

# **Birth Control—The Biblical And Historic Protestant Position**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The formulation of these thoughts is based to some extent upon a letter which the Session of the Puritan Reformed Church of Edmonton (of which I was a member) sent to a young couple on the subject of birth control. However, I have modified and added various sections as well. Although this paper is not intended to be exhaustive in answering all questions related to birth control, nevertheless, these observations are offered with the hope that they may be helpful in arriving at a biblical conclusion on a very controversial topic.

## **STATEMENT OF POSITION**

Since procreation was a God-given duty given to Adam and Eve at creation (“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” Genesis 1:28), and an obligation repeated even after the fall of man (Genesis 9:1,7), and an obligation that God always associates with blessing not cursing (Genesis 16:7; Leviticus 26:9; Deuteronomy 7:13; Deuteronomy 28:11; Nehemiah 9:23; Psalm 107:38; Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 128:3), and an obligation that God has never revoked in either the Old Testament or the New Testament, I maintain that procreation to all those who may lawfully do so remains a duty to the end of the world (unless, of course, it can be demonstrated from the Scriptures not to be a duty). Since it is God’s prerogative to open and close the womb at His will (Genesis 29:31; Genesis 30:2,22; 1 Samuel 1:5), and since the use of birth control for the express purpose of preventing conception intends that a child not live (contrary to the Sixth Commandment), and since there is no approved example of the use of any birth control method found in the Scripture wherein the conception of a child was intentionally prevented, but to the contrary one example where the intentional use of birth control for the express purpose of preventing conception was condemned (Genesis 38:8-10), I also submit that God condemns the use of birth control methods that are used for the express of purpose of preventing conception.

Thus, this paper will seek to demonstrate that any method used for the express purpose to intentionally prevent the conception of a child is a sin against the Sixth Commandment. This would include any INTENTIONAL abstention from sexual intercourse for the express purpose of preventing conception (i.e. the rhythm method etc.), or any INTENTIONAL wasting of the seed of copulation for the express purpose of preventing conception (i.e. various forms of artificial contraception or sterilization).

Let us then consider the two methods that are generally used for the stated goal of preventing conception (abstaining from sexual intercourse and wasting the seed of copulation in some manner) and determine whether they are lawful according to God’s precepts.

## **ABSTENTION FROM SEXUAL INTERCOURSE**

First of all, I submit that voluntary abstinence from sexual intercourse is acceptable according to the Word of God for the following reasons: PIETY (i.e. prayer and fasting), MERCY (e.g. as when one abstains so as not to spread a contagious and deadly virus such as HIV), MODESTY (i.e. abstinence during menstruation), and NECESSITY (e.g. when a lawful calling requires a husband to be apart from his wife for extended periods of time such as a soldier in times of war or a minister in times of persecution or apostasy). In all such cases, the express purpose for abstinence from sexual union is NOT to prevent the conception of a child.

Here it is to be noted that a purposeful distinction is being made between abstinence from the conjugal relationship for an UNLAWFUL PURPOSE (namely, to prevent conception of a child), and abstinence for LAWFUL PURPOSES. The distinction between the two cases of abstinence resides in the intent for which the moral action or omission of the moral action is done.

Every moral act must be judged upon the basis of three criteria: (1) The right motive (which is faith in and love for God); (2) The right standard (which is the supreme standard of God's Word); and (3) The right goal (which can be none other than to glorify God). Only when all three of these criteria are realized, can we expect moral actions to be equitably and consistently judged. Note in the following text that all moral acts are classified as either good or bad, and that the classification of indifferent actions does not exist in relation to the judgment seat of Christ.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Thus, every moral action of mankind is either good or bad. Every moral action either proceeds from a love for God or it doesn't; every action is either biblical or it is not; every action either glorifies God or it doesn't. There is, therefore, no act of mankind that is truly indifferent when judged by this scriptural standard. Thus, it is important to understand at the outset that whatever choice we make regarding our actions before God, there is certainly nothing that is considered morally neutral.

With this in mind, let us first examine the moral act of voluntary abstinence from sexual intercourse.

### **1. FOR ACTS OF PIETY**

It is scripturally demonstrable that voluntary abstinence from sexual relations for a period of time is not unlawful (in and of itself). This is proved by the fact that Paul allows abstinence for the purpose of prayer and fasting (i.e. for the reason of fulfilling deeds of piety).

Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (1 Corinthians 7:5).

In the permissive commandment cited above, the Apostle Paul states the intention to fervently fast and pray as a legitimate reason for abstention from sexual union, though he warns of potentially sinful consequences if the abstention is maintained for too long a period of time.

