



Bible Study

LEADER'S GUIDE

Is Family Planning Okay?

The contraceptive mentality says children are something to be avoided. Is that valid?

The use of birth control by married couples is not debated in evangelical circles. But one couple says we should give it some thought. They have chosen to let nature take its course and have not artificially prevented pregnancy. In a dissenting article, a scholar builds a biblical and theological case for birth control. Why has family planning generated so much debate among Catholics and so little among Protestants? Is there a sound biblical basis for opposition to contraception, or for broad acceptance of its use by married couples?

Lesson #18

Scripture:

Genesis 1:27-28; 24:60; 38:8-10; Psalms 127:3-5; 128:1-4; John 1:12-13

Based on:

"Make Love and Babies." CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 12, 2001, Vol. 45, No. 14, Page 48

"Be Fruitful and Multiply," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 12, 2001, Vol. 45, No. 14, Pg 58



CHRISTIANITY TODAY

INTERNATIONAL

© 2002

Visit CurrentIssuesBibleStudy.com

PART 1**Identify the Current Issue**

Note to leader: Prior to meeting, provide for each person the articles "Make Love and Babies" and "Be Fruitful and Multiply" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine, included at the end of this study.

In "Make Love and Babies," we meet Sam and Bethany Torode, a young Christian couple who has chosen against birth control. They believe sex within marriage and without contraception is God's intent. Too many evangelicals have co-opted marriage, they say, by elevating pleasure and convenience above God's design.

**Discussion starters:**

- [Q]** The Torodes referred to the wedding ceremony from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which gives three purposes for marriage: procreation, a remedy against sin, and mutual society (or companionship). How would you rank these in order of priority? Why?
 - How has our society reordered these purposes in recent years?
- [Q]** The Torodes view marital lovemaking in a way different from most evangelicals. What do you like about the Torodes' view? Does the article resonate with your convictions?
- [Q]** Do you think the elevation of companionship as a reason for marriage, supplanting procreation, has had positive or negative influence on society's view of marriage?
 - What is its effect on the quality of your relationships and your expectations of marriage?
- [Q]** The Torodes write: "In the traditional Christian wedding service, there is no mention of pleasure or feelings. When we exchanged vows, we did not promise to give each other goose bumps. Instead, we vowed to remain faithful always, even through hard times, poverty, and sickness." What's your reaction to these words?
- [Q]** The Torodes draw a distinction between the use of artificial birth control (chemicals and devices) and natural methods for the spacing of children. Do you agree with this distinction?
- [Q]** In order for God to do something holy through marital lovemaking, must those involved give up contraception?



PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles**Teaching point one: Is childbearing a command or a blessing?**

Raymond C. Van Leeuwen provides a new interpretation of the familiar passage “Be fruitful and multiply.” His view may change the conventional understanding of the Bible’s teaching on contraception.

Van Leeuwen first points to Genesis 24:60. This passage is a benediction given to Rebekah by her family as she leaves home to marry Isaac. The language is that of a blessing rather than a command. “Be the mother...” may sound like a directive, but it’s obvious that human beings cannot make such demands. The second phrase is clearer: “may your descendants possess.” Her fertility is the heartfelt desire of her relatives.

Van Leeuwen, professor of biblical studies at Eastern College, says the grammatical structure in Genesis 24:60 is identical to that in Genesis 1:28. The blessing aspect may be lost in the translation from Hebrew to English where God says, “Be fruitful and increase in number” —which should be translated, Van Leeuwen argues, “May you be fruitful and multiply.” The expression of God’s desire continues: fill the earth, subdue it, rule over the creatures. God has given humanity its place and tells them his desire for all human beings. In this light, God sounds more like a father waving to a child who is heading off to college: “Behave yourself, make good grades, call home on Sundays.”

The blessing is what God desires for his beloved image-bearers, and it is what he makes possible. But Van Leeuwen says it is not a command. This interpretation leaves much open for humans to decide. The college student can choose whether to behave herself exactly as her parents wish, how to make good grades, and when on Sunday to phone home. The male and female, within marriage, can choose whether, how, and when to be fruitful.

