

What Does Contraception Have to Do with Abortion? Evangelicals v. Augustine and *Roe v. Wade*¹

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Abortion is wrong because it is the killing of an innocent human being. Such is the unambiguous basis of the opposition of many evangelical Christians and other pro-life advocates to abortion. Every abortion puts an end to a human life, and is therefore unjustifiable, unless perhaps the mother's life is itself threatened. The issue is clear, and as a result, the moral stance of evangelicals on abortion is certain.

The same cannot be said about the issue of contraception. It is evident that there is no well-defined evangelical position on contraception, at least as a moral issue in and of itself. Indeed, while abortion is viewed as a crucial moral issue, many would question whether contraception is a *moral* issue at all. Rather, it is considered to be simply a matter of practical and personal consideration and choice.

Why consider the relatively insignificant issue of contraception in a journal issue dedicated to the weighty issue of abortion? Is there even any relation between the two issues? Evangelical Christians, it would seem (even those who question the acceptability of contraception), do not perceive any significant or essential connection between abortion and contraception. However, there are some "groups" who have, in fact, made a connection between the defense of contraception and the defense of abortion, or between the condemnation of contraception and the condemnation of abortion. The primary connection that is made between the two issues relates abor-

tion and contraception to one another as forms of birth control, and then they are together either accepted as good or condemned as morally wrong.

The purpose of this article is to examine the possible connection between abortion and contraception, and to suggest how evangelicals might respond to claims that there indeed is a moral relation between these two issues. I will argue that while evangelicals are right to distinguish or "disconnect" abortion and contraception from one another in one respect, there is nevertheless a sense in which there is an important connection that should not be disregarded. Indeed, that connection ought to inform our perspective on contraception and on sexual morality in general. In order to see both how we may distinguish and how we may relate these two issues, I will suggest that there are two complementary moral frameworks within which we should consider them: regard for human life and regard for human sexuality. To begin, some points of clarification are in order.

Contraception and Birth Control

It is important, first, to make the distinction between contraception and birth control. For the purposes of this article, "birth control" refers to any action that is taken to prevent the birth of a child. "Contraception" refers to forms of birth control that prevent conception. It is thus distinguished from methods of birth control that act after conception, which may act either before or

after implantation, and which include abortion.²

Although abortion has received a great deal of attention from evangelicals, particularly since *Roe v. Wade*, there has not been a great deal of discussion of contraception and birth control in general, especially at a scholarly level. There have been some contributions, mainly in books that deal with various ethical issues, including texts such as John Jefferson Davis's *Evangelical Ethics*, Stanley Grenz's *Sexual Ethics*,³ and John and Paul Feinberg's *Ethics for a Brave New World*.⁴ These are helpful summaries of the issues, but it remains true that there has not been significant discussion within evangelical scholarship. This is particularly evident when compared with the interest in contraception and birth control as moral issues among Roman Catholic scholars, as well as a more general debate that relates birth control to population issues and women's rights and autonomy. For instance, in a recent search of the database of the American Theological Libraries Association (ATLA), there were nearly 500 articles listed under "contraception" or "birth control," including 43 articles in the journal *Theological Studies*. Yet there was *not one* article on birth control or contraception listed in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.

It is not entirely clear whether evangelicals have an interest in these issues. For instance, in the search of the ATLA database, *Christianity Today* had 26 articles listed on birth control, the first appearing in 1966. Yet, by comparison, there were 85 articles found in *The Christian Century*. In addition, in a *Christianity Today* survey, while 9 out of 10 couples used some form of contraception, only 28% considered moral issues when deciding what form to use.⁵ No doubt even fewer considered moral issues

in deciding whether to use contraception in the first place. It would appear that, morally speaking at least, contraception (and perhaps birth control in general) is a non-issue for many. In a contribution to *First Things*, James Nuechterlein suggests why there is little discussion among Protestants. He writes:

It is not simply that the overwhelming majority of them come down on the same side of the issue, but that for most of them *there is no real issue here at all*. [*First Things*] received a flood of letters in response to the contraception symposium. Almost none came from Protestants. This is not a matter that engages them.⁶

If it is difficult to tell to what extent evangelicals are interested in the issue, it is not surprising that it is equally difficult to determine an evangelical view of birth control and contraception. We may have some indication, however, from two treatments of the issues in *Christianity Today*, the first from November 11, 1991, and the second from November 12, 2001. Here we may observe that while the majority of evangelicals accept the use of some forms of birth control within marriage, there are some who believe that the use of any "artificial" birth control method is improper even within marriage. The following is a summary of some common arguments used to defend or affirm the use of birth control (or, more specifically, contraception) and those used to challenge the acceptance of its use, several of which are raised in the *Christianity Today* articles:

Defending the use of Birth Control

1. There is great latitude in moral decision-making where there is no clear command in Scripture, which is the case concerning contraception (and evangelicals remain unconvinced about Natural Law argu-

ments against contraception).

