints in official sources that the poor are having more children than the wealthy and educated because the poor are not using contraceptive means. (Sounds rather modern!) From all this one can conclude that the Israelites knew of various means of contraception. Whether they used them is a question that will be treated below.

There are no passages in the Old Testament that treat contraception explicitly. A few passages bear indirectly on the topic and may provide some understanding of how the problem was faced. Continence might appear to be a natural form of contraception, but Exodus 21:10 shows that regular intercourse is a duty of marriage even if one has more than one wife, which would suggest that continence would be wrong.⁴² Furthermore, the prohibition of intercourse during menstruation (Lev. 15:19-28; 20:18) would work as a reverse contraception. Because one would not have intercourse for seven days after the onset (possibly completion) of menstruation, by the time one could have intercourse again pregnancy would be more likely to occur. Not only would one be closer to the fertile period, but there would be a large accumulation of semen from the period of abstinence. Castration, whether voluntary or involuntary, was grounds

³⁷ Waltke, p. 19.

³⁸ J. T. Noonan, Jr. "Authority, Usury, and Contraception," *Cross Currents* XVI (Winter, 1966), 57.

³⁹ J. D. Fearon, "Onanism," (New York, 1967), p. 696.

⁴⁰ Waltke, p. 9, errs in assuming no mechanical contraceptives.

⁴¹ Noonan, *Contraception* ch. one.

⁴² Waltke, p. 16.

for excommunication from the religious community (Dt. 23:1), which would eliminate a rather gross form of contraception.⁴³

Alongside of these negative indications are other more positive indications of the Old Testament attitude toward contraception. If Leviticus 15:18 refers to *coitus interruptus*⁴⁴ then one form of contraception was practiced without the express condemnation of scripture. In various places in the Old Testament sex crimes of various sorts are condemned, but contraception is never listed as one of those crimes.⁴⁵

In summary one can say that contraception was either never an issue with the children of Israel because of their high regard for children, or it was an accepted practice not considered worth mentioning. On the basis of our knowledge of the methods of contraception used in the ancient world one would be inclined to conclude that Israelites not only knew of contraceptive means, but considered them so normal that no mention is ever made of the topic. At the same time one must add the proviso that with the Israelite attitude toward children, people must have had very strong reasons for using them when they did.

ABORTION

One faces the same problem in dealing with abortion that one faces in dealing with contraception: no passages deal with the topic directly. The only passage that is assumed by some to treat of abortion is Exodus 21:22-24.⁴⁶ Arguing from the meaning of the word *yeledh* Keil states that the passage deals with a child, and has nothing to do with an abortion.⁴⁷ Other commentators treat the passage as dealing only with a special instance of involuntary abortion that was induced by a second party.⁴⁸

Waltke argues from this passage (Ex. 21:22-24) in comparison with Leviticus 24:18 that a fetus is not a person.⁴⁹ Since the death penalty is demanded

⁴³ This passage should not force one to conclude that sterilization is wrong. (Waltke, p. 22.) There is a great deal of difference between sterilization and castration.

⁴⁴ Above p. 49.

⁴⁵ Lev. ch. 18; 20:18; 15:16-33; Ez. 18:6; Dr. 27:20-23.

⁴⁶ Viktor Aptowitzer, "Observations on the Criminal Law of the Jews," *Jewish Quarterly Review* XV (1924), 65ff, shows how this passage is used in Jewish thought to support both a "murder" theory of abortion and a rather lax approach. The differences appear to be based on the version of scripture used. The MT supports the lax position; the LXX supports the "murder" theory. This may have a bearing on the Church's position as it developed through the use of the LXX.

⁴⁷ C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, II, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., n.d.), 134-5.

⁴⁸ U. Cassuto, *Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1960), pp. 275-6.

⁴⁹ Waltke, pp. 10-11.

for murder, and only a fine is paid if the fetus dies without injury to the mother, the fetus is not considered human. He also states that the use of *nephesh* in the second part of the passage shows that the mother is a person while the fetus is not. But the fact that a fetal death is not punished by another fetal death also shows that the fetus was highly regarded.⁵⁰

Other passages may also have a positive, although indirect, bearing on the topic. In Leviticus 20:11-21 all sexual crimes punishable by death are listed--no mention is made of abortion. In Leviticus 18:21; 20:2 child-killing is condemned in connection with the worship of Moloch. Abortion is not mentioned here either, although it could be argued that it has no bearing here. Other passages (Lev. 15:16-33; ch. 18; Dt. 27:20-3) dealing with sexual behavior make no mention of abortion.