## **2. FOR ACTS OF MERCY**

Consider that those people who contracted leprosy were commanded to be isolated (quarantined) from all family members (including husbands or wives as the case may be) and friends (Leviticus 13:46). Isolation (and abstention from all sexual intimacy) was required in all such cases in order to prevent the spread of disease (not in order to prevent conception). Likewise, it may be deduced that mercy requires that in cases in which the husband or wife is in such a present condition of pain and suffering, they are not under obligation to fulfill their duty to procreate (for their abstention is again not for the express purpose of preventing the conception of a child). Furthermore, when the specific intent of a medical procedure is not to prevent the conception of a child, but rather to remove some cancerous tissue or to correct some bodily malfunction of the mother or the father, and in the process of this medical procedure, the ability of the mother or father to procreate is hindered or eliminated, then I would submit that such a procedure is not sinful. For the express purpose of the surgery was one of mercy in sustaining life, and not of cruelty in preventing life. Our God delights in showing mercy and calls us to minimize the suffering of others (in all lawful circumstances) rather than to increase the suffering of others (Matthew 12:7). Just as man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath made for man, so likewise, man was not made for procreation, but procreation made for man.

## **3. FOR ACTS OF MODESTY**

We also know from the Scriptures that temporary abstinence was (and is) also required by God for the sake of modesty during the woman's monthly menstruation cycle.

Also thou shalt not approach unto a woman to uncover her nakedness, as long as she is put apart for her uncleanness (Leviticus 18:19).

Again, this temporary abstinence from sexual union was not in order to prevent conception, but was in order to prevent an abomination for which the Lord cast out the heathen nations from the land of Palestine (Leviticus 18:24-30).

#### 4. FOR ACTS OF NECESSITY

The Scripture recognizes temporary abstention from sexual intercourse as warrantable in cases of such urgent necessity wherein a husband or wife may be required to perform his/her lawful calling, and so may be apart from his wife (or from her husband) for an extended period of time (e.g. a doctor who is required to attend to an epidemic for several months, or a soldier who is required to defend his country in a lawful war, or a minister who is required to preach the gospel to hungry souls scattered like sheep over many hills due to apostasy or persecution). The intention in all such cases is not to prevent conception, but rather to fulfill a lawful and necessary calling. In support of this reason for abstention, we appeal to the faithful testimony of Uriah the Hittite who refused the lawful privileges of matrimony with his wife because his calling required such sacrifices of him:

But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and went not down to his house. And when they had told David, saying, Uriah went not down unto his house, David said unto Uriah, Camest thou not from thy journey? why then didst thou not go down unto thine house? And Uriah said unto David, The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? as thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing (2 Samuel 11:9-11).

With regard to the first three cases cited above, William Gouge, a Presbyterian minister and member of the Westminster Assembly, discusses the defects and excesses to avoid when attending to the duties of the marriage bed (*Of Domestic Duties*, Still Waters Revival Books, p.223).

[Abstinence is applicable] in the time when it [i.e. sexual intercourse] is against piety, mercy or modesty.

1. Against piety, when no day, nor duty of religion, nor not extraordinary days, and duties of humiliation, will make them forbear [having intercourse]. The prophets bidding the bridegroom and bride [to] go out of their bedchamber in the day of a fast (Joel 2:16), and the Apostles excepting of prayer and fasting where he enjoins this duty of due benevolence (1 Corinthians 7: 5), shew that in the time of a fast it [i.e. intercourse] must be forborne.

2. Against mercy, when one of the married couple being weak by sickness, pain, labour, travel, or any other like means, and through that weakness not well able to perform this duty, the other notwithstanding will have it performed. I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, saith the Lord. Shall God's sacrifice give place to mercy, and shall not man's or woman's lust? for so I may well term this unseasonable desire.

Question: What if an husband or wife continue so long sick, or otherwise weak, as the other cannot contain?

Answer: In such cases of necessity the body must be beaten down, and earnest prayer made for the gift of continency: for assuredly the Lord who brought thee to that necessity, will give thee grace sufficient.

3. Against modesty, when husbands require this duty in that time, which under the Law was called the time of a wife's separation for her disease: 'And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even (Leviticus 15:19).' For what can be expected from such polluted copulation, but a leprous and loathsome generation? This kind of intemperance is expressly forbidden: 'Also thou shalt not approach unto a woman to uncover her nakedness, as long as she is put apart for her uncleanness (Leviticus 18:19);' and a capital punishment inflicted upon such as offended therein: 'And if a man shall lie with a woman having her sickness, and shall uncover her nakedness; he hath discovered her fountain, and she hath uncovered the fountain of her blood: and both of them shall be cut off from among their people (Leviticus 20:18).' Abstinence in this time is set in the catalogue of notes which declare a man to be righteous, 'But the soul that eateth of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, that pertain unto the LORD, having his uncleanness upon him, even that soul shall be cut off from his people (Leviticus 7:20);' and the contrary intemperancy is put in the roll of such abominations as provoked God to spew out the Canaanites: 'That the land spew not you out also, when ye defile it, as it spewed out the nations that were before you (Leviticus 18:28);' and to forsake his own inheritance: 'In thee have they discovered their fathers' nakedness: in thee have they humbled her that was set apart for pollution' (Ezekiel 22:10).

Hereby we see that, according to the Word of God, there are morally acceptable reasons for which a married couple can and ought to abstain from sexual intercourse, viz., piety, mercy, modesty, and necessity.