2. The purposes of marriage are more than procreative. Indeed, unity, intimacy and pleasure are purposes of marriage in their own right, which may even be given some priority, and which may be enhanced through the use of contraception.

3. God has given us authority to order life and to be stewards of life rather than simply to be driven by nature. This includes the responsible planning of the number and spacing of children to facilitate things such as education, companionship in marriage, the ability to care for existing children, and so on.

4. Some suggest that couples could forgo having children at all, e.g., in cases where their service to God might be increased by having no children.

5. Decisions about birth control ought to be made with the goal of honoring God, not for selfish reasons.

Challenging the Acceptance of Birth Control

1. Biblically, children are seen as a gift and blessing, whereas the use of artificial birth control often treats children as a “risk” or liability, an accident or inconvenience.

2. The focus on freeing up sex for pleasure reflects our culture’s pursuit of pleasure in freedom from responsibility, demonstrating a sense of selfishness.

3. Scripture commands us to be fruitful and multiply, and contraception thwarts this command.

4. Obstructing the procreative purpose of marriage is either itself claimed to be wrong, or wrong in that such obstruction negatively affects the purpose of unity and oneness in marriage and thus marriage in general.

5. The commitment to marriage is also a commitment to bearing and raising children.

6. The acceptance of contraception has not been very well thought out, if considered at all.

These arguments do not each hold equal weight, yet there are significant points made on each side. It certainly indicates that there is a place for debate and moral

reflection on the use of birth control. Indeed, the issue may be of particular interest because it tests and indicates something of our process of moral reasoning. That is to say, if Scripture is not explicit or absolute in what it has to say concerning birth control, and I think that it is not, then our thinking about this issue will indicate how we might apply moral reasoning in other areas that are not addressed explicitly or absolutely in Scripture.

Given some differences among evangelicals on the issue of birth control, we may nevertheless make some general observations. Evangelicals generally accept the use of contraception in marriages that are open to children, but are typically opposed to forms of birth control that prevent implantation, and are strongly opposed to those that are clearly abortive. Thus, a sharp distinction is made between contraception and abortion as moral issues. While contraception is often understood to be morally neutral, abortion is judged to be morally wrong. The moral criterion is simple: it is the sanctity of human life. Abortion involves the destruction of innocent human life, and therefore it is wrong. Contraception does not destroy life, but prevents its conception, and therefore it is morally neutral, and may be used to aid in responsible family planning.

While the criterion of the sanctity of human life is clearly an important one, and while it does distinguish abortion from contraception as methods of birth control, there are other issues that are worth thinking about when it comes to evaluating birth control and specifically contraception. I will turn to two quite different places to raise those issues: Augustine (as a representative of some early Church Fathers) on the one hand, and *Roe v. Wade* and those who support liberal abortion laws (as rep-

representatives of our contemporary culture) on the other. Two general questions will guide the following discussion. First, is there a moral link between abortion and contraception as forms of birth control? Second, how does our answer to that question affect our understanding of birth control, contraception, abortion, and sexual morality in general? The first question will guide most of what follows, but the second question will be addressed by looking at implications of our answer to the first.

The Morality of Birth Control: The Evangelical Perspective and its Dissenters

Evangelical Perspective(s)

As indicated already, evangelicals tend to give a negative answer to the first question, concerning whether there is a moral link between abortion and contraception. The problem with abortion—that it is a violation of the sanctity of human life from the moment of conception—is also a problem for other post-conception methods of birth control. But that problem does not present itself with forms of birth control that prevent conception. Thus, while both abortion and contraception may be considered to be methods of birth control, the means to the end marks a great difference between the two, and the means is the decisive point in our moral evaluation. As long as we do not violate the sanctity of human life, and there are not other significant problems, it is believed that we can use contraception responsibly within a marriage that is open to children. It may be added, however, that marriage ought at least to be open to receiving children into the relationship, even if contraception is used. If it is not, surely it is a marriage that is suffering from moral poverty.