Van Leeuwen bolsters his argument by indicating that this verse as a blessing can apply to all humans, whereas as a command it cannot. Not all people marry. Not all people can have children. The Bible has numerous examples of both of these.

[Q] Biblical exegetes warn against building a doctrine on one or two verses. Do you agree with Van Leeuwen that Genesis 1:28 is better interpreted as a blessing than a command?

- Even if you believe it is a command, should this verse be the basis for forbidding contraception?

Optional Activity: Ask group members to pair off for this exercise. Ask them to read Psalm 127:3–5 and 128:1–4 and answer the questions in the “Optional Handout.” After they answer the questions, bring the group together. Read the psalms aloud and share your findings.

Teaching point two: Are children the result of God’s will or human will?

The Torodes point to the role of will in procreation. Let’s look at the involvement of divine and human wills in childbearing.



A. The case for human will.

Two passages in Scripture speak specifically to the role of the human will in family planning. One acknowledges it. The other condemns it, but in a very specific instance.

In the beautiful, poetic prologue to the Gospel of John, one verse speaks to the role of will in childbearing. This passage is not intended as a doctrine on family planning. Its purpose is to describe the first coming of Christ in poetic terms, his dwelling among us, and his residence by faith within us. But verse 13 mentions “human decision” and “a husband’s will” as being factors in the birth of children. John uses these terms to contrast the spiritual birth, which is brought about by God. The inclusion of these terms serves, in our discussion, to acknowledge that the human will is involved in the process, and that humans make decisions about having babies. John 1:13 is descriptive, not prescriptive. But from the verse we can conclude that family planning isn’t left to God alone.

Another passage, Genesis 38:6-10, may be our only recorded case of conception prevention in Scripture. Judah’s son Er was married to Tamar. Er died without leaving an heir. Judah told Er’s younger brother Onan to father a child by Tamar in Er’s name so that Er’s line would continue.

[This was called levirate marriage. Its purpose was to guarantee that each man’s name and property would be handed down (see Deut. 25:5-10). This custom prompted Jesus’ question in Matthew 22:23-28. He didn’t answer it directly, by the way, using the occasion instead to teach on marital status in heaven and the resurrection of the dead.]

Onan refused to do his duty to his dead brother’s wife, making certain before intercourse that conception would not be possible (see Gen. 38:9). Some use this verse as an argument against masturbation, but God’s displeasure with Onan was specifically brought about by Onan’s refusal to honor his brother by providing descendants. But can we take it so far as to mean that God is against contraception? This text is again descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Later, after her father-in-law Judah reneged on a promise to provide children by a third brother, Tamar arranged to sleep with Judah himself. As a result, she bore twins.

The lesson of Onan and Tamar is that people do take part in family planning, whether by wanting children or by not wanting them. In addition, the Bible does not seem to condemn—or endorse—contraception.

B. The case for God’s will.

Other passages emphasize God’s will in childbearing. Consider the story of Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29 and 30. Seeing that Jacob does not love his first wife, Leah, God gives her children. Rachel, the beloved second wife, has none. Notice that Scripture does not say that Rachel’s infertility was from God in the same way Leah’s fruitfulness was from God, but that is the opinion of Jacob. When Rachel pleads for Jacob to impregnate her, he responds, “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from bearing children?” His question is helpful to our understanding. In Jacob’s Old Testament understanding, God decided whether women bore children or not. Many who wrestle with a Christian response to contraception and family planning ask Jacob’s question: Am I in the place of God? By bringing this passage into the discussion, Van Leeuwen has elevated its importance in the discussion regarding birth control.



- [Q] Does the use of birth control mean usurping God's power?
- [Q] To what extent is God concerned with our use of birth control?
- [Q] God allows us freedom to make many choices. What, if anything, is different about this choice?

The theological argument, as Van Leeuwen frames it, is one of sovereignty versus stewardship. Proponents of the sovereignty argument would say: "Who are we to decide whether we will give God the opportunity to create life within a marriage? That is his choice. After all, he is God."

Proponents of the stewardship argument would contend, "God has given us dominion over the earth. That includes the wise use of resources, and because human beings are the main users of resources, it only makes sense to limit their number."