## **CONTRASTING LAWFUL REASONS WITH UNLAWFUL REASONS FOR ABSTENTION**

Let us now contrast the above lawful reasons for abstention from sexual intercourse with the unlawful reasons for abstention.

First, it must be asked: Can we ever, under any circumstances, justify a moral action or omission that would "intentionally" prevent the conception of a child?

Again, I understand from the previous argument that abstention is not, in and of itself, evil, and that good consequences may flow from such an action under divinely prescribed circumstances.

Undeniably, the quality of this moral action abides in the intent for which the moral action is done.

We know from Scripture that God judges the thought and intentions of our heart:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

We also understand that our Lord Jesus Christ taught that immoral actions conceived merely internally (in the intentions of a man's heart) were as blameworthy as if the deed were done externally to a man's person or property:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart (Matthew 5:27,28).

But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death (James 1:14,15).

The sins described in the above citations all begin in the intention of the heart, and then manifest themselves in external acts. Thus, it is certain that adultery, murder, theft, etc., can be committed in the heart, and that man is guilty even when such sin only manifests itself in his intentions. In essence, the heart that is angry without a just cause is guilty of violating the Sixth Commandment, even though an actual person was never killed. It is enough to "intend" to kill an actual person to be guilty of the crime before God. Likewise, this applies to intentionally preventing the life of an actual child. An actual life does not have to be taken (as in an abortion) in order to incur blame for the sin of taking away the life of our neighbor. Only the intention to destroy life (by way of preventing life) is necessary to make one culpable of taking away the life of another. It is enough that the intent to destroy life (or to prevent life) is conceived in the heart. As we examine the serious matter at hand, it is not the life of a fictional person that is prevented by the intention to prevent conception, but rather the life of an actual person.

Furthermore, consider the following analogy. Just as it is clearly a moral evil to intentionally prevent the conception of SPIRITUAL LIFE (i.e. a new man in Christ) which God creates by means of the seed of the gospel, so likewise I would argue it is a moral evil to intentionally prevent the conception of PHYSICAL LIFE (i.e. a new man in Adam) which God also creates, but by means of the seed of copulation. On the one hand, just as it is a violation of the Sixth Commandment to intentionally keep the seed of the gospel from being preached for the express purpose of preventing the birth of a new man in Christ (for a new man is a creation of God, renewed in the image of God), so likewise it is a violation of the Sixth Commandment to intentionally prevent the seed of man from being united with the egg of a woman for the

express purpose of preventing the birth of a new man in Adam (for a man is the creation of God, made in the image of God). On the other hand, just as it is not a violation of the Sixth Commandment to avoid preaching the seed of the gospel for the express purpose of fulfilling other commanded duties (personal, domestic, and civic), so it is not a violation of the Sixth Commandment to avoid sexual transmission of the seed of man for the express purpose of fulfilling other commanded duties (piety, modesty, mercy, and necessity). Life, whether physical or spiritual, is God's great creation. For man intentionally to prevent life for his own reasons is to usurp the prerogative of the Creator of life. Consider the Larger Catechism upon this question (emphases added):

**Question 136:** What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment?

**Answer:** The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; THE NEGLECTING OR WITHDRAWING THE LAWFUL AND NECESSARY MEANS OF PRESERVATION OF LIFE; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarrelling, striking, wounding, and: WHATSOEVER ELSE TEND TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THE LIFE OF ANY.

Can it be argued that intentional abstention for the purpose of preventing the conception of a child “tends” to the destruction of the life of a person? Certainly. It directly “tends” to and intends the destruction of the life of a particular human being that has not yet been conceived (and that human being's entire posterity)—not an imaginary, fictional human being, but a living rational soul—not simply one person, but also entire generations that would come from him or her. Let us universalize the practice of intentional abstention or intentional spilling of the seed (for the express purpose of preventing conception) so that no conceptions occurred throughout the whole world for one generation, what would happen? Would only a fictional human race be destroyed or would a real human race be destroyed? We would literally destroy actual human beings (by intentionally preventing) the next generation of persons! Thus, I would submit that according to our Confession of Faith and the Word of God, intentional abstention from sexual intercourse and intentional spilling the seed for the express purpose of preventing human life is a violation of the Sixth Commandment.

Aside from the above mentioned qualifications (“public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense”), if whatsoever “tends” to the destruction of the life of any is a violation of the Sixth Commandment, then I would submit that whatsoever “intends” to the destruction of the life of any (or “intends” to prevent the life of any) is also a violation of the same.

Now, can it be argued from the Larger Catechism that intentional abstention from sexual intercourse or intentional spilling of the seed of copulation, for the express purpose of preventing life, is a case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense (which are enumerated as biblical grounds to take away the life of others according to Question 136 in the Larger Catechism)? To the contrary, I would submit that to intentionally abstain from sexual

intercourse or to intentionally spill one's seed for the express purpose of preventing life is rather according to the Larger Catechism "the [sinful] neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life" (the preservation of an actual child that would be conceived).

One may attempt to argue that there