An Assyrian law states concerning the problem of abortion:⁵¹

(If a seignior) struck a(nother) seignior's (wife) and caused her to have (a miscarriage), they shall treat (the wife of the seignior), who caused the (other) seignior's wife to (have a miscarriage), as he treated her; he shall compensate for her fetus with a life. However if that woman died, they shall put the seignior to death; he shall compensate for her fetus with a life. But, when that woman's husband has no son, if someone struck her so that she had a miscarriage, they shall put the striker to death; even if her fetus is a girl, he shall compensate with a life.

Waltke argues from this law that the death penalty is required in Assyria for inducing an abortion by striking a woman.⁵² That is true, if the woman also dies, but the quotation may suggest that the death of the fetus only calls for the death of another fetus unless the man has no heir.

Considering the general attitude of the Church through its history toward the problem of abortion that it is equivalent to murder, the failure of the Old Testament to mention it either explicitly or implicitly is significant. Again, it may never have been a problem in a country that desired children as strongly as the Israelites appear to have,⁵³ but if others did it, which we know from

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 12. J. W. Montgomery, "The Christian View of the Fetus," *Birth Control and the Christian*, eds. Walter O. Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton: Tyndale House Pub., 1969), pp. 88-9 argues that Ex. 21:22-24 does not distinguish the life of the mother from the life of the child in meting out punishment. The injury may be to either mother or child, and if either is injured, punishment equivalent to the injury should follow. Waltke gives an adequate answer to this interpretation when he says that it is possible, but improbable, and rejected by most translations and many commentators. (p. 23, note.)

⁵¹ Pritchard, p. 184.

⁵² Waltke, pp. 11-12.

⁵³ Kantzer, p. 553, states that abortion is never condemned because of the high value placed on offspring. But even in a culture where almost all hold such a value, some will not, and a response would have been made to them.

Egyptian writings,⁵⁴ Israelites must have been aware of the problem. If that is true, then silence (although a notoriously weak argument) would appear to suggest acceptance of abortion as legitimate.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION

As in the Old Testament, abortion and contraception are never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament.⁵⁵ But this does not mean that the authors were ignorant of the problems. It has been shown above that abortive and contraceptive means have been known from ancient times. Not only is that true, but both the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (although probably dependent on *Didache*) condemn abortion. The issue was live, but the New Testament is silent.

In a significant article on the New Testament understanding of marriage Montgomery argues that marriage is not simply a means of legalizing procreation nor is mutual love the end of marriage. Christian marital love is meaningful as a reflection of Christ's love for the Church. Since intercourse is the natural result of marital love and children the result of intercourse, contraception needs to be justified in every case.⁵⁶ He then goes on to show various reasons that would justify the use of contraceptives. The whole of his argument turns on the idea of marriage as a reflection of the relationship of Christ to His Church.⁵⁷ The Old Testament purpose of marriage as companionship is superceded by a greater concept for the Christian, the concept of marriage as an image or analogy of the relationship of Christ to His Church. The analogical relationship then determines what is right and wrong within a marriage. Self-sacrificing love,⁵⁸ such as Christ had for the Church, would at times demand contraception.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Kahun Papyrus, Ebers Papyrus, Ramasseum Papyrus IV, Berlin Papyrus, Carlsber Papyrus.

⁵⁵ Noonan, *Contraception* p. 45.

⁵⁶ Montgomery, "How to Decide ... ", pp. 8-10.

⁵⁷ Cerling, ch. three. The nature of marriage as an analogy of the relationship of Christ to the Church is extensively discussed in its Biblical setting.

⁵⁸ The foremost example of such love in action would be in a situation where a pregnancy would impose hazards to the mother's health, either physical or mental. A second example would relate to the quality of life between the parents to whom the child would be born. (Quality refers to more than simple economics, although they play a part.) This could include a desire to postpone children for any of a variety of reasons in order that the relationship of husband and wife would be deepened rather than destroyed or hindered by a pregnancy. If the love of Ephesians 5 is to be revealed, a pregnancy should be a means of growth for the couple. If a pregnancy would appear to do otherwise, it should be prevented.

⁵⁹ Below, p. 54, it will be shown why this same principle is insufficient by itself to justify an abortion.