- [Q] So, what do you think? Whose choice is it—God's or ours?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

- [Q] What should the church say about birth control?

Leader's Note: *The Bible does not give explicit instructions on the church's role in family planning. A teaching on birth control can be pieced together from biblical passages on marriage, family, respect for human life, the sovereignty of God, and stewardship of life and of the earth. The Torodes point out that, while the Catholic church has been the leading opponent of artificial birth control in the twentieth century, Protestant churches were the first to oppose the sale and use of contraceptives. Yet in recent decades, the use of birth control has been accepted among most Protestants without debate.*

- [Q] Are you surprised by the relative silence of Protestant churches on the subject of birth control at the time when they speak out against abortion?
- [Q] Can you recall a discussion in church of the use of birth control by married couples?
- [Q] Should family planning be part of the minister's pre-marital counseling curriculum? Should it be the subject of sermons?
- [Q] The promotion of so-called safe sex and condom use in public schools makes many Christians wary of debating sex-related topics with teenagers. Is there a place in your church's youth program for a discussion of birth control and family planning?





Bible Study

A HANDOUT FOR FURTHER STUDY

Make Love and Babies

The contraceptive mentality says children are something to be avoided. We're not buying it.

This exercise may be done before the meeting, either at home or as the participants arrive. They may pair off.

Read Psalm 127:3-5 and Psalm 128:1-4 and answer the following questions.

1. What do these verses tell you about the Hebrew view of children and family?
2. A full quiver would hold as many as 12 arrows. Do you think the psalmist is advocating families of 12 children?
3. Notice who is credited with Psalm 127. How does the authorship affect the perspective on family in this psalm?
4. Based on these texts and on what you know about agrarian societies, why would a big family be important? Who bears responsibility for providing for the family?
5. On what is the blessing contingent?
6. Do you think having children is a command or a blessing?



© 2002

Visit CurrentIssuesBibleStudy.com

Bible Study

ARTICLE

Make Love and Babies

The contraceptive mentality says children are something to be avoided. We're not buying it.

By Sam and Bethany Torode, for the study "Make Love and Babies."

Are children a risk or a blessing? Of course children are a blessing, most couples say; then again, many say they're not ready for this blessing just yet. In fact, most married Christians use thermometers, spermicidal jellies, contraceptive pills, and lovemaking techniques to delay this blessing.

Why is that? What happens when we treat childbearing as something to be delayed or avoided? This essay explains how one young couple answered these questions. An accompanying essay by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen reaches different conclusions. Both essays raise theological, ethical, and historical issues that all engaged and married Christians need to discuss.



"Dearly beloved," the minister began, "we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

The congregation was silent in rapt attention, except for the occasional cry of a disgruntled baby who had little interest in the sacred occasion.

"Marriage is an honorable estate," the minister continued, "and not to be entered into lightly, but reverently and soberly, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained."

"First, it was ordained for the procreation of children."

At this point, a guest later reported, the calm was interrupted by a snort of disapproval—"humpf!"—from one of our relatives, who crossed her arms in dismay.

That snort summed up a good deal of modern thought on childbearing. Partly thanks to the wide availability of artificial contraception (along with dual careerism in an increasing number of marriages), married couples these days are



having fewer and fewer children. Many Christians see this as a blessing. Hormone and barrier contraceptives, they feel, allow newlyweds to spend time “getting to know each other” before the kids start coming. For this reason, before we were married a number of Christians advised us to wait a year or two before having children.

Neither of us had been brought up to oppose contraception. Growing up, Sam believed that the Catholic church forbade artificial contraception, but he assumed it was a superstition left over from the Middle Ages. Birth control was never mentioned in his Baptist church. In high school, his friends ridiculed the Catholic position by quoting the lyrics from the satirical Monty Python song, “Every Sperm Is Sacred.”

As a teenager, Bethany occasionally discussed contraception with her best friend. Though her mom had taught her to be wary of hormonal contraceptives because of their side effects and suppression of the body’s natural fertility cycle, she argued in favor of barrier methods such as condoms. When she met Sam, such speculations ceased to be merely theoretical. She would be getting married soon, and she needed to think practically and deeply about birth control.

