

**A Lutheran ethical approach to contraception**

with reflection past Missouri Synod ethics texts

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Theological Ethics

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## Introduction

Some Christian church bodies speak adamantly against the use of contraception (Rome.) Most denominations are silent or indifferent. Our own Missouri Synod and her members have taken differing positions, some representing descriptive ethics, and others freedom to choose under the Gospel. The ethical issue of contraception models a duality of sinner and saint. Falling into one or the other camp ignores the tension of man as *simul justus et peccator* and gives only a Law or a Gospel approach. After evaluating these positions, this paper will present a Lutheran ethic on the use of contraception.

### For Better Not For Worse

Concordia Publishing House released three editions of Walter A. Maier's *For Better Not For Worse: A Manual of Christian Matrimony* in 1935, 1936, and 1939. This sprawling work contemplates specifically marriage ethics in a Lutheran context from Maier's perspective as seminary professor, editor, and Lutheran Hour speaker. Maier begins with the blessings God promises in marriage. Before delving further into the topic, Maier considers "pathways to purity" or who sanctifies the believer and the marriage. He wisely counsels that the marriage remains centered on Christ's forgiveness, steadfast in His Word and Sacrament, and grounded in the chastity of prayer. This all-important section occupies the first sixty-five pages of his text. The remaining four hundred and ninety-five pages descriptively approach every offense or challenge to classical matrimony Maier witnessed in his context of the middle to late 1930's. The descriptive approach makes its applicability to the current postmodern setting difficult. Through a careful reading of the

text, the reader can determine the ethical *principles* behind Maier's specific response.

Specifically Maier addresses contraception in chapter twenty-eight "The Blight of Birth Control." in his section "Part VI. Twin Menaces to Wedded Happiness." Drastic declines have occurred in family size. "Its consequences directly involve individual and national welfare" (Maier, 379.) These declines worldwide are linked by Maier to "the employment of artificial means to restrict the size of the family." (379) One reason given by society is the neo-Malthusian "overpopulation bugaboo" (380) and its fears of food supply and resultant poverty. Maier also considers poverty-based limits on education, contraception for "elimination of the unfit," or eugenics, and maternal relief in both mental and physical strain (387-396). Wisely Maier rejects these reasons using contradictory evidence of the same nature.

Next, Maier turns to reasons to avoid contraception use. Here, he considers potential medical effects of contraceptive use, contraception as an unnatural interference with nature, the promotion of immorality, contraception as a stimulus for divorce, consideration of birth rate and national prosperity, and the crafty marketing and big business of the pharmaceutical industry (396-407.) As with his previous section he reacts with physical, sociological, or statistical evidence and occasional Biblical witness. This allows him to contemplate and refute the very arguments given by culture, speaking to sinful man on his own terms.

Even so, Maier considers the Biblical argument the "basic objection, which, if all other argumentation were swept aside, would be a complete denunciation" (407.) Maier is brief in his Biblical citation but thorough. "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" (Gen 1:28; 9:1). "Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is His reward" (Psalm

127:3). "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house; Thy children are like olive-plants round about thy table" (Psalm 128:3). Other citations include Prov. 31:28 where children are part of a virtuous woman's household; 1 Timothy 5:10,14 where Paul exhorts widows "to marry, bear children; 1 Corinthians 7:14 which illustrates God's interest in the children's children; Mark 10:14 where Christ welcomes the little children; finally the spilling of the seed by Onan in Genesis 38:9,10.

This Scripture provides the basis for Maier's (and the Church's) position on birth control. "The Church must maintain its emphatic avowal of Christian marriage as God's institution for the propagation of the human race. It must insist that, whenever the divine command "Be fruitful and multiply" is evaded for selfish purposes and through the employment of methods suggested by birth control, divine displeasure is invoked" (410). Maier argues that the "Christian principles of love and forbearance must be actuating impulses" (411.) Having as many children as possible, at the risk of child and mother is not declared. Fertility is not always and infinitely possible. It is regulated mysteriously by God's providential care (and natural spacing due to breast-feeding.) Children are the "gift of His rich and undeserved mercy. No child comes into the world without the will and direction of God" (411). Yet, there are times of emergency where unobjectionable means of birth control may be used. With these infrequent and exceptional cases, the Christian conscience should seek pastoral advice and the counsel of a Christian physician. Lastly, Maier promotes adoption as a churchly alternative to contraception usage.