First Corinthians 7:1-7 gives one element of the New Testament attitude toward marital intercourse. As in the Old Testament, regular marital intercourse is a right and obligation of the spouses to each other. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that continence is the most natural means of preventing births. This passage suggests, contrary to Catholic teaching, that continence is not natural, since it violates a basic purpose for marriage. That purpose as stated in I Corinthians 7:2 is that marriage is a prophylactic against immorality. Continence may only be for short periods of time, by mutual agreement, for the sake of prayer. Therefore continence would not be an acceptable method of preventing births, because regular marital intercourse is a right and obligation of the married.

A few passages that are occasionally brought to bear on this topic are worth mentioning. First Thessalonians 4:4, which refers to a man possessing his vessel in honor, is thought, and has been thought in history, to refer to having only natural means of intercourse with one's wife.⁶⁰ Although the verse may be interpreted in that way, even if it is true, the reference is so general as to have almost no meaning to the modern reader. Is anal or oral intercourse being condemned or is the reference generally to contraception? The broadness of this statement makes its helpfulness nil.

Matthew 19:10-12 is sometimes thought to suggest that people castrate themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Again, if this interpretation is true, and that is questionable,⁶¹ it would have no bearing on the contraceptive question because of Paul's injunction in I Corinthians 7 to regular marital intercourse. Self-castration could only be for single people.

Because of the association of contraception and abortion with magicians, Noonan suggests that the Greek *pharmakeia* (magic or medicine) may refer to medicine in Galatians 5:20; Revelation 9:21; 21:8,15; 18:23, but he then goes on to state that although it may, there is little basis for thinking that it does.⁶²

⁶⁰ Robert P. Meye, "New Testament Texts Bearing on the Problem of the Control of Human Reproduction," *Birth Control and the Christian*, eds. Walter O. Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton: Tyndale House Pub., 1969), pp. 35-6.

⁶¹ Q. Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXX (July, 1968), 335-58.

⁶² Noonan, *Contraception*.... p. 44. In a later publication on abortion Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History," *The Morality of Abortion*, ed. J. T. Noonan, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 23, he changes his position. As justification for the change he leans heavily on the attitude of the early church fathers in condemning abortion. The only problem with his argument is that it can be turned either to support or condemn abortion. The condemnation of the early church fathers can suggest that they reflect the thinking of the apostles, or one can argue that their strong condemnations arose out of the necessity of condemning something they thought was a great evil apart from scriptural support, and therefore had to use exceptionally strong language, comparing abortion to murder. One also wonders how Luke would have felt as Paul condemned medicine!

In summary, the New Testament has even less to say directly or indirectly on the topics of abortion and contraception, but the principles derived from Ephesians 5 give guidelines suggesting that contraception may be acceptable. If a fetus is neither a person nor an emerging entity of high value, the same passage may justify abortion. The complete silence of both the New and Old Testaments in explicit references to these topics suggests a permissive attitude toward both contraception and abortion.⁶³

ABORTION CONSIDERED THEOLOGICALLY⁶⁴

Only one case in the whole of scripture mentions the problem of abortion, and that case has a very limited scope. From this it might be assumed that abortion is permissible under any circumstances. But Thielicke and Piper both raise the same argument against abortion:⁶⁵ Children are a gift of God; therefore abortion is wrong.

Before considering Thielicke's argument it is well to give consideration to the motivation of one seeking an abortion as this has a bearing on the legitimacy of abortion. The Old Testament attitude is that children are a blessing given to parents by God; therefore to reject a child is to reject a gift of God. Therefore even if abortions are considered acceptable, one must have serious reasons to justify an abortion. Many abortions are for selfish reasons. The motives are related to economic limitations, limitations on one's time, unwillingness to accept the responsibility for rearing another child--because these are selfish motives, abortion should be condemned in these instances.⁶⁶

But even after the proper motivation exists serious questions must be raised: Is abortion murder? The Bible does not teach directly when a fetus becomes a child.⁶⁷ O'Donnel states categorically that abortion is murder,⁶⁸ taking the

⁶³ This conclusion is reached recognizing the weaknesses of any argument from silence.

⁶⁴ Paul Ramsey, "References Points in Deciding About Abortion," *The Morality of Abortion*, ed. J. T. Noonan, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 64-100, makes some important points concerning arguments for abortion. (1) All arguments for abortion must take into account the question of when the fertilized ovum becomes a human being. (2) Arguments for abortion must not also be arguments for infanticide by logical extension. Under this point he mentions that birth is hardly a line of demarcation for modern medicine. The time when fertilized ova will be placed in artificial wombs is not remote. "There are no theoretical limits on man's scientific ability to push back the time of viability and to treat the patient in utero as a man alive." (87) (3) One must also distinguish between killing and allowing to die, which is very important for point #2.