Unfortunately, we found little help on this subject at Protestant bookstores. Most of the popular Christian relationship guides seem to assume that couples will be using artificial contraception and that this does not affect their marriage. James Dobson’s book with the promising title *Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide* is disappointingly silent on the subject of birth control.

During our engagement, it became increasingly clear that for love to flourish, we had to grow in knowledge and respect for each other’s bodies—not just our minds and souls. We found a number of Catholic resources that helped us along the way. By taking a home study course in Natural Family Planning (NFP—the natural method of fertility regulation, or child spacing, endorsed by the Catholic church) we learned far more about our fertility, with its God-ordained cycles and rhythms, than we had ever been told by doctors or health educators. More than that, we were prompted to communicate with each other on a deeper level than before and were immersed in what we found to be a profound, biblical perspective on the meaning of love and marriage.

One Flesh

The pastor who presided at our wedding used the eloquent 17th-century *Book of Common Prayer* ceremony. This service gives three purposes of marriage: first, it was instituted for the procreation of children; second, it is a remedy



against sin; and third, it provides for the mutual society, help, and comfort of the spouses.

Although all three purposes are drawn from Scripture, several of our friends objected to the order in which they were given. They argued that companionship was the most important reason for marriage and that procreation was a distant second. In response, we said the point is not that one purpose of marriage is more important than another—each is important and none should dominate at the expense of the others. Later, we came to believe that there is good sense in listing procreation first: having (or adopting) children ought to bring spouses closer together and expands the community of marriage. The responsibilities, trials, and joys of parenthood are means of sanctification.

Sex is the consummation of marriage—it epitomizes the complete union of husband and wife. As Genesis 2:25 states, husband and wife become one flesh. Jesus reiterates this teaching when he condemns divorce: “They are no longer two, but one flesh.” The apostle Paul writes that this one-flesh union is of mystical significance—it is a sign of the union between Christ and his church.

In her novel *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Doris Betts provides a beautiful picture of a one-flesh union. Describing two grandparents, she writes: “A plain and stocky couple, once blond and ruddy, now bleached by the same work and weather and habits, they might have been siblings.... or resemblance might deepen over the years from steady absorption of each other’s bodily fluids.... Ye shall be one flesh.”

It may seem strange to say that, within marriage, the free exchange of bodily fluids is a means of experiencing the grace of God, but we believe this to be true. As the Bible makes clear, the mystery of marriage is not about becoming one mind or one soul, but one flesh, encompassing the totality of man. When unobstructed, this one-flesh union leads to procreation and spousal unity. It’s important to remember that married couples don’t create children—God does, and they are a gift only he can bestow. We see our part as remaining open to children by being one flesh and refusing to compromise that union.

Intended for Pleasure?

In the United States today, you aren’t likely to win popularity points by saying that sex is meant for procreation and spousal unity. Thus, in order to stay culturally relevant, many evangelicals stress that God designed sex to yield pleasure. In fact, according to the title of one evangelical sex guide, sex is “intended for pleasure.” In subtly elevating pleasure to the place belonging to



procreation and unity, we may be unconsciously buying into our culture's hedonistic pursuit of pleasure as an end in itself.

A few months after we were married, we looked through the best-selling Christian sex manual, Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage*. We found the LaHayes' advice on birth control (and much else) similar to Dr. Ruth's. For example, the LaHayes enthusiastically recommend birth control pills for newlyweds. "Because of its safety and simplicity," the LaHayes write, "we consider the pill the preferred method for a new bride in the early stages of marriage. Then, after she and her husband have learned the art of married love, she may decide on some other method."

Of course sex is pleasurable. But those Christians who endorse artificial methods of contraception, asserting that by eliminating the "risk" of pregnancy you can magnify God's intent of sizzling, marriage-enhancing sex, seem to have forgotten that while sex is accompanied by pleasure, that's not its purpose. Ironically, if pleasure becomes the focus of our lovemaking, true and lasting pleasure will elude us.

What exactly is "pleasure"? An intense stimulation of nerve endings? Or that and much more—the knowledge that you are giving yourselves in your entirety, fertility and all, to each other? Spousal love is intended to be completely self-giving. "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:22, 25). As a married couple, we must always be on guard against treating each other's bodies as objects, or using them for purposes other than those for which they were created.