Not all agree that a sharp line ought to

be drawn between abortion and contraception in a moral evaluation of birth control. There are at least three significant types of dissent from this view, which evangelicals ought to reckon with in some way. Each makes different assumptions about the “ends” when making the moral judgment.

Roman Catholic Dissent

The first is the Roman Catholic view, which I will simply note in passing, because my interest at present is to look at the connection made by the other dissenters. To summarize the Roman Catholic view, it could be said that the above analysis is only partially correct. Abortion and other methods of birth control that act after conception are rightly condemned because they violate the sanctity of human life. Yet, such an analysis does not thereby permit all remaining forms of contraception, because Roman Catholic theologians typically also distinguish between “natural” and “artificial” methods of birth control that seek to prevent conception. Artificial methods are condemned because of the sanctity of marriage and the integrity of sex. That is, anything that obstructs the natural “ends” of the conjugal act is against nature and is destructive of marriage and sexual relations. Methods that do not obstruct such ends, such as Natural Family Planning (NFP), are deemed acceptable.

Again, it is not my purpose to engage with the Roman Catholic view here, but only to note its dissent from the evangelical position that the primary or only moral criterion for judging birth control methods is the sanctity of human life. Nevertheless, it is worth noting at least that many Protestants argue that this Roman Catholic position wrongly takes an act-oriented view of sexual relations within marriage. A marriage as a whole may be open to the

blessing of procreation, preserving its integrity, even if particular conjugal acts seek to prevent conception.⁷ In addition, it seems to many that such a view maintains a strained distinction between “artificial” and “natural,” since even NFP can hardly be said to be truly natural. Finally, since some type of limitation or family planning is allowed, it may be asked whether intention is a more significant moral factor than the Roman Catholic Church recognizes.

Augustinian Dissent

A second type of dissent from the general evangelical analysis of birth control comes from the early Church Fathers, and especially Augustine, whose views will be the focus of this section. It may be said that many of the early Christians saw a close connection between contraception and abortion as methods of birth control, and condemned them together as aspects of the same problem.⁸ This was true for several reasons, including the fact that both were seen as an assault upon human life and because they obstructed the purposes of marriage and sexual relations within marriage. In effect, Christians sought to distinguish their own beliefs and practices from those of the culture around them. The following were some of the relevant issues in relation to cultural beliefs and practices, which affected Christian views (note that aspects of these cultural issues are quite relevant in our day as well):⁹

1. Both contraception and abortion were used as forms of birth control in order to limit family size, preserve wealth, and cover up sexual immorality, including prostitution, fornication and adultery, etc. Such reasons were contrary to Christian values and beliefs.

2. It was unclear whether some drugs acted as contraceptives or abortifacients, or both, and thus they were

to be avoided altogether.

3. The Gnostic and Manichaean belief systems had an aversion to procreation as a form of material evil, in contrast to the Christian affirmation of procreation.

As an example, the *Didache*, an early manual of Christian belief and practice, condemns abortion alongside of sexual sins as well as sins that attack human life:

You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not corrupt boys. You shall not fornicate. You shall not steal. You shall not make magic. You shall not practice medicine (*pharmakeia*, probably meaning drugs for sterilization or abortifacients). You shall not slay the child by abortions (*phthora*). You shall not kill what is generated. You shall not desire your neighbor's wife.¹⁰

As indicated, several early Church Fathers also condemned birth control and abortion (and infanticide), not only on the basis of the sanctity of human life, but also on the basis of the sanctity of marriage and sexuality. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, states, “what cause is there for the exposure of a child? The man *who did not desire to beget children had no right to marry at first*; certainly not to have become, through licentious indulgence, the murderer of his children.”¹¹ The combination of the desire for sexual indulgence and the refusal to have children will lead people to practice contraception, abortion, or even infanticide. Jerome echoes the same sentiment when he says, “Some go so far as to take potions, that they may insure barrenness, and thus murder human beings almost before their conception. Some, when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion.”¹²

Probably none of the early Fathers made as sweeping a condemnation of birth con-

trol, including both contraception and abortion, without distinction, as Augustine. In the following excerpt from “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” we see something of Augustine’s view of birth control, which he connects with sexual lust:

Sometimes, indeed, this lustful cruelty, or; if you please, cruel lust, resorts to such extravagant methods as to use poisonous drugs to secure barrenness; or else, if unsuccessful in this, to destroy the conceived seed by some means previous to birth, preferring that its offspring should rather perish than receive vitality; or if it was advancing to life within the womb, should be slain before it was born. Well, if both parties alike are so flagitious, they are not husband and wife; and if such were their character from the beginning, they have not come together by wedlock but by debauchery. But if the two are not alike in such sin, I boldly declare either that the woman is, so to say, the husband’s harlot; or the man the wife’s adulterer.¹³

Augustine considers the attempt to prevent conception to be like the destruction of the fetus in that sexual relations and pleasure are sought apart from openness to procreation. Such actions despise the gifts of God and they are characterized and condemned as “cruel lust.” For him, birth control (contraceptive or otherwise) cannot be justified even within marriage, for it desecrates marriage, turning it into something that is simply used to satisfy human lust.