⁶⁵ Piper, p. 148. Thielicke, pp. 277, 279.

⁶⁶ Rousas J. Rushdoony, "Abortion," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, I, ed. Edwin Palmer (Wilmington: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1964), 21.

⁶⁷ P. K. Jewett, "The Relation of the Soul to the Fetus," *Birth Control and the Christian*, eds. Walter O. Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton: Tyndale House Pub., 1969), p. 62.

⁶⁸ O'Donnel, p. 28.

traditional position of both the Catholic and Protestant churches. Thielicke raises the problem of when a fetus becomes a human being and then dismisses it as mere casuistry.⁶⁹ He takes the position that a child is a gift of God and as such to reject a child is to reject God. On that ground he states that abortion is wrong.

To bring the matter into sharp focus Thielicke treats the problem of a woman who will die if her pregnancy is not terminated. In this discussion he gives the most enlightened treatment of the topic available from a biblical or theological perspective. Although he rejects abortion because a child is a gift of God, he still accepts the "murder" theory of abortion. He asks the question if killing a person is ever right. We kill people when we sentence a person to death for a crime. We kill people when we engage in a just war. Therefore killing is sometimes right. Arguing further he asks whether suicide is ever right, for a mother who would not terminate a pregnancy that would kill her is committing suicide. He then shows that under certain circumstances suicide is right. We honor a mother who is killed saving her infant from death. We honor a father who saves his family by giving his life. Suicide is sometimes right and even honorable. He finally asks, if a mother does not hesitate to save the life of her child by giving her life, why does she hesitate in giving her life to save her fetus? He concludes by stating that one can only do what he thinks right in this ticklish situation realizing that we serve a God who will forgive if we are wrong.⁷⁰ Thielicke leaves one on the horns of a dilemma, but his approach is basically good, and shows the difficulty everyone faces with this one extreme question.⁷¹

An important objection needs to be raised in relation to Thielicke's approach. He equates murder and killing. This faulty equation has led to innumerable arguments about taking human life. Exodus 20:13 prohibits murder, but there are circumstances that justify killing another person (self-defense, justice, war). Therefore if abortion is murder,⁷² one must take the position of the Roman Catholic Church that abortion is never justifiable as a direct act no matter how serious the danger to the mother nor what the circumstances of her impregnation.

⁶⁹ Thielicke, pp. 227-8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 232-247.

⁷¹ Noonan, "Introduction," *The Morality of Abortion*, ed. J. T. Noonan, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), makes the point that modern medicine has almost eliminated the extreme problems mentioned most often as justification for abortion. These problems are (1) the life of the mother versus the life of the child; (2) pregnancy resulting from forced intercourse because of the common practice of performing a disinfecting procedure to the vagina and uterus during immediate medical treatment; (3) severe genetic malformations.

⁷² Kantzer, p. 553, suggests that if abortion were murder Ex. 21:22-24 would demand the death penalty for the one inducing an abortion.

Psalm 127:3 states "Lo, sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" (RSV). On the strength of this statement alone one could argue that God is directly involved in every pregnancy. When this statement is combined with Old Testament comments about God's involvement in childlessness and pregnancy in old age, one is impressed by the fact that the children of Israel saw the hand of God involved in fertility or sterility. Therefore one must ask, "Are children a gift of God, or were children so important to the Israelite society and their view of the world so theologically oriented that they considered children a direct gift from God?" When one adds to this the mystery surrounding procreation before the advent of modern medicine,⁷³ one is placed in a difficult position. No one who reads the Old Testament will deny that the children of Israel thought that children were a direct gift from God. The question one must ask is this: "Is this part of the teaching of the Old Testament or is it simply a part of the culture of the Old Testament, such as levirate marriage?" The only argument offerable is weak. If children were a direct gift from God, one would expect to find the explicit condemnation of abortion in the Bible. At the same time one is greatly impressed with the pervasiveness of this view in the Old Testament, and its pervasiveness may be a stronger argument than the argument from silence given above.⁷⁴

The conclusion of Montgomery that abortion can only be justified as the lesser of two evils is a common position.⁷⁵ It also can lead to the introduction of factors that are more subjective than rational. In the case of rape or incest is the psychological health of the mother more valuable than the life of the fetus? Even if one places a higher value on the mother's mental health, there is little evidence that a rape- or incest-generated pregnancy and birth will do more permanent and severe psychological damage than the simple fact of the forced intercourse itself. Serious personal crises forced on a person by factors beyond control may be beneficial or detrimental. (This is not to suggest the need for such crises, but to suggest that crisis counseling may have greater long range benefits than abortion--we just do not know.) How can one weigh the life of a fetus against an unknown and presently unmeasurable psychological danger?