In the traditional Christian wedding service, there is no mention of pleasure or feelings. When we exchanged vows, we did not promise to give each other goose bumps. Instead, we vowed to remain faithful always, even through hard times, poverty, and sickness. The lasting pleasure to be found in marriage is the fruit of selfless love. Bearing and raising children brings pleasure; establishing a household together brings pleasure; serving each other brings pleasure. All these things bring sorrow, too. It's hard work, but, in the words of poet, teacher, and farmer Wendell Berry, "work is the health of love."

Body Language

The most thoughtful evangelical defense of artificial contraception we've heard is that, by harnessing procreation, the cautious use of contraception can elevate unity, nurturing spiritual companionship. We believe that one cannot elevate one purpose of marriage by suppressing another. By attempting to elevate



the “spiritual” (unity) over the “physical” (procreation), contraception pits the spirit against the body. As a result, the body can too easily be reduced to an object. The Bible, however, speaks of a human being as a unity of matter and spirit, a “living soul”—not a holy soul trapped in an evil body, as the gnostics taught. We, in our entirety, are created in the image of God. Not only do our souls and minds bear the divine image; our bodies, too, reflect the glory of God.

Christian proponents of contraception assert that when it comes to birth control, it’s our intentions that matter, not necessarily our actions. Contraceptives, they believe, are tools that can be used for good or ill. One author condemns using contraception to indulge in promiscuity, but calls it a great blessing when it gives couples time to grow in greater love and commitment at the beginning of marriage. Deliberately severing the biological link between sex and procreation is by itself a morally neutral act. But with contraception, as with all of life, actions and intentions cannot easily be separated. What we do with our bodies we do with our souls. Paul writes of this astonishing truth in 1 Corinthians 6: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

Actions speak louder than words, and the bodies of Christians ought to sing praises to the Most High. In the language of the body, each sex act simultaneously symbolizes our marriage and renews the marriage covenant. Putting the male and female bodies together says something; it mysteriously speaks of the union of Christ and the church. Artificial contraception appears to alter the language of the body. Regardless of our intent, it seems to send a message: “I am not giving myself completely to my spouse” or “I will not accept my spouse in his entirety.”

What we do to our bodies, and with our bodies, tells God what we think of his handiwork. He thought it “very good”—do we? We ought to respect the integrity of our bodies, and to alter as little as possible the way they’re intended to function. This does not mean that all medical technology is bad—far from it. There are occasions when the body is not working right, and medical intervention is necessary to restore it to rightful order. While we were writing this article, Bethany came down with appendicitis. Her appendix was infected and had to be removed for her body to function properly. The female fertility cycle, unlike appendicitis, is the norm of a healthy body. Children are not an illness—why vaccinate against them?



We've heard it said that since artificial birth control is not explicitly forbidden in the Bible, it's fine for Christians to use it. But the contraceptive mentality—treating fertility as an inconvenience, danger, or sickness—seems to go against what the Bible has to say about the goodness of creation and children. The Bible teaches us to approach sexual intimacy and the possibility of conception with awe and reverence. The womb is the place where God forms new life in his image, not a frontier to be invaded and conquered.

Kissing the Pill Goodbye

Understandably, many people fear that by giving up contraception, they will lose control of their lives and bodies. While Christians believe that our bodies are not our own—they belong to God—we're also called to be good stewards and responsible parents. When Bethany was 16, she volunteered at a Christian-run crisis pregnancy center where married couples occasionally would seek advice on birth control. To her surprise, the center did not advise its married clients to use contraceptives—not even condoms. Instead, the center counseled them to become aware of their fertility and, when appropriate, use natural forms of child spacing.

To most Protestants, the phrase “natural child spacing” means the notoriously unreliable rhythm method. *The Act of Marriage*, for example, describes the rhythm method as the “least effective” method of birth control, and mentions no other natural method. But, apparently unknown to these authors, the rhythm method was superseded decades ago by NFP, the natural and, we think, reliable way of child spacing. This method pinpoints the days per cycle that a woman can become pregnant by monitoring three different signs: her temperature upon waking, her body's production of cervical fluids, and the position of the cervix. These signs are recorded daily and tracked on a chart. The couple then decides whether to make love during the fertile days or to abstain until they have passed.

