

Birth Control as Ethical and Pastoral Problem

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The author has kindly given permission for it to appear here in translation. Professor Frederic E. Blume prepared the English text. Some of the material that originally appeared in the footnotes has been incorporated into the text proper.]

Introduction

By way of introduction we call attention to some basic considerations that must be kept in mind in dealing with ethical and pastoral problems in theology and to the mutual relations of the one type of problem to the other.

First, ethical questions concern us personally, our relations to our neighbor; pastoral questions concern the members of our congregations and their ethical relations to their fellow men. To us pastors then such questions are both *ethical* and *pastoral*: ethical, since we must of necessity be clear with regard to them for our own person before we can enter upon a discussion of them with those who are entrusted to our pastoral care; and *pastoral*, since they are matters of concern to our members, persons whom we are called to assist in establishing a proper relation to the various aspects of the world in which they live. In this way the ethical becomes of pastoral concern.

Accordingly, when we now pose our question as an ethical problem and seek an answer first of all for ourselves personally, we are approaching the problem in the way that is recognized to be the proper one, the way on which also a solution to the matter as a pastoral problem is to be found. To put it the other way around: if we as pastors are to be of any help to our people as they face any kind of ethical problem, it is essential that we first of all face that problem as though it were our own. We must personally have come before our God with this question and from His Word, from Law and Gospel, have arrived at full clarity on the matter before we can presume to be of help as pastors to those of our people whose hearts are troubled because of this same question.

Secondly, ethical problems are such that deal primarily, though not exclusively, with the application of the Law of God to everyday living. The question arises as to how they are to be solved and to what extent they can be solved at all.

The Law and the Gospel, we realize, have been revealed to us each in its own way. The Gospel's way of salvation is revealed in Holy Scripture and in that alone (I Cor. 2:9, 10). Hence the principle *Extra scripturam nulla salus, nullum evangelium*. This principle does not exclude the oral preaching of the church, but rather includes it.

On the other hand, the Law is revealed, according to Romans 2, also to the heathen (Rom. 2:15: "written in their hearts"). The revelation of God's Law is accordingly not confined to the Bible, in which this Law is not so much pronounced and defined as authoritatively interpreted. Rather it occurs originally and essentially within man himself. In the creation of man God Himself (that is τὸ γινώσκον τοῦ θεοῦ, Rom. 1:19) and His Law have been revealed to men (φανερόν) in such a way at least that the thought of God and His Law must ever have a meaningful appeal to man. For it is part of man's nature, given in the creation, that he can never simply turn away from preaching about God and the demands of His Law and utterly ignore them, since his "conscience" testifies to him of God's existence and that same conscience (his "thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another," Rom. 2:15) brings to naught every attempt on his part to deny the validity of the Law as a norm for man's conduct. Thus it becomes clear that man and Law belong inseparably together: there are no human beings without this Law and the knowledge of it. The Law, to use Elert's expression, has by God's creation of him been pronounced upon man.

When we now inquire what this Law is, we realize that unlike the Gospel it has not literally and originally been revealed in Holy Writ. Even the Ten Commandments are not the original revelation of the Law. Rather, like almost all the rest of the revelation of the Law in the Old Testament, they are, as Luther put it, a “law code for the Jews,” that is to say, a divine and valid exposition of the Law of the Jewish theocracy, one that, however, does not directly apply to the New Testament. Holy Writ does not in fact concern itself in stringent fashion in a systematic way with the separate demands of the Law. The Bible is anything but a moral code, as will be clear from a study of the Decalog and especially from the Sermon on the Mount. Scripture rather speaks of the function of the Law in the service of man and in God’s plan of salvation (naturally only in view of His gracious purpose for man). Consequently, in any question of ethics it is not always so perfectly clear precisely what it is that the Law demands at every time and in every situation, especially when Holy Writ does not have anything specific to say about the matter at hand.

At this point the problem of natural law enters the picture, a consideration upon which especially Roman Catholic moral theology is based. It is assumed that there exists a continuity between man’s original state of innocence and his state in a world fallen into sin and that the effect of sin’s entrance into the world has been merely to disturb that continuity. The latter disturbance, however, it is assumed on the *analogia entis*, man himself is able to overcome once he in the freedom of the will he still possesses—*gratia ecclesiae assistente*—sets himself to clarify the situation.

