

Birth Control: A Spiritual Shackle

By Thomas W. Bear

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Introduction

Did you know that before the twentieth century, the Protestant Church boldly spoke out against the practice of birth control?¹ They were opposed to any act of man that interfered with the natural order of procreation. Men such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Arthur Pink and Augustine were vehemently opposed to birth control. Today, most Protestant Christians hold to quite a different view. Birth control is not simply tolerated, it is embraced by the Protestant Church. Why has the Church changed its position? Since the cloud of witnesses that preceded us uniformly opposed birth control, we do well to consider what they believed and why they believed it.

We know that the history of birth control extends back to the time of Onan. (See Genesis 38.) He lived approximately 4000 years ago. Both birth control and abortion were practiced by the people of ancient Greece and Rome. The Church was faced with this issue as early as the time of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c.215) who believed that for couples to have sexual intercourse in marriage for any purpose “*other than to procreate children is to do injury to nature*” (Pedagogus 2.10-95.3),² Epiphanius of Salamis who lived between 315 A.D. and 402 AD. and Augustine who lived between 354 AD and 430 AD also addressed the issue of birth control.

*“And why has Paul said: ‘If he cannot control himself, let him marry? Surely, to prevent incontinence from constraining him to adultery. If, then, he practices continence, neither let him marry nor beget children. However, if he does not control himself, let him enter into lawful wedlock, so that he may not beget children in disgrace or avoid having offspring by a more degraded form of intercourse. There are some lawfully wedded couples who resort to this last, for intercourse, even with one’s lawfully wedded spouse, can take the place in an unlawful and shameful manner, when ever the conception of offspring is avoided. Onan, the son of Juda, did this very thing, and the Lord slew him on that account. Therefore, the procreation of children is itself the primary, natural, legitimate purpose of marriage.”*³

Early in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther and John Calvin began to speak out against birth control. These two men spearheaded the Protestant Reformation that turned the world upside down. The following quotations express their perspective on the subject.

*“Onan must have been a malicious and incorrigible scoundrel. This 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.”*⁴

(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.”*⁵
(John Calvin)

The views of these two men concerning birth control were shared by the entire Protestant Church in their day and for many subsequent years. Their perspective was shared by the founding fathers of the Protestant Church in this country. The Pilgrims that founded Plymouth Colony back in 1620 were opposed to birth control. The following quotations make clear the fact that the Protestant Church was united in its opposition to birth control.

(Concerning Onan) *“..there is a seminal vital virtue, which perishes if the seed be spilled; and by doing this to hinder the begetting of a living child, is the first degree of murder that can be committed, and the next unto is the marring of conception, when it is made, and causing of abortion.”*⁶
(Westminster Annotations 1657)

(Concerning Onan) *“Those sins that dishonour the body are very displeasing to God, and the evidence of vile affections. Observe, the thing which he 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”*⁷

(John Wesley)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, planned parenthood (birth control) was still considered immoral by the Protestant Church and that is probably the major reason why many laws were written which prohibited the propagation of birth control. Numerous people were sentenced to prison terms for breaking state laws that prohibited the creation or distribution of literature that promoted birth control. On the federal level, the Comstock law of 1873 made the mailing and importing of contraceptives illegal. As recent as the early part of the twentieth century, some fairly well known Protestants were still speaking out against birth control. Arthur Pink made his position very clear.

Any teaching that leads men and women to think of the marriage bond as the sign of bondage, and the sacrifice of all independence, to construe wifehood and motherhood as drudgery and interference with woman's higher destiny, any public sentiment to cultivate celibacy as more desirable and honorable, or to substitute anything else for marriage and home, not only invades God's ordinance, but opens the door to nameless crimes and threatens the very foundations of society.