Unlike artificial contraception, NFP has no harmful side effects, only side benefits. Perhaps the greatest of these is that NFP fosters communication between spouses. NFP encourages a husband to learn the rhythms and cycles of his wife's body. Some evangelicals and even non-Christians have embraced NFP's benefits. One secular author, Toni Weschler, has been teaching and speaking on fertility awareness for years. “The beauty of charting is that a man can be involved as his partner—taking her temps, jotting down her fertility signs, determining when her fertile phase has begun and ended,” Weschler writes in her book, *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*. “And rather than perceiving it as work, most people agree that the minute or two a day is so enlightening that it can be fun rather than a chore.... The potential for furthering intimacy is obvious.”



The knowledge required to practice NFP is easily acquired and very inexpensive. You may have to buy a book and a thermometer, but that's it. In-depth information on NFP can be found at Couple to Couple League's Web site (www.ccli.org).

Some readers may ask, "What's the difference between natural and artificial birth control? Don't couples who use either means have the same goal in mind?" The fundamental difference between spacing children by NFP and by artificial methods of contraception is that periodic abstinence (prudent self-control) preserves the integrity, symbolism, and sacramental wholeness of each sex act. The one-flesh union is neither diminished nor compromised.

Elisabeth Elliot, one of the few well-known evangelicals to espouse NFP, explains: "The distinction that became so clear to me is the difference between the deliberate interruption of the transmission of life during the fertile period, and the responsible use of the natural rhythms which are imminent in the reproductive system. In other words, the difference between impeding a natural process, or making legitimate use of the natural disposition which God the Creator has built into the reproductive system."

However good, NFP can of course be misused. By always abstaining during the fertile times of the cycle, NFP can become a means of avoiding children for selfish reasons. But on the whole, NFP is starkly different from artificial contraception. While the latter makes children out to be failure-rate statistics, couples using NFP can remain fundamentally open to life. This results in a completely different view of "unplanned pregnancies."

Having Babies, Not Regrets

Fertility has never been a given, and this is especially true today. Infertility, alongside artificial contraception use, has been steadily rising since the 1960s. The longer you put off having children, the better chance you have of becoming infertile.

We have never heard a Christian parent say, "You know, I really regret having that fifth child" or "I wish I hadn't had any children at all." We have only heard regrets from those who chose not to have more children, and sorrow from those who are physically unable to have any. We have read many stories from Christian couples who gave up artificial contraception—none regret it.

Initially, we were interested in NFP because we hoped to avoid having a baby right away. But as our wedding day approached, we found ourselves more and more looking forward to having a child, and we decided not to put off having a baby for our own convenience or because we were afraid our marriage was not yet



ready for such a test. God's timing is different for every couple, and some have legitimate reasons for postponing children immediately after marriage, but we did not. We knew this was a responsibility to be approached with fear and trembling, but we believed that by inviting new life we would grow closer in ways we had yet to fathom.

Completely self-giving love between spouses is never sterile. It cannot be contained in just two bodies. It overflows, spilling over into love for others. For married couples, this love finds expression in its openness to participating with God in the creation of new life. It's time for us, as Christians, once again to embrace childbearing with joy, as a gift, and fertility as a mystery to be revered.

Sam and Bethany Torode work at home in rural Wisconsin. Their son, Gideon, was born in September. This article has been developed and expanded into a book, Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception (Eerdmans, Spring 2002). Their Web site is www.torodedesign.com.

CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 12, 2001, Vol. 45, No. 14, Page 48 'Be Fruitful and Multiply'



A black rectangular graphic with a white curved line resembling an open book's spine. The words "Bible Study" are written in a white, sans-serif font across the center.

Bible Study

ARTICLE

Be Fruitful and Multiply

Is this a command, or a blessing?

By Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, for the study “Is Family Planning Okay?”