This theology pretends to know precisely where, in every case, man’s obligation lies and claims to be able to apply natural law as a generally valid principle, whose applicability is generally recognizable and which can then be made the standard of conduct for actions private and public. Indeed, Rome’s moral theology thinks itself able to prescribe to the human being what in every case he is to do and what he is to leave undone. Roman Catholic casuistry, controlled by this moral theology, is constantly putting into practice the above-described principle.

The church of the Reformation does not know a natural law that is able in this way to prescribe and prohibit. Luther and the reformers indeed appeal to nature and are well aware of a natural law and a natural right (e.g., *Apology XXIII: 12*). But in all this man’s fall into sin must be reckoned with, for now his knowledge is darkened; in a critical situation he may well be unable to act according to knowledge at all. Such a decisive role does man’s fall into sin play. Sin has changed the function of the Law. Above all, there simply does not exist any continuity with respect to man’s moral capabilities between his original state of sinlessness and his present state under sin. Instead, man is constantly confronted with the results of such a mass of erroneous decisions which he has made in the past that he in a concrete critical situation not only does not do that which is good but does not know what that good is and will in a given situation even with the best of intentions commit sin (cf. FC, *De libero arbitrio*, eg., *Sol. Decl. II, 7ff.*).

As a result of all this the Christian often does not know where in a practical concrete situation his duty lies. There are situations in the Christian’s life in which, despite his best intentions to do what he recognizes as God’s will, he cannot decide what he ought to do. Furthermore, in certain cases he must decide to do something, for to do nothing would obviously be wrong. In such a dilemma his choice lies between two or more evils with the result that he may possibly be led to acts that go contrary to his own moral insight and the judgment of people in general (e.g., the practical decisions of a man in public life, “white lies,” borderline cases).

From all this it is clear that the human being, yes, the Christian too, certainly cannot be sure in advance where in every situation his duty lies and how he is to conduct himself, for in his actions he is constantly guided by standards of his own conscience, and that conscience is subject to error and to sin. It may even allow itself to be deceived and “used,” for the directions of the divine Law, as these are authoritatively stated in Holy Writ, are not adequate to cover every case.

There is then actually no perfect system of natural law and no infallible moral teaching, neither in man’s consciousness nor in the divine Law, that could without fail be applied in every case and that could tell us with absolute certainty how we are to conduct ourselves in a given situation. This is not to say that ethics has been reduced to “situation ethics,” for there are on the other hand numerous interpretations of the Law in Scripture which must be recognized as divine directions of binding force (the Decalog as the New Testament presents it

in the Sermon on the Mount, catalogs of vices, tables of duties, formal exhortations). The proclamation of Law and Gospel will then be made in close connection with these and will not only be of service to our people who need pastoral assistance in practical cases, but it will reach out much further in showing the erring conscience its error; it will here correct, restore, and bring about a renewed sensitiveness. It will enable the individual on his own responsibility to arrive at correct decisions even there where the interpretations of the Law found in Scripture do not answer questions of detail and where the person concerned, now alone in the presence of his God, finds that according to the law of love he must and will do something that others may possibly no longer understand.

A. Our Problem

It was necessary to present the above considerations in detail because of the nature of our topic: birth control. For here we have a matter on which the interpretations of the Law found in the Old as well as in the New Testament do not give a direct solution to the problem. Still any evaluation of the problem will directly draw in God's Law and command, that is to say, God's natural law. Since this is so, we are here unquestionably dealing with an ethical question; consequently our remarks at the beginning have valid application here: as pastors we must have stood before our God with this question and have arrived at clarity out of Law and Gospel both as to the matter itself and as to our personal attitudes in it, and have done so before we could presume in this matter to render pastoral help to others. The rendering of such help unquestionably belongs to our pastoral responsibilities. Here the pastoral word of the Apostle Peter comes to mind: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, ... neither as being lords over God's heritage, but *being ensamples to the flock*" (I Pet. 5:2f.).

What is meant by "birth control"? "Control" implies to rule over, to govern, and thereby to regulate and limit. Hence the term "birth control" signifies: not to allow the births in a family simply to follow one another in plan-less succession, but by forethought to establish an order for them and to govern their succession by means of limiting them. Other terms are also sometimes used: birth-regulation, conception-regulation, birth-limitation; responsible motherhood, planned parenthood, family planning. The terms conception-prevention, anti-conception, contraception are not entirely synonymous with birth control. They either speak of a totally different matter or they indicate a possible method of birth control. However, this will be covered later.