Now it is clear that marriage must have particular reasons for the appointment of it. Three are given in Scripture. First, for the propagation of children. This is its obvious and normal purpose: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him: male and female created He them" (Gen. 1:27)—not both males or both females, but one male and one female; and to make the design of this unmistakably plain God said, "Be fruitful and multiply." For this reason marriage is called "matrimony," which signifies motherage, because it results in virgins becoming mothers. Therefore it is desirable that marriage be entered into at an early age, before the prime of life be passed: twice in Scripture we read of "the wife of thy youth" (Prov. 5:18; Malachi 2:15). We have pointed out that the propagation of children is the "normal" end of marriage; yet there are special seasons of acute "distress" when 1 Corinthians 7:29 holds good.

And now for a final word on our text. "Marriage is honorable in all" who are called thereunto, no class of persons being precluded. This clearly gives the lie to the pernicious teaching of Rome concerning the celibacy of the clergy, as does also 1 Timothy 3:2, etc. "And the bed undefiled" not only signifies fidelity to the marriage vow (1 Thess. 4:4), but that the conjugal act of intercourse is not polluting: in their unfallen state Adam and Eve were bidden to "multiply;" yet moderation and sobriety is to obtain here, as in all things. We do not believe in what is termed "birth control," but we do earnestly urge self-control, especially by the husband, "But whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." This is a most solemn warning against unfaithfulness: those who live and die impenitently in these sins will eternally perish (Eph. 5:5).⁸

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Protestant Church's voice against birth control was beginning to weaken along with its general influence on the unbelieving world. Church attendance began to drop off reducing further the impact of the preaching and teaching ministries. The spiritual climate of the United States was open to the prevailing winds of the birth control movement. Early in this century, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America stated that the Church and the Bible are "silent on the subject" of birth control. This and other official statements from leaders of various denominations paved the way for the birth control movement to spread through the Protestant Church.

The person mainly responsible for the birth control movement in the United States was Margaret Sanger. In her twenties, she developed an interest in birth control as a means to help the poor and to limit the spread of the

Afro American population. In her early thirties, Margaret Sanger started down a path of adultery which led to her divorce from William Sanger. She was maintaining sexual relationships with several men late in her first marriage and continued this lifestyle throughout her adult life. As a senior citizen, she wrote to her granddaughter that sexual intercourse outside of marriage was acceptable provided it was done with sincerity. It was this lifestyle that spawned her zeal to form the National Birth Control League in 1913 and Planned Parenthood in 1939.

The movement of women into the work force during recent decades precipitated greater acceptance of family planning. With the advent of the birth control pill, couples could virtually eliminate the possibility of pregnancy until a later, “more convenient” time. This made it possible for married women to pursue careers with the confidence that they would not be interrupted by an unwanted pregnancy. As a result, there was no reason for corporations to discriminate against women in their hiring practices. If it was not for the birth control pill, the feminist movement would not have been able to make the strides that it has made since the late nineteen-sixty’s.

With so many women in the nation’s work force, it has become difficult for single income families to maintain the same standard of living as those with two incomes. Now, many Christian women have decided to seek careers in order to relieve the financial stress. Besides gaining acceptance by the Christian community, birth control is considered by many to be an essential ingredient of the lifestyle that many have come to enjoy and expect.

An entire generation has come and gone since the Protestant Church gave license to the practice of birth control. Which generation has the correct view of birth control? Is it possible that Christians living before the twentieth century were all mistaken? Why did they take a stand against birth control? What scripture did they use to support their views? Is it possible that the church of the nineteenth century was better equipped to discern right from wrong? This book will address these questions with its chief objective to glorify God.

“We do not believe in what is termed ‘birth control.’”⁸
(Arthur W. Pink)

Books Written by Tom Bear

Church (according to the Bible): Most pastors wish that the members of their churches would grow and flourish more. The church members often sense that God has purposes for them but they don’t know what He wants them to do. They often end up playing the role of an unfulfilled spectator. Church examines the early New Testament Church and its teachings for answers to this universal problem. It demonstrates how certain unbiblical attitudes and traditions exist which cultivate this unhealthy spectator mindset. Church challenges leaders and “laypeople” to identify and discard these unbiblical attitudes and practices that stifle spiritual health. This book asserts that if the pattern of the early New Testament Church is followed today, Christians will mature at a greater pace and experience fulfillment as active participants in the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom. (160 pages)

E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006FL00EO>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/biblical-church>.