When our two sons graduated college and set off on their own, my wife and I had a talk. I asked her what she hoped for. One thing she said took me by surprise, though it made perfect sense. She said, “I hope we don’t live too far from the grandchildren.” Surprise: We don’t have grandkids yet, and our sons are not yet married. Perfect sense: Within his prayer that God would bless Jerusalem, the psalmist also prays, “May you see your children’s children!” (Ps. 128:6, RSV).

Children are indeed a blessing, and they are one of the Lord’s purposes for creation. God made humans in two sexes, designed to complement one another, to image his glory, and by reproduction to fill the Earth with that glory. Amid the sexual chaos of our society, Christians need to be faithful to God’s purposes for us as sexual beings created in his image.

The Bible also teaches that our sexuality can be properly fulfilled only in the secure garden of delights we call marriage (though sin disturbs it). Outside the bounds of marriage, sex is like luscious fruit that God has said is not for us—it does damage instead of good. Biblical commands against sex outside of marriage and divorce are designed to protect not only adults but also the next generation, the children who need a secure world of committed love and affection.

For Jesus, marriage is rooted in God’s purposes at the Creation. The other side of the coin is that Jesus calls divorce and remarriage adultery, because it goes against God’s created order for the male and female (Matt. 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12).

Following this teaching on marriage, Jesus blessed the children and warned adults not to stand in the way of the children coming to him. The implication is clear: Divorce and adultery create obstacles that can hinder children from entering the kingdom. God’s grace can and does overcome those obstacles, though rarely is the damage to children completely undone in this life. The opposite implication is also clear: marriage ought to be a place where children experience God’s promises and love in the kept promises and sacrificial love of their parents. In faithful marriage, children also experience a place where Christ’s



Copyright © 2002 • CHRISTIANITY TODAY INTERNATIONAL

Visit CurrentIssuesBibleStudy.com

forgiveness heals and repairs the damage sin inevitably does. They discover that marriage is both blessing and work, and never one without the other.

The Truth of Genesis 1:28

Many Christians correctly oppose the sexual and marital chaos that has infiltrated our churches. But in this struggle against sin and for marriage and family, some Christian traditions take a wrong turn. They argue on the basis of the created order (sometimes called natural law) and Scripture that God has actually commanded married people to have children.

These Christians, who see this command as absolute, argue against birth control, except for what they consider the natural means of abstinence. They claim Genesis 1:28—"Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth"—as a proof text. Birth control seems to disobey this commandment, which is rooted in God's purpose for creation.

Much could be said in response, but only one comment is essential: Genesis 1:28 is not a commandment, but a blessing. It does not refer to what humans must do to please God, but to what God does for and through humankind. The text says, "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (RSV). Fertility is not a command but a blessing that God gives to his creatures, to animals as well as humans (Gen. 1:22). The filling of the Earth is a gift of God's wisdom and shows forth his glory as Creator (Ps. 104:24, 31; Isa. 6:3).

In English it is easy to confuse blessing and command, because the blessing of Genesis 1:28 sounds like a command. This verse and its context is often called the cultural mandate. Instead, we should call it the cultural blessing. A look at Genesis 24:60 shows why. There, Rebekah's family is about to send her off to marry Isaac: "And they blessed Rebekah, and said to her, 'Our sister, be the mother of thousands of ten thousands; and may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them!'" (RSV).

Here again, the first part of the blessing ("be the mother") sounds like a command in English. But it is not. The human blessing appeals to God to make Rebekah and her descendants fruitful. In the next generation, when this blessing does not come for Rachel, Jacob angrily responds to her complaint, saying, "Am I in the place of God?" (Gen. 30:2, RSV).

The Hebrew grammar of "blessing" in Genesis 24:60 is identical to that in Genesis 1:28. But in English, the blessing comes through more clearly in the second clause of Genesis 24:60: "may your descendants possess" (RSV). In Genesis 1:28, of course, it is God who declares the blessing and fulfills it himself.



So it would be inappropriate for the English translation to read, “May you be fruitful.”

What is the upshot of all this? God does not command humans to be fruitful. Rather, he himself will bless his creatures and see to it that they are fruitful. He has provided for this by making us male and female, by investing our humanness with sexual desire and love, and by ordaining marriage as the place for, among other things, joyful lovemaking. Marriage is also the God-given matrix from which family naturally springs, the place where children may be born and reared with love and wisdom, “in the fear of the Lord.” The biblical blessings show that marriage is the natural and safe place for humans to be open to, and even eager for, God’s gift of children.