We shall not enter into the history of the problem. The work of *Malthus* (1766–1834) here plays a significant though often misunderstood part; the encyclopedias furnish detailed information. Finally, we shall also not go into the current Afro-Asian aspect of the problem and the much-discussed problems of over-population and population explosion on those continents. For us the question is ethical, not ethnical, and one of great pastoral concern. We are here thinking of our own marriages, in which we are living, not in Asia or Africa, but in Germany, specifically in our own state. Consequently it is hard to be convinced of the validity of the argument that someone wishes to have fewer children, or perhaps none at all, "because too many children are being born in China," or "because the people of India are going hungry."

We are concerned with the matter of birth control among ourselves, in our own time. What is to be our own attitude here? What advice will we give the members of our congregations when they are confronted with the problem and inquire of us (or do not inquire)? This is the ethical and pastoral problem of birth control.

B. The Primary Purpose of Marriage

We shall again approach the matter from the point of view of the Roman Catholic Church. This is a practical approach, inasmuch as Rome's theologians contend that on the basis of their system of natural law they can give a consistent answer.

In Rome's system of natural law the first and only purpose of marriage is: *propagatio humani generis*, propagation by means of the begetting of children. In comparison with this first and primary purpose, other purposes of marriage like the fostering of mutual companionship and the prevention of immorality fade into the background. CJC, can. 1013, par. 1: *Matrimonii finis primarius est procreatio atque educatio prolis, secundus*

mutuum adiutorium et remedium concupiscentiae. (“The primary purpose of marriage is the procreation and upbringing of offspring; a secondary purpose is that of mutual assistance and the prevention of sinful desires.”)

This *finis primarius* determines then the relations of husband and wife in marriage and the entire conduct of that marriage. Pope Pius VI declared: “Every act in marriage in which its natural power for the coming-into-being of new life is frustrated by the arbitrary action of man violates the Law of God and of nature. Those guilty of doing so, defile their conscience with grievous guilt.” (The encyclical *Casti conubii*, 1931; in a similar fashion spoke Pope John XXIII, though somewhat more restrained, in *Mater et magistra*, 1964.) On the basis of these declarations everything would seem to be clear and quite simple.

The practical realities, however, no longer appear to be so clear and simple in the Roman Catholic Church. Well known are the strenuous efforts that have been made to distinguish between “natural” and “unnatural” methods of forestalling conception and with the former to arrive at an allowable method of birth control. In consideration here come the observance of the female’s periods of infertility (“rhythm method”) and complete continence as well. Of special interest is the discussion in Roman moral theology on the primary purpose of marriage, instigated at the recent Vatican Council, a discussion that has generated considerable heat. Reference is freely made among Catholics to a “change in the moral law concerning marriage” and to an address delivered by Pope Paul VI on July 23, 1964, in which he spoke of “the possibility of modifying the doctrine once promulgated by Pius XI.” According to Paul VI, a distinction must be made “between the revealed Word of God and the religious and moral insights of man which he arrives at as he contemplates his own nature and the moral order.” One wonders what has here happened to “papal infallibility”! An official “opinion” by the Pope *de matrimonio* was promised in 1966 but was repeatedly postponed.

It is evident, therefore, that matters are really not as clear and simple as Rome has tried to make them appear. In our view, the very basis of this nicely elaborated system, its premises, are false. As a result the very structure of the system is false as are also the practical and seemingly obvious conclusions drawn from it.

In this matter it again becomes clear that Rome’s system of natural law does not in any real sense take into account man’s fall into sin, especially not the fact that in this sinful world many things must be taken into account in questions relating to marriage which were not thus before the fall into sin, and that by divine ordinance (Gen. 3). For marriage was instituted before the fall. These ordinances have to do not only with creation and preservation and consequently apply unaltered also in the world under sin; they are applicable also in a world under sin, given because of sin and against sin (Gen. 3). Considerations such as these scarcely come within the range of vision of Rome’s theologians: at best they play a very insignificant part.