We may wonder about how abortion is judged not merely on the basis of the sanctity of human life, but on the basis of sexual morality and an inviolable connection between sex and procreation. What are we to make of Augustine’s account? It is common to dismiss him rather quickly, for various reasons. In part, this is because, as Michael Gorman states, we “welcome the church’s relatively recent liberation from

its negative, Augustinian attitudes towards sex.”¹⁴ In addition, Augustine is dismissed quickly because he claims that sexual relations must not only be limited to marriage, but also always be directed at procreation, if they are to be without fault.¹⁵ We who have come to place priority on the companionship of husband and wife above other purposes of marriage find it difficult to grant such a dominant place to procreation.

Furthermore, it is an alien concept to us that Augustine could consider sexual relations within marriage, for the purpose of pleasure, to be a sin, even a forgivable one. Or, even more strange and appalling, that married couples who would use contraception, so that they may enjoy marital love in its own right, might be called harlots and adulterers. Obviously, it is thought, Augustine has nothing to say to us in this regard. His complete rejection of birth control and his view that contraception and abortion are points on the same continuum, are mistaken and quite foreign to the contemporary mind. We are gladly liberated.

As a result, evangelicals, and Protestants in general, largely reject Augustine’s views on birth control and sexual morality. They are also rejected by our contemporary culture, but for different reasons. Ironically, even the Roman Catholic Church, whose position on contraception has been built largely upon the Augustinian analysis, has departed from Augustine’s view. In particular, Augustine would not accept the Roman Catholic affirmation of even “natural” methods of birth control, for in his view, intentionally engaging in marital relations only when conception is not possible simply demonstrates a couple’s servitude to lust. Despite this wholesale rejection of Augustine, I believe that we need to reckon with his analysis, in part because he is sometimes misunderstood,

and in part because perhaps we have lost something of his keen awareness of and insight into our fallen sexuality.

In other words, while some of this criticism of Augustine is proper, other parts of it are not, and we may be in need of some Augustinian correction. For instance, it is not quite right to say that Augustine has a negative attitude towards sex. Rather, his view is that sex (and even sexual desire), as part of God's creative purposes, may be affirmed as good, but that fallen sexual desire is hopelessly tainted by concupiscence or lust. It seems to me to be a difficult task to prove Augustine to be wrong on this point, though we may respond to the point differently than he does. Augustine's concern with birth control is at least partly that sexual desire aimed at pleasure as an end in itself either stems from or leads to lust, to the extent that not only is the attempt made to prevent conception, but, if necessary, to kill what is conceived. Sexual pleasure is made to be an idol. Such is "cruel lust," in Augustine's words.

Before drawing some conclusions from this analysis, I will turn to a third group that could be considered "dissenters" from the evangelical position that contraception and abortion are not to be linked together in our moral analysis. It is possible that we may need to consider Augustine's challenge more carefully, as we think about this group of "cultural" dissenters in our day, remembering that Augustine took aim, in part, at the Greco-Roman culture of his day. Indeed, our culture shares many values in common with the Greco-Roman world.

***Contemporary Cultural Dissent:
Roe v. Wade and Its Supporters***

I will highlight *Roe v. Wade* and its supporters to indicate something at least about

the culture and morality of our day. And what is the understanding of birth control, and the relation, if any, between contraception and abortion in *Roe v. Wade* and among its supporters? *Roe v. Wade* does not directly address the relationship between contraception and abortion. Neither does it explicitly accept abortion as a means of birth control. The Texas law, which allowed abortion only to save the mother's life, was said to be too restrictive, and following on that, all restrictive abortion laws were struck down on the grounds of protecting the mother's life and health.¹⁶