We must beware of confusing matters. God gave this blessing to the human race as a whole. He does not give it to everyone. Some couples are barren, and their earnest prayers for children are not fulfilled. Others, like the apostle Paul, are called to life without marriage.

If Genesis 1:28 were a command that applied to every individual, then Paul would have been disobedient in his apostolic singleness. Paul and everyone else would be obligated to pursue marriage and to order their marriages to produce many descendants.

Usurping God’s Sovereignty?

Marriage exists for God’s glory, not just for the gratification of individuals. Thus marriage is a place where sex should be open to the awesome gift of children—without fear. Outside of the committed love of marriage, the words “I’m pregnant” have frightening implications. Within marriage, those words bring joy and gratitude to God, even if the birth was not planned, even if the rearing of a child may be difficult.

But does the openness of marriage to children mean that birth control is forbidden? Some have argued that contraception “usurps God’s sovereignty.” It is true that God is sovereign in blessing couples with children (Ps. 127 and 128). But do we disobey God’s sovereignty or reject his providence by spacing the children we bear or by limiting their number?

And what of a couple who decide to have no children at all—though they would welcome a child that God in his wisdom might send them in spite of their precautions? Do they disobey a sovereign God? Some couples give up the good of having kids because of health problems. Others may believe they have a special calling together (say, missions in a dangerous land) that leads them to forgo the blessing and the task of parenting.



Such decisions should be rare exceptions, not undertaken lightly or for reasons of self-indulgence. They should say No to God's blessing of children only for the sake of greater good or need.

But they do not usurp God's providence or sovereignty. If God can use even evil to accomplish good (Gen. 45:5-8), surely he can use human actions that seek to serve God with the freedom he has given us. God's sovereignty works in and through human actions, and, if necessary, in spite of them.

To suggest that birth control is evil or perverse because it undermines God's sovereignty is to underestimate God's sovereignty and reject our responsibility to serve him wisely. Of course human choices ought to be made in the realm of freedom set within the limits of God's law. But where there is no law, our choices are free (Gal. 5)—provided they are wise and serve God.

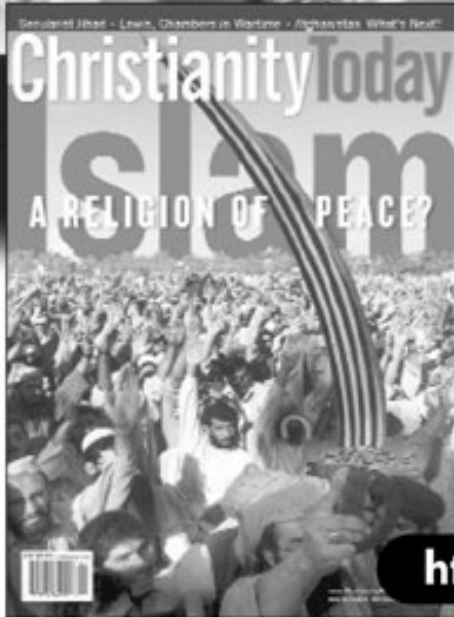
To be sure, God then holds us responsible for our freedom. Within the limits of marriage, sex is one of the good gifts of God's creation, to be used for love and glory, whether or not it seeks in every instance to be fruitful in a procreative sense. Within the boundaries God has set for sex, there is much room for responsible Christian freedom, for what God has made is very good indeed.

Raymond C. Van Leeuwen is professor of biblical studies at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pennsylvania.

CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 12, 2001, Vol. 45, No. 14, Page 58



UNDERSTAND THE WORLD



For a trustworthy Christian perspective on current issues, trends, and news, turn to **Christianity Today** magazine. You'll get reliable facts and views to help you make wise decisions in our ever-changing world.

Each issue will inform and challenge you with timely news coverage, compelling articles, and thought-provoking editorials. Subscribe today and SAVE! To get 3 risk-free trial issues, go to:

http://christianitytoday.com/go/ctmag_ad