Aside from these objections, however, the very scope of the creation account contradicts what is alleged to be the purpose of marriage according to the system of natural law. To indicate a few points: at the creation of man, specifically also of woman, that is, at the establishing of marriage (Gen. 2), no mention whatsoever is made of offspring; companionship alone is spoken of. God ordained marriage, not in order to assure progeny, but in order to create a “help meet for” man, עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ - Vulgate, *simile sibi*; Luther, *quod sit coram eo*, “eine Gehülfin ... die um ihn sei.” The reason given is: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

Of this companionship it is furthermore stated (Gen. 2:24): “and they shall be one flesh,” לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד. In the condensed account of the sixth day of creation of Genesis 1, an account that is further elucidated in chapter 2 (as such we read it and not as “a second creation account of the Yahwist”), mention is already made of the blessings resting on marriage. Genesis 1:28: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.’” What is not to be overlooked is that the institution of marriage and God’s reason for it actually precede the blessing pronounced upon it. The latter is pronounced upon the wedded pair living in marriage: “male and female created he them.” We note also that therefore the essence of marriage does not depend upon its resulting in childbearing, else childless marriages would not really be marriages!

In view of all this, it is certainly correct to say: marriage has its primary purpose in itself, in its essence and existence. Still better would it be, rather than speak of the primary purpose of marriage, to dwell on its essential meaning. On this there can be no question both from the point of view of the scope of the creation account as well as from any other. The meaning of marriage is that which is already given and implied in it: the life-long union of man and woman to one flesh. Its first meaning is עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, that is, fellowship, *societas*,

consortium, companionship, “to be one flesh,” לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד. “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother” (Gen. 2:24).

It is only fair to inquire how it happened that the point of view of Scripture on the one hand and of Roman Catholic theology on the other diverge so widely in this matter. Our answer must be: The fundamental reason is the Roman Catholic Church’s devaluation of marriage in principle as well as in practice, a situation that harks back to the middle ages, even to the time of the old catholic church and the days before the Roman bishop could maintain his primacy. This negative attitude toward marriage was nourished by the ascetic notions that prevailed in Stoicism and Neoplatonism. It placed celibacy and virginity on an incomparably higher moral level than marriage; the latter was basically despised and considered unclean. The influence of Augustine with his Neoplatonic background and his early experience in Manichaeism must here be taken into account. In all events the Roman Catholic Church never got rid of this inheritance that is neither Christian nor Biblical but is utterly pagan. To this day Rome has not gotten over this affliction. Accordingly, she puts up with the idea of marriage as an ordinance *ad procreationem et educationem liberorum*, realizing that finally her very existence depends on it. But it would be expecting too much of her to hope that she could see in marriage—as over against virginity—an institution that has its purpose within itself and that has value for its own sake.

Naturally the procreation of offspring is also a purpose of marriage and in pointed fashion the matter could be formulated thus: “The meaning of marriage is the child.” We are well aware of the fact that our Lutheran dogmaticians found it possible to give the *proximate* purpose of marriage (*finis cuius proximus*) as *procreatio sobolis* (procreation of posterity) (Baier, Comp. Theol. Pos., p. III, c. XVI, par. 38). According to our conviction, however, this does not deny what we have maintained: marriage’s primary purpose (*finis primarius*) is companionship (*consortium*), a total communion in body and soul. And of this communion, children are the special, divinely intended blessing, the divinely intended fruit of marriage according to Psalm 127: “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward.” To what degree, according to I Corinthians 7:2, 9, also *remedium concupiscentiae* (prevention of sinful desires) belongs to the purpose of marriage need not at this point be investigated further. It does, however, become eminently clear that marriage has a function also as an ordinance for life in this sinful world.

It is by now clear that our totally different view of and approach to the essence and meaning of marriage, a conviction based on Scripture, must also lead to a completely different answer to the ethical problems raised by marriage and must bring about a different pastoral practice in our church. Rome is committed to the position: the guarantee of progeny is basically the only assignment given marriage. All of marital life must go to further this assignment and subordinate itself to it. Where a vital decision must be made, the production of offspring must take precedence of the maintenance of the marriage itself, as where the life of the mother is at stake. No one could now doubt for a moment that we have come to a basic decision, out of which also the matters of detail under our theme and the basic question as to the permissibility of birth control are to be answered.