### **Planned Parenthood**

Twenty years after the publication of *For Better Not For Worse*, Concordia Publishing House released Alfred M. Rehwinkel's *Planned Parenthood and Birth*

*Control In the Light of Christian Ethics*. Unlike Maier's text, Rehwinkel is specifically targeting the use of contraceptives within Christian marriage. Like Maier, Rehwinkel served as a professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. There, he taught ethics and other disciplines. The goal of his text is present his own perspective on the evidence surrounding contraception and reacts with a Christian ethic to its use. Rehwinkel's intends to provide a deep understanding of birth control including all the "necessarily knowledge of the subject required to enable him to give intelligent advice... biological, psychological, sociological, ecclesiastical, and ethical... all must be considered" (6) At this point "either he will be convinced that the position here presented is reasonable, sane, and in harmony with Christian ethics, or he will be confirmed more than ever before in the view that birth control in every form and under all circumstances is an evil and must therefore be opposed to the bitter end. A halfway position hardly seems possible" (ix-x).

Scripture offers no definition of "planned parenthood." In his second chapter, Rehwinkel defines it thus: "planned parenthood means to apply to the function of begetting children and the establishment of the family the same intelligence, experience, judgment, and careful weighing of all the consequences for those concerned as man would normally apply to any other life situation where an important decision must be made" (8-9). While begetting children is a sacred responsibility, it is not an undirected process of nature but contemplates the personal, social, and ethical implications. The regulation of family size comes through applied intelligence, judgment, conscience, and in within the recommendation of the medical profession. The proper criteria for medical judgement include prevention of unnecessary and premature death, recovery time for young wives, prevent avoidable death among babies, prevent transmission of communicable diseases, and reduce children

born with congenital physical or mental defect and disease. Society may reasonably demand curtailment of pregnancy to prevent economic or industrial instability, limit population growth, and protect food supply. Finally, contraception may not be used for egocentric avoidance of the responsibility of parenthood. Rehwinkel suggests that "planned parenthood" has a dual aim: overcoming sterility and the encouragement of having children when safe and desirable; but also to prevent births where dangerous and undesirable.

Rehwinkel discusses the various traditional methods of contraception and their potential implications including infanticide, sterilization, *coitus interruptus*, abstinence, and abortion (15-20). He condemns infanticide and "criminal" abortion on social and philosophical grounds. Rehwinkel prohibits *coitus interruptus* because of Onan in Genesis 38. He allows for "therapeutic" sterilization to prevent the spread of genetic disease or malady (17-19). He allows for therapeutic abortion to save the life of the mother (21-22). He denounces "criminal" abortion as a serious moral offense, a criminal practice, and an universal evil (21-25). He regrets that the increasing use of abortion may one day make its sin overlooked and be considered acceptable in society. (25)

Rehwinkel continues by considering the state of birth control in society and in the various Christian denominations. Most notably is his inclusion of the current Missouri position. He says, "The Missouri Synod has not made any official pronouncement on the subject of planned parenthood. The unofficial and semiofficial position of the past, however, has been that birth control is a violation of God's creation order and must therefore be avoided by Christians... but a re-examination of the theological arguments in support of this position has given rise in recent years to some serious doubts regarding the validity and adequacy of this position... and it is a noteworthy fact

that approximately sixty percent of those who answered the questionnaire prepared by...the Board for Parish Education... favored a judicious practice of birth control" (43-44).

To approach the subject with Christian ethics in mind, Rehwinkel must contemplate the Scriptural evidence. With Onan's deed of Genesis 38, Rehwinkel suggests Onan was under the older Levitical law, there were different societal needs, and this was a specific time and place and so God's punishment is not normative. Onan's sin was not the deed itself but total disobedience. Next Rehwinkel approaches Genesis 1:28. "Be fruitful and multiply" is not God "giving man a law but pronouncing a blessing... [it is] a promise of offspring rather than an obligation to beget them" (53). "Since sin has come into the world, not all good things that God had intended for man continued to be at all times and under all circumstances a blessing for man. Even children are not always a blessing" (55). Natural law cannot be equated with Moral law. The function of sex is not limited to procreation but also pleasure and partnership with his wife. Parenthood is more than a mere biological process. Parenthood implies the establishment of a home (66). Marriage is for companionship, procreation, and the prevention of fornication and unchastity.