Bringing Back the Gospel: In the 21st century, many evangelism techniques are being used that have no biblical foundation. *Bringing Back the Gospel*, examines the Bible to determine what Christians should and should not do in order to fulfill the Great Commission. Christians all over the world consider this book an excellent instructional resource that is firmly grounded in the Bible. (154 pages) E-Book available from

Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006FXUME0>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/bringing-back-the-gospel>.

Bring My Sheep Back presents a candid framework for the process of restoring Christians that stray. Most of the books that deal with this subject approach it from the standpoint of solving conflicts between Christians. *Bring My Sheep Back* is founded on Jesus' teaching to put the interests of the straying Christian ahead of our own desire for immediate relief of pain caused by the one caught in sin. Personal observations along with much attention to biblical instruction produce a very useful and thorough resource for church leaders and lay people who desire to restore Christians trapped by sin. This book warns against dependence on man-made approaches to solving relational problems. Whether it involves private sin or public scandal, or even cases that involve the governing authorities, biblical principles are taught as foundational to the process of restoration. (130 pages) E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006FXEDMM>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://BringMySheepBack.com>.

Birth Control: A Spiritual Shackle- Did you know that before the twentieth century, the Protestant Church boldly spoke out against the practice of birth control? They were opposed to any act of man that interfered with the natural order of procreation. Men such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Arthur Pink and Augustine were vehemently opposed to birth control. Today, Birth control is not just tolerated, it is embraced by the Protestant Church. Why has the Protestant Church changed its position? Is it possible that Christians living before the twentieth century were all mistaken? Why did they take a stand against birth control? Is it possible that the church of the nineteenth century was better equipped to discern right from wrong? Using six biblical arguments, this book demonstrates that birth control is a worldly practice that opposes God's will for His people, violates the marriage covenant and is an attack on the very character of God. (64 pages) E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006J749NM>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/other-books>.

Christian Marriage: This book provides biblical principles that if applied, will result in harmony in the marriage and glory to God. Some will undoubtedly say that many problems in marriage are far too complex for such a short book to address. It is the premise of this book, however, that the source of all problems in Christian marriages are the result of failure to live as God has taught us to live in His Word. If a Christian couple lives in accordance with God's principles described in *Christian Marriage*, true harmony is guaranteed. (50 pages) E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006J9EIFO>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/other-books>.

Old Testament Historical Narrative Bible Curriculum- This course is designed to stimulate the student to read through the Old Testament historical narrative so that he becomes familiar with the history of God's work to bring about redemption through Jesus Christ. By reading just one Bible chapter each day, the entire Old Testament historical narrative can be covered in less than six months. Questions are provided to help students read with the purpose of understanding the content and help the teacher measure the comprehension of the student. The answered questions also provide a basis for weekly or biweekly family or group discussion. As the student becomes more familiar with the Old Testament narrative, he will begin to understand how each part of the Old and New Testaments fit together into a harmonious message of redemption. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/other-books>.

Notes

1

The American Encyclopedia defines birth control as “the regulation and spacing of offspring by legal and ethical means, according to health, economic condition and circumstances of the husband and wife.”

Encyclopedia American, Americana Corporation, 1966, Planned Parenthood Vol. 22 p.153

2

Davis, John Jefferson; Evangelical Ethics, Issues Facing the Church Today, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, p.39

3

Gerhard, Johann (1582-1637); Lutheran, From his commentary on Genesis 38:7-10. In it, he quotes Augustine of Hippo (354-430) as an argument against what is now called birth control.

4

Luther, Martin, Luther's Works, Vol. 7, Page 20-21

5

Calvin, John, Calvin's Commentary on Genesis 38:8-10, translated from the Latin by Dr. Ford Battles

6

Westminster Annotations, 1657, Ley, John, Commentary on Genesis 38:9

7

Wesley, John (1703-1791), Commentary on Genesis 38:7

8

Pink, Arthur (1886-1952); Calvinist, An Exposition of Hebrews, Chapter 108. Providence Baptist Ministries
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