C. The Secondary Purpose of Marriage

So as not to wander from our theme and not to be misunderstood, we must now in our discussion of birth control as an ethical and pastoral problem turn our attention to the *finis secundus* of marriage, the blessing of children in and through marriage. While we recognize the highest value of marriage in itself, in the union of the wedded pair to one flesh, there dare be no doubt that God wills this companionship not only for its own sake but that he wills in and through it (and *only* through it) to provide for offspring. This is clear *per se* and is established by Genesis 1:28 and 3:16. Genesis 1:28 is indeed no command, but a word of blessing (“And God blessed them, and God said ...”). But this blessing implies the willingness of the wedded pair to put their marriage into the service of the divine will. Without the active (and passive) concurrence of the married couple God’s word of blessing, valid once and for always, cannot be fulfilled. And while this word of blessing, spoken once, remains in force through the ages and as *creatio continuata* is realized anew in every child that is born, it is still possible for man in marriage to refuse to submit to God’s will and to frustrate His work. When considered thus, the prevention of conception and childbirth (surely not to be directly identified with birth

control) is in principle a willful interference with the acts of the Almighty Creator and under certain circumstances (as prevention of divinely-willed life) even indirectly (or in abortion, directly) murder of the unborn child.

For us, and for our pastoral work, proper insight here is of significant importance. We cannot free our church members and ourselves—if we are married—of the obligation to beget or bear children. To have or not to have children is not a matter of free choice for us and for those committed to our pastoral care. For a marriage that excludes children and that from the first determines to limit the number of its children is on its part hindering God in His preservation of the world and in His purposes for the world, namely to fill the world with human beings. It hinders humankind in its dominion over the world by intelligence and technical skill. Indeed, it finally also hinders God in carrying out His plan of salvation for the world.

That such attitudes and actions are sinful dare not be left in question. In our pastoral work, in our preaching, and in our instruction classes we must clearly say so. The principal reasons for them would be avarice and lack of faith; also, the service of mammon, materialism, the idol of a certain living standard. Naturally, our admonitions will be evangelical, never legalistic.

Here then we are met by two definite declarations of God's will standing side by side, also in the account of the creation: 1) God wills the inseparable companionship of husband and wife in one flesh; this companionship is implicit in marriage itself and is in all cases to be preserved. 2) God also wills the fruitfulness of marriage; He not only wills marriage, but also by it the family, and expects the unfeigned willingness of married couples obediently to fulfill this will of God.

D. The Finis Primarius as Over Against the Finis Secundarius

These two declarations of God's will, which according to Scripture follow from the essence and purpose of marriage and are affirmed in the account of the creation, are not to exclude one another. Just the opposite is the case: normally they will mutually supplement and condition each other. Marital relations, willed by God, are also the only means given for procreation; and in the family, which likewise is willed by God, these relations are to be practiced, indeed only there.

Normally, no choice needs to be made. But a dilemma does arise when the size of the growing family and the productive capacity of the parents create a problem, when the increasing size of the family becomes a burden, and when the all too rapid succession of births threatens to overtax the physical capabilities of the parents, especially those of the mother.

The writer must ask to be excused from giving further elucidations or citing examples. But in a gathering of experienced heads of families and of experienced pastors such as this he feels that he can assume that he is being understood.

The limit of productivity for a healthy woman is not reached, for example, with five children; she might well have fifteen or more. However, it is not to be expected that every family and especially every mother will be able to reach this limit of possibility.

We have now arrived at that point where "birth control" (that is, regulation of conception, responsible parenthood, family planning) enters within the scope of our discussion. We must now ask what advice in a responsible way is to be given to married couples in view both of the fact that their relations may well result in a continued succession of births and that certain limits are placed on their own capabilities.

The rigorist ethic of Rome's thinking about marriage (an approach that is fundamentally pagan) here knows no relaxation of its stand. And this stand may easily have burdened the consciences not only of our church members but, all unconsciously, also of us theologians. The basic Roman moral law here knows only a harsh either/or (cf. here the encyclical of Pope Pius XI of 1931 quoted above). This means that all marital relations that are not engaged in with the intention of thereby producing offspring but are purely an expression of the companionship they know and of the joy that the spouses find in each other are essentially immoral and wicked.

Here we then have the inescapable consequences of Rome's thinking about marriage, according to which there is actually only one "purpose" of marriage, the procreation of offspring.