However, there are clear indications that this landmark ruling had more to do with reproductive (and sexual) liberty than with the mother's health. First, because the case against abortion was based in part on a claim that Texas had violated the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Specifically, the clause says that states shall not "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." In the case of abortion, it was interpreted that women are deprived of liberty by restricting abortion, for if it was deprivation of life that was at issue, then the Texas law (let alone other less restrictive state laws) would not need to be struck down. Second, it is relevant that one of the key Supreme Court decisions leading up to *Roe* was *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), which was appealed to in *Roe*. That case determined that a married woman has the right to purchase contraception, based upon privacy rights. Thus, its relevance to *Roe* is with respect to privacy, not a woman's health. Finally, the fact that the *Roe* decision stopped states from prohibiting abortions for any reason during the first two trimesters of pregnancy clearly indicates that abortion must be allowed as a means of birth control. Otherwise, some limitations

would be considered, so that, for instance, abortion could be prevented except in cases of rape, incest, fetal deformity, or to protect the life of the mother, and so on.

Justice Blackmun, who delivered the majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade*, makes his view very clear in his dissenting opinion in the case of *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (1989), saying,

“Not with a bang, but a whimper,” the plurality discards a landmark case of the last generation [*Roe v. Wade*], and casts into darkness the hopes and visions of every woman in this country who had come to believe that the Constitution guaranteed her the right to exercise some control over her unique ability to bear children. The plurality does so either oblivious or insensitive to the fact that millions of women, and their families, have ordered their lives around the right to reproductive choice, and this right has become vital to the full participation of women in the economic and political walks of American life.¹⁷

The use of abortion as a means of birth control can be seen further in some arguments defending abortion and the *Roe v. Wade* decision. For instance, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott states:

How is a married woman able to plan schooling or commit herself to a career or vocation as long as her life is continually open to the disruption of unplanned pregnancies? Unless, of course, she can fall back on an abortion when all else has failed.¹⁸

Likewise, Laurence Tribe says:

Laws restricting abortion so dramatically shape the lives of women, and only of women, that their denial of equality hardly needs detailed elaboration. While men retain the right to sexual and reproductive autonomy, restrictions on abortion deny that autonomy to women. Laws restricting access to abortion thereby place

a real and substantial burden on women’s ability to participate in society as equals.¹⁹

The end result of *Roe v. Wade*, and the expectation of many of our cultural arbiters, is that abortion must be available as a means of birth control, should contraception not be used or should it fail. Some deny that they support such a view, but their logic and ultimate position demonstrates the point, or there would be no objection to legal provisions that would limit reasons for abortion. And, indeed, if, as it is claimed, the human life in the womb is not one that is worthy of legal protection, then how could someone object to a particular reason for which abortion is used?

In a recent book, Daniel Maguire displays the inconsistency of many arguments used to defend abortion. It is suggestive that the book examines the right to contraception and abortion in religious traditions (and in a claim that defies understanding—and reality—Maguire argues that views opposed to abortion and those defending it are both legitimate and authentic views within each tradition). At one point, Maguire states that “the religious scholars you will meet in these pages are at one with the position stated by Asoka Bandarage: ‘Abortion should not be used as a contraceptive method, but safe and legal abortions should be available to women who choose to have them.’”²⁰ Yet later he cites Christine Gudorf without challenge when she says that in earlier days “abortion was not the ‘birth limitation of choice’ because it was, until well into the twentieth century, so extremely dangerous to the mother.”²¹ Abortion is defended in part, at least, as a method of birth control, whatever may be said to the contrary.

Finally, it can be added that, in practice,

abortion is widely used as a method of birth control in our culture. It is significant to note a study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (USA 1987-88), the research arm of Planned Parenthood. The study asked women who had abortions what their main reason was for the abortion. Their answers are revealing, with at least 92% giving reasons that indicated that abortion was used as a means of birth control.²²

It is fair to say that abortion is considered to be a method of birth control. Such a view was implied in the arguments in *Roe v. Wade* and other legal rulings. It is also maintained in various arguments made in defense of abortion, and is seen in the actual reasons given for having abortions. It is, in other words, a commonly held view that abortion is linked with contraception as forms of birth control, and both are defended as morally acceptable.