### **A Lutheran ethical response to Contraception**

The Christian leads a messy life, caught between two realities of sinner and saint. The sinner requires a legal code to keep him in check and to point out his inability to keep God's command. The saint receives the working of the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament and by this gift keeps God's command freely and willingly. The sinner is free to his will and so is bound to disobey and sin. The saint is bound to God's will and so is free to live in

God's holiness. This side of the resurrection God has not destroyed the sinner or restored the man completely. In faith, the Christian awaits the resurrection of the dead and the new life as saint only.

This tension challenges the ethical living of the believer. He receives justification at the cross of Christ completely but he is continually being sanctified by the Spirit. This tension of "now and not yet," between justification and sanctification, and between Law and Gospel tests the ethical decisions of the faithful. Is the believer bound to live his life under the command of God? Is the believer free to live according to the Spirit and guided by the Word? Both statements are true as long as the tension remains. The proper ecclesiastical and pastoral approach to ethical challenges is then also a matter of both bound life to the Law and free life by the Spirit.

We challenge the notion of private and public in our postmodern context. We are fascinated with the private lives of celebrities, glorifying their successes, and failures on evening tabloid television. Reporters scrutinize criminals in print and on video, delving into their psyche to ascertain what makes them tick. Yet, it remains taboo to tell anyone how to live his life unless he has opened himself to the public as a celebrity or through wrongdoing. Marriage, family, and matters of sexuality remain hidden under this veil of privacy. Individuals determine what is acceptable behavior by following majority practice, commercial marketing, the examples of celebrities, or deliberate opposition to traditional practice.

This organized chaos presents real conflicts with the ethical life of the believer. The church avoids being ethically descriptive ("you can or can't do") for fear of legalism. The church also avoids being ethically silent ("all things are permissible for the believer") for fear of antinomianism. The ethical relativism of the postmodern world prefers antinomianism. The

church historically favored descriptive ethics. Yet, the believer living as both sinner and saint require either words of command (Law) and gift (Gospel.)

A Lutheran ethical response is neither legalistic nor antinomian. A Lutheran ethic proclaims both God's Word of Law and Gospel, with proper distinction and precisely to the need of the hearer. The church must adequately contemplate the challenge of our postmodern society. God's Word must not be molded or shaped to fit these worldly ideals. It must remain unbound to our sinful will and unpolluted from worldly wisdom. Where the Word speaks in truth and purity, the sinful are condemned by Law and justified into faith by Christ's justifying death and resurrection. Where this World is spoken clearly, the faithful are renewed and sanctified and empowered to live in harmony with God.

Maier and Rehwinkel rely on biological, psychological, and sociological evidence and proof to establish their position. Rehwinkel uses the same argumentation as Maier to justify what Maier denounces. Rehwinkel elevates reason over command. Maier presents this evidence as reinforcement for the Scriptural argument. In both cases, there is an appeal to reason in a matter of faith. The old man doubts the promises of God and relies on his reason, skill, or a whole laundry list of exceptional circumstances prohibiting childbearing. The new man trusts in God's promise to provide not just children but the means to support and care for them.

Where Rehwinkel argues averse to a "halfway position," this clearly is possible since we are both sinner and saint. Where God wills the sainted man would procreate freely (Genesis 1:28), he is sinner as well. Man corrupted flesh with the original sin. Disease, malady, and deformation resulted. All men now die therefore for Adam's disobedience. Yet, while the old man has

corrupted God's procreative purpose, the new man freely accepts procreation as God's gift. The new man does not rely on his reason or strength to believe in the benefits bestowed by God. The new man trusts in the promise of God through faith given by the Holy Spirit.

A distinctly Lutheran ethic response to contraception uses neither prohibits their use in all circumstances nor condones their use as beneficial. It understands the divine command of Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply" as a cross to bear. This cross is a burden for the old Adam who desires not the physical, mental, or social burdens of parenting, especially in cases of deformity or disease. This cross is a gift for the new Adam who receives the blessing of children with a faithful spirit.

### **Bibliography**

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