According to such a point of view anything like "birth control" would be impossible, for that means in every case control of the sexual life and conscious responsibility in carrying it out; regulation of conception. According to Rome, however, conscious reflexion between the intention and the execution of the sexual act is out of the question. The encyclical *Casti connubii* of 1931 says: "The essence of marriage is not left free to man." Accordingly, the sexual act is blindly to follow its purpose; else it is sin.

There is, however, actually birth control also in the Roman Catholic Church, a permission to regulate conceptions, and this is granted not in consequence of further thoughts on the purpose of marriage but rather as a concession to married couples and to human nature. This is birth control by the "rhythm-method," with its observation of times of infertility in the female. This is a glib bit of lack of logic, for if sexual intercourse is to serve the sole purpose of begetting offspring, then there can be no marital relations at those times when conception is not to be expected. Caught in this logical *non sequitur*, Roman moral law has made a great deal of the distinction between allowable and not allowed practice, between *res in se malae* (things wicked in themselves) and *res per abusum tantum malae* (things wicked only by misuse), and the like. Still, it cannot be denied that by allowing intercourse during the woman's periods of infertility the presuppositions of the Roman doctrine of marriage have actually been set aside. Will Rome take the next step and abandon her presuppositions?

The scriptural view taken of marriage in the Reformation is in principle a completely different one. Side by side with the purpose of procreation the reformers recognize the close bond in which spouses live as also a purpose of marriage. Indeed, they recognized this intimate companionship between husband and wife as the directly given blessing of marriage, that dare never be broken and that dare never be relegated to a rank behind that of the other purpose, that of procreation.

To the leaders of the Reformation sex was not taboo. The desire of spouses for marital intimacy and the joy found in it were not to them something that was really forbidden, as it is in Neoplatonic ethics, or as it is with many a Roman Catholic moralist, who puts these relations into the category of concessions made to human weakness but still maintains that they cannot be practiced with a good conscience. A burdened conscience in this respect is not unknown also among our Christians. The reformers, however, have said: "... the natural desire of sex for sex is an ordinance of God in nature, and for this reason is a right; otherwise, why would both sexes have been created?" (*Apology XXIII:12, Concordia Triglotta, page 367.*)

According to the reformers, then, sex is something of positive value, given to man to be enjoyed within the prescribed limits, that is, within marriage and in obedience to God's command. It is to be received in the sense of Paul's word to Timothy: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, ... (For) every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving" (I Tim. 4:1-5).

With this view, then, also birth control will be seen in a different light, namely, as a responsible manner of meeting the problem of the limits to be set on marital relations. Methods, too, of forestalling conception like the "rhythm-method" will not be seen as violations of the essence of marriage or as mere concessions to human weakness.

E. Holy Writ

But what does the Bible, for example the New Testament clarification and interpretation of the divine Law, have to say on all this? It has nothing to say directly on the problem of birth control, even though in the time of late antiquity the prevention of conception was widely practiced. Still I find in the admonitory sections of the New Testament epistles two passages that deal with marital relations as such. First, there is the longer instruction I Corinthians 7:1ff. We stress one word ὀφειλή, *debitum* (obligation, duty). Marital relations are consequently not merely *libitum* (something that pleases), nor even merely *licitum* (something allowable), but

definitely *debitum* (a duty). They are to be not merely a means of procreation but an owed (and not merely tolerated) expression of marital companionship and affection. To omit them could call in question, not only the companionship, but even the very existence of the marriage itself (vv. 2ff.). In his interpretation of I Corinthians 7 of 1523 (WA 12:92ff.) Luther pointed to such “malicious desertion” as valid grounds for divorce.

The other apostolic instruction is found I Peter 3:7. Here Peter as part of a table of duties admonishes husbands: συνοικοῦντες κατὰ γνῶσιν ὡς ἀσθενεστέρω σκεύει τῷ γυναικείῳ. (“Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with (your wives) according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.”)

Συνοικοῦντες need not be taken to refer to the marital “living together” alone, but this meaning is readily suggested when the word is found together with σκεῦος, since in Hebrew and rabbinical usage the latter word for “vessel” was used to designate the wife as sexual partner of the husband (cf. לְעֵלְךָ - Κατὰ γνῶσιν - “according to knowledge” (KJV), *nach Vernunft*: “with understanding” (Luther). Γνῶσις is the reasonable understanding that in this case takes into consideration that the wife is the weaker partner in the marital relations. Luther says: “The wife is physically weaker and of a more delicate and timid frame of mind. Therefore your actions and relations to her should be such that she can bear it.”