Conclusions and Implications

To summarize the main ideas to this point, we may say that evangelical Christians, for the most part, do not consider contraception and abortion to be linked together morally as forms of birth control, but to be significantly different issues. Based upon the sanctity of human life, abortion is judged to be wrong, while contraception is said to be morally neutral. Augustine challenges this point of view. He maintains that abortion and contraception are of the same species. Based upon the sanctity of marriage and sexuality, he condemns both abortion and contraception as morally wrong, because they fuel lust, and marriage is used as a cover-up to such immorality and to give an appearance of decency. Augustine's view was a response in part to the prevailing views of his day, which also held that contraception and abortion were, in effect, continuous moral

issues, but which had gained acceptance among many in the Greco-Roman world. Interestingly, the prevailing evangelical view exists in a day when the surrounding culture holds a view similar to the Greco-Roman culture. The judgment of *Roe v. Wade* and its supporters agree that abortion and contraception are of the same species in some sense. And, based upon autonomy, including the right to sexual and reproductive freedom, and the "good" of limiting family size, they defend both abortion and contraception as morally acceptable.

In other words, though their conclusions are clearly different, there is at least one relevant point upon which Augustine agrees with the culture of his day and with *Roe v. Wade* and its supporters: They agree that abortion and contraception free sex from its "essential" connection to procreation. As forms of birth control, both abortion and contraception allow for freedom from procreation and freedom for sexual indulgence (inside and outside of marriage). The Greco-Roman culture and *Roe v. Wade* and its supporters defend both methods morally because they allow for freedom and moral responsibility. Augustine condemns both methods as an attack upon marriage and sexuality, allowing for the free reign of lust.

What conclusions might be drawn from this study? Do we reject the Augustinian analysis of the issues as readily as we reject our culture's view that contraception and birth control are linked together in morally significant ways? How is it that such vastly different perspectives as Augustine and Planned Parenthood agree on anything with respect to birth control? I would suggest that Augustine's analysis might provide us with some important insight, and in doing so, we might rescue something

of his perspective from those who would quickly dismiss him. Or, perhaps Augustine might rescue us from our own unchecked attitudes concerning marriage, contraception, and sexual morality in general.

If nothing else, hopefully the challenge of Augustine is one that will invite us to think more critically about the issue of contraception. The following are some considerations for evangelical reflection on the use of contraception.

First, we need to articulate a perspective that is distinguished from our culture in significant ways. This has been accomplished, in part, through the focus on the sanctity of human life as a crucial moral criterion. Yet, from Augustine (and negatively from our culture), we can learn something important about the broader issue that he addressed. That is to say, another criterion by which we may evaluate both abortion and contraception is (something like) the sanctity of sexuality and marriage. If we use this criterion, we may at least attend to some of Augustine's concerns. Our culture defends and practices abortion as a form of birth control, demonstrating the lengths to which we will go for reproductive or sexual "freedom." There is evidence that evangelicals, too, have been significantly affected by this ethic of sexuality, and that Augustine was not far off the mark:

1. The CT study cited earlier indicates that Christians do not even consider moral issues with regard to procreation and contraception.

2. Evangelicals were slow to realize the devastation of liberalized abortion laws (and, indeed, many actually supported them prior to *Roe v. Wade*), and it may well be that we have not fully comprehended the effects of the sexual revolution in general.

3. In addition, according to an Alan Guttmacher Institute survey on abortion, 1 in 5 women having abortions identified themselves as "born again" or "evangelical" (which, if accurate, amounts to 250,000 or more abortions each year).²³

Second, we need to articulate a perspective that is distinguished from Augustine in some ways. Resisting our culture's perspective on contraception does not require rejecting the use of contraception altogether. Augustine's wholesale rejection of all forms of birth control (besides abstinence!) notwithstanding, we may say that the distinction between contraceptive and abortifacient methods (including surgical abortion) is valid, and the sanctity of human life is an important criterion by which to evaluate both abortion and other birth control methods. This criterion clearly points to a decisive difference in means. Birth control methods that act after conception (including abortion) are properly judged to be morally wrong on this criterion, while methods that prevent contraception may be acceptable in a marriage that is open to children, so long as they do not do harm in other ways.

Third, we need to cultivate moral wisdom concerning the responsible use of contraception *because* contraception in itself is morally neutral. One of the reasons that many evangelicals do not speak more frequently or clearly on the issue of contraception is because we do not have a clear Biblical imperative to which we may appeal. Nor is there confidence in a principle derived from Natural Law (or a particular interpretation of Natural Law). In such cases, it is often implied that there are no moral issues, only pragmatic ones. The "bottom line" for many, then, is that moral wisdom may be nice, but if there is not a clear right and wrong, it hardly seems to

be worth a large investment of time simply to give advice. We need to resist such notions, and recognize the importance of wisdom if we are to use our freedom responsibly. Thus, it is not only possible, but also necessary to reflect and deliberate morally about contraception.