If abortion is justified as the lesser of two evils, it may only be justified as such by one whose position is that the fetus is not fully human. If a person

⁷³ Maurice Bear Gordon, "Medicine Among the Ancient Hebrews," *Isis* XXXIII (Dec., 1941), 465, writes, "Since the Israelites realized that intercourse was necessary for but did not invariably lead to pregnancy, they felt that successful fertilization was in the hands of God." This inference goes beyond the data, but it is interesting.

⁷⁴ Those dealing with the problem of abortion usually treat the problem by asking one of two questions: (1) When does a fetus become a human being? (2) Is a child a gift of God? By treating these questions separately one gives the impression that they are not related. The questions can and should be examined in combination as well as separately. The resulting question is, "At what point in its development, if he is, does a child become a gift of God?"

⁷⁵ Montgomery, "The Christian View....," pp. 83-6.

considers the fetus human while claiming that abortion may be justified as the lesser of two evils he places himself in an untenable position. Justification of abortion under these circumstances logically leads to justification for infanticide and euthanasia of the senile or terminally ill. If a fetus can be killed as the lesser of two evils, badly deformed or severely retarded newborns could also be killed. And they could be killed with greater justification because their defectiveness is certain; whereas the defectiveness of a fetus is often uncertain. The same reasoning applies to the senile and those whose life can be saved only at great cost to their personality.

There are four positions on the question of when a fetus becomes a human. The first is represented by traducianism where it is thought that a fetus is a person from the moment of conception. The second is represented by creationism that teaches that the fetus becomes a person when God gives it a soul. (This occurs anywhere from conception to viability.) The third position is concerned with the problem of viability.⁷⁶ A fetus becomes a person when it would be viable outside the mother's womb. The final position is the view that a fetus is an emerging entity, immeasurably valuable from the moment of conception and becoming increasingly valuable as it approaches birth.⁷⁷ These positions are integral to larger theological systems and derived more by deduction from other propositions than from direct exposition of scripture. One is on far safer ground when one contends that scripture does not give any information on when a fetus becomes a human being. The greatest direct support from scripture appears to be the application of Exodus 21:22-24 to the fourth position. No position stands on solid ground, but if degrees of solidity are accepted, the fourth position stands on ground that is least shaky.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bible says nothing directly and almost nothing indirectly on the problems of contraception and abortion. One cannot emphasize this strongly enough. If decisions are to be made on these questions they must be made by

⁷⁶ Viability as a term of distinction is becoming increasingly meaningless. Even considered from the viewpoint of primitive societies, the newborn infant is not viable until he attains a fair degree of maturity. Until the infant becomes a child or even an older youth, he is not viable without a great deal of parental care. Modern medicine, which can save the life of previously hopeless premature infants, makes the use of viability as a term of distinction almost meaningless. When medical science reaches the point where it can place a fertilized ovum in an artificial womb, this term will have lost all meaning.

⁷⁷ This is the position described by Kantzer in "The Origin of the Soul as Related to the Abortion Question," *Birth Control and the Christian*, eds. Walter O Spitzer and Carlyle L. Saylor, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Pub., 1969). Here he also states "The exact moment or point in development at which a fetus becomes fully human, we cannot determine for this lies in the freedom of God." (p. 557)

deduction from statements relating to the purpose(s) of marriage, the place of children in marriage, and the value of fetal life.

The purpose of Christian marriage given in Ephesians 5 suggests that marital love could involve contraception under certain justifiable conditions. But contraception designed to prevent conception through the whole course of a marriage would go contrary to the intent of the Creator as revealed in his blessing to the first couple (Gen. 1:28).

With regard to abortion, if children are a gift of God, abortion would appear to be unjustifiable except under the most extreme conditions. If one does not accept the "gift-of-God" idea, one must then answer the question as to when a fetus becomes a human being. That a child is a gift from God appears to the author to have the support of the Old Testament. It would also appear that the fetus is an emerging entity, immeasurably valuable at conception and becoming increasingly valuable as the date of its birth approaches.

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