In general this is the virtue we know as chivalrousness but is here obviously to be applied to sexual relations. These too are to be κατὰ γνῶσιν, with the consideration of the wife as the weaker partner “that she can bear it.” The wife, already the “weaker vessel,” must in marriage bear the principal burden of the family and of the children. The man can readily get out from under; the wife must continue to shoulder the burden. The man must understand this and have insight into, that is, as Luther says, act with understanding.

All this can have no other meaning than that also in family planning there must be consideration for the wife (“that she can bear it”) and thought given to limiting the marital relations. In other words the sexual impulse is not to be given free rein in the procreation of offspring, as is the case with animals, but the human being is to conduct himself as an intelligent being also in establishing his family. He is to control and regulate his sexual drive and is to expect no more of the wife in the matter of the number of children than she, the wife, and they, the union of husband and wife, can justly be expected to have.

What is this, however, but a type of “birth control”? Understood in this way, a control of births, practiced in mutual love and responsibility, is not a reprehensible wrong but a moral requirement made of marital relations, a demand based on the fact that the companionship of husband and wife is implicit in marriage itself and is a blessing so great that it must be preserved and never needlessly or heedlessly put in jeopardy.

A rational consideration surely enters into every instance of birth control, a consideration here imposed on nature itself. Yet, how would a rational consideration as such be opposed to the essence of marriage? At any rate it is demanded by the Apostle Peter for the relations of man and wife in marriage: κατὰ γνῶσιν. This dare not indeed be taken wrongly in an intellectualistic way, but rather entirely in the understanding of Luther as that moral virtue that makes man lord over nature and makes him in liberty responsible for his doing and his leaving undone, quite in contrast to the instinctive actions of the animal, that knows neither liberty nor responsibility.

F. Liberty and Responsibility

Where are the limits set to man’s liberty and responsibility in his control over nature, specifically in a reasonable use of the sexual drive implanted in him for the establishing of his family? Plainly they go so far as they are in the service of the divine will, that is, so far as they do not transgress a clear command of God in Holy Writ. Man has liberty and responsibility in this matter so long as he does not go contrary to the express will of God, by means of offspring begotten in marriage to fill the earth with human inhabitants.

It is God’s will that children be born to married couples (“Be fruitful and multiply”). So, to practice birth control for the purpose of preventing any and all births or to limit them where the continuance of wedded bliss would not be jeopardized by further births is an action that is diametrically opposed to the will of God as expressed in His institution of marriage and hinders Him in carrying out His purpose in creating and preserving the world, indeed, in His final purposes of grace for the world. It is therefore wrong and a sin to enter into

marriage with the intention of not having any children by it. It is just as wrong at the outset arbitrarily to limit the number of children one will have. Finally, it is likewise wrong at any time during the course of a marriage to determine that one will not have any more children, and that entirely for the sake of convenience and out of lack of faith.

This is, however, obviously as much as we can say. For considerations of convenience, of unbelief, of service of mammon, of materialism and the like *need* not necessarily be what prompts or even requires (as in a case of illness) a couple to limit the number of its children or to postpone the birth of the next child. We are not the lords or the judges of the motives of our congregation's members. It may well be that the limit has been reached in the number of children that this couple should or could have. And with the limit reached they have in liberty, love, and responsibility been obliged to make the decision they have made. We are, it is true, ever to examine ourselves in the sight of God as to our real motives and to ask whether they may not be but an excuse to cover our desire for convenience and our lack of faith. And we are further in our preaching and in our pastoral work to castigate a desire for convenience and a lack of faith that relate to the desire to limit the number of children and point out that these are indeed sins of the times. Yet as pastors we must ever be ready to accept as valid the motive that is mentioned; yes, according to the law of love we must assume and presuppose that perfectly justifiable motives exist in every case where the opposite has not been established. Anything else is none of our business but God's who examines and judges the hearts of men.

Liberty and responsibility as such cannot cancel out the fruitfulness of marriage that God has willed. They do rather call for a decision to be made in special cases and occasionally in each case (that is, from each child to the next), when the parents will have to decide just how much this marriage and the marital harmony implicit in it can still bear without foundering.