The following points represent some areas of concern that are deserving of our attention and further discussion. First, we may affirm that contraception can be a blessing, but, if so, it is a mixed one. We might note that, on balance, the benefits that we have achieved with reliable birth control methods have come with a price. Many consider child spacing and limitation to be a blessing, but can that blessing be embraced apart from some recognition of the tragic results that have accompanied the sexual morality that has grown up with effective birth control? Is it possible for Christians to distinguish ourselves from our culture in our use of birth control? If not, perhaps there is a deeper problem than we recognize. But if so, then we need to describe how it is possible.

Second, we may recognize that there is a balance in the “goods” of marriage. Through much of church history, procreation was seen as the primary purpose of both sexual relations and marriage, and this was especially so for Augustine and other church fathers. Against the Manichees, who disparaged marriage and procreation, Augustine spoke of the goods of marriage, among which procreation was central, which led him to reject both abortion and contraception.²⁴ If we consider not only the sanctity of human life, but also a broad concern for sexual morality, as a mode of ethical reflection, we may be cautious about attitudes and behaviors that radically separate marital union and procreation.

Third, we ought to show clearly that we welcome children into our marriages. We ought to be careful to avoid a contraceptive mentality, in which children are simply seen as choices, which, if not planned, may be an intrusion into our plans, hopes, and dreams. In a culture that sees children as risks and in which the importance of children is diminishing, Christians ought to affirm the blessing of children. A recent report in the *National Marriage Project*, sponsored by Rutgers University, concludes that there has been a loss of child centeredness in our culture. It states:

The presence of children in America has declined significantly since 1960, as measured by fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Other indicators suggest that this decline has reduced the child centeredness of our nation and contributed to the weakening of the institution of marriage.²⁵

Is it possible that Christians can use birth control responsibly while at the same time affirming the central place that belongs to children in marriage (and that ties sexual intercourse to procreation)? Can we be intentional about doing so?

Fourth, we ought to be particularly cautious about sterilization. The fact that more than 38% of all users of birth control choose sterilization as the preferred method (making it the most common form of contraception) suggests a fairly radical loosening of the bond connecting sexual union and procreation.²⁶ There may not be clear moral lines here, but moral wisdom suggests not severing too quickly or permanently the connection between sexual union and procreation. If, as Protestants are fond of saying, the totality of our unions are to be open to procreation, what is the significance of ending that possibility, especially simply because we have the number of

children that we want?

Fifth, pleasure should be kept in perspective. If one of the problems that has marked some teaching on marriage and sexuality in the past has been a suspicion of sexual desire and pleasure, that is surely not our problem. Instead, while we deny our culture's view that any and all forms of sexual desire are perfectly good, we do tend to think that sexual desire within marriage is by definition without fault. Furthermore, we tend to elevate pleasure to a central place in our understanding of sexual relations within marriage. Perhaps we ought to recognize, as Augustine did, that pleasure, for which contraception frees up sexual relations, can easily become idolatrous, and that even in marriage lust can be a problem. We ought to distinguish ourselves from our culture in terms of our understanding of sexuality and marriage, and not promote a view of sex for pleasure apart from the broader purposes of marriage. "Intended for pleasure" ought not to be our only or even primary understanding of sex. As NFP advocates Sam and Bethany Torode recognize, true pleasure may be something much more than a momentary and intense feeling, if we place it in proper perspective and pursue greater things.²⁷ Pleasure has its place, and it is a good gift of God. Yet, perhaps rather than being a purpose of sexual relations in itself, it may simply be given by God so that we might receive great joy in pursuing the deeper purposes of marriage, including unity and procreation. What an incredible blessing that, as we *give* ourselves to our spouse, we also *receive* pleasure, all the while welcoming the possibility of transmitting the gift of life.

Finally, we may recognize that while nature need not be our master, it can be a guide. Natural Law arguments have often

led to the conclusion that contraception is morally wrong, because it goes against nature (in part, by obstructing the natural "ends" of sexual relations in marriage). If we are right in claiming that contraception need not be seen as a problem in and of itself, it is in part because we find fault with this reasoning. We may claim that another "end" of marriage is unity, for instance, which is not obstructed (necessarily) by the use of contraception. Or, we may claim that we have been given dominion over nature. Yet nature may still serve as a guide, disclosing to us, perhaps, the natural connection between unity and procreation in marriage and sexual relations. This disclosure comes through reflection not only on the natural connection, however, but also through Scripture's attestation to the purposes of marriage and the creation of male and female. As a result, we are encouraged not to think that the only thing that ties marriage and sexual relations to procreation is the human will and choice. If we wish to avoid inadvertently supporting a radical separation of marriage, sex, and childbearing, then we do well to reflect upon the natural connection that is given and blessed by God. For if the only thing that ties marriage and sex to procreation is the human will, then what will be thought to be artificial is not the use of contraception, but the supposed connection (once thought of as natural) between sex and procreation. Inevitably, such a view will lead not only to the unreflective use of contraception, but also, by contributing to the severing of sex from procreation, it may unwittingly contribute to our culture's acceptance of abortion.