It is clear then that liberty and responsibility are subordinate to the divine ordinances and dare never destroy them. Concerning marriage God has ordained from the beginning: "... they shall be one flesh." That establishes according to Jesus' interpretation its indissolubility: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). But it also establishes that nothing is to occur that would inwardly separate the spouses and abolish and destroy the deep unity they know as a married couple. And where a choice must be made and there is a real question of duty in the light of God's will that marriage be fruitful, then it is up to the person and his powers of reason to make the decision what he is to do in this particular case. He will act in liberty, knowing that a responsible strength of conviction is expected of him.

G. The Methods

Finally, something needs to be said about the methods that are to be used in such clearly defined cases where birth control may in liberty and responsibility be practiced. Everything said here must be weighed very carefully, since it is impossible to anticipate what the results of technical developments will be. A first consideration would naturally be that the selection of the method be guided by the basic decision and by the purpose it is to serve. A method chosen in unbelief and used to serve a forbidden purpose is of itself wrong. A method that is to serve a good purpose is indeed not because of that fact good (the end admittedly does not sanctify the means), but if it is not of itself evil, then it is to be allowed and is, when used in faith, indeed good.

Furthermore, every method is not immediately like every other one. The most obvious method would be the regulation of marital relations, the control of desire in temporary continence (I Cor. 7:5). Here we find the difference between the reasonable conduct of man and the instinctive acts of an animal. In this the Christian is strengthened by faith and prayer so as to control himself and check his desires. In connection with marriage there is a wide area where asceticism has its place. This is not to say, however, that continence of itself stands morally on a higher level than marital intercourse in marriage. The latter can and must be practiced in chastity. Another method would be the observation of periods of infertility in the wife's menstrual cycle (rhythm-method).

Still it is to be noted that on the basis of our fundamental approach to the problem other, even technical, methods and means are not immediately objectionable and to be rejected. In and of itself, and on the basis of

our fundamental presuppositions, every method is acceptable that does not otherwise bring harmful results, to health for instance, or does not violate human dignity or destroy the very essence of marriage.

It is not our purpose here to make any pronouncements on certain individual problems, as for instance that of "The Pill." It has been our purpose to suggest for consideration a number of thoughts that could be of value to our pastors as they strive to be of help to their people in questions of right and wrong, especially where they as Christians will feel that in meeting one responsibility they are failing to meet another. Instruction in methods and techniques has not been our purpose. Our opinion on this matter is that the decision on the particular method to be used is far from easy and that the matter must be weighed most conscientiously. Here the question must be asked, not only what the purpose of a particular method of birth control is to be, but under certain circumstances also whether or not this method could be used to set that purpose in a false light and thereby to make for perversion of marital relations. Where methods of birth control are used just so that the passions may be given free rein and that the marriage relation becomes "legal" immorality, there marriage itself and the partners in it are being degraded. Should the time ever come when marital relations are under the complete dominance of medical techniques for the prevention of conception, then it could well happen that within marriage itself that demonic element in mere technology would take the upper hand that is causing us so much concern in other areas of our culture and civilization. Today it is possible to speak only in terms of generalities and of consequences that might possibly follow. Since the technical aspects of contraception have developed so many ramifications, it is impossible to comprehend in one view. It is indeed possible that disastrous results could follow of which we at present have not so much as an inkling. Therefore extreme caution is indicated when speaking of these matters, especially in the pastoral care of our people.

Here, too, everything depends on the presuppositions of a correct doctrine of marriage: if marital relations are a blessing ordained by God and implicit in marriage; if therefore marital relations are something more than a mere spark to set a piece of machinery in motion but also and primarily an expression of the union to "one flesh" for which God Himself made man and woman when He joined them in marriage, and when this relation in marriage is recognized as a *debitum* and not merely *licitum* and *libitum*, then the demand dare not be made of a married couple that they refrain completely from marital relations in a case where in liberty and responsibility but also in obedience and humility before God's command and will they have actually come to the decision to postpone the birth of a further child or where they have come to recognize the fact that they should have no more children. In such a case they surely may, in liberty and responsibility, in humility and obedience, make use of such methods and means as will serve this purpose without thereby making a perversion of that purpose. We as pastors may properly help them to a clear conscience in the matter.