ENDNOTES

¹An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the annual meeting

of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in November, 2002 entitled "Abortion, Birth Control and Sexual Morality: Augustine, Roe v. Wade and NARAL."

²Conception is understood here as the point at which fertilization occurs, though some hold that conception is the point at which implantation occurs. For a discussion of the various forms of birth control and ethical implications, see William Cutrer, *Family Building: Fact, Fallacy and Faith, A Christian Doctor Looks at Contraception* (Dallas: Aspire, 2002); cf John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1993) 18-30. In some cases, such as the birth control pill (or oral contraceptives), there is debate concerning whether they always act prior to conception. For a summary of this issue, see Cutrer, *Family Building*; also Walter Larimore and Randy Alcorn, "Using the Birth Control Pill is Ethically Unacceptable," in *The Reproduction Revolution*, ed. John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham, and W. David Hager (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

³Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

⁴John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993).

⁵George K. Brushaber, "The Joy of Procreation," *Christianity Today*, 11 Nov 1991, 45.

⁶James Nuechterlein, "Catholics, Protestants, and Contraception," *First Things* 92 (April 1999) 10.

⁷For a helpful discussion of the Roman Catholic view(s) of contraception, by both Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars, see "Contraception: A Symposium," *First Things* 88 (December 1998) 17-29. For a thorough study of the historical and theological issues from a Roman Catholic perspective, see John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁸For example, Didache 2.2; Hippolytus, *The Refutation of all Heresies* 9.7; Jerome, *To Eustochium* 22.13; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* XXIX; Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* Book II, ch. XVIII.

⁹I have adapted this list from John T. Noonan, Jr., "Contraception," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 124-125.

¹⁰Didache 2.2. The prohibitions here are connected, as each sin is a sexual sin and/or a sin against human life.

¹¹Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, Book II ch. XVIII. Italics added.

¹²Jerome, *To Eustochium* 22.13.

¹³Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.17.

¹⁴Michael J. Gorman, "The Church's Changing Mind," *Christianity Today*, 11 November 1991, 43.

¹⁵See, for example, Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 6.

¹⁶For an examination of *Roe v. Wade* and an analysis of the abortion controversy in general, from various perspectives, see Louis P. Pojman and Francis J. Beckwith, *The Abortion*

Controversy: 25 Years After Roe v. Wade: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: Wadsworth, 1998).

¹⁷Cited in *May it Please the Court: Arguments on Abortion*, ed. Stephanie Guitton and Peter Irons (New York: The New Press, 1995) 122. Italics added. For a complete transcript, see <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=case&court=US&vol=492&page=490>.

¹⁸Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Reproductive Choice: Basic to Justice for Women," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17 (March 1988) 289.

¹⁹Laurence Tribe, *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes* (New York: Norton, 1990) 105. Italics added.

²⁰Daniel C. Maguire, *Sacred Choices: The Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 27.

²¹Ibid, 38. Italics added.

²²<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/2411798.html>; the reasons given were as follows:

- 25.5% Wants to postpone childbearing
- 7.9% Wants no (more) children
- 21.3% Cannot afford baby
- 10.8% Child would disrupt education or job
- 14.1% Relationship problem or partner does not want baby
- 12.2% Too young to have baby
- 2.8% Risk to maternal health
- 3.3% Risk to fetal health
- 2.1% Other reasons

Note: all but the last three (or 8.2%) are forms of birth control, and some of the last three may be as well.

²³<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/archives/prabort2.html>.

²⁴Cf. Noonan, 124.

²⁵Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, "The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America," The National Marriage Project, 2002 (<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/TEXTSOOU2002.htm>)

²⁶http://www.agi-usa.org/pubs/fb_contr_use.html.

²⁷Sam and Bethany Torode, "Make Love and Babies," *Christianity Today*, 12 November 2001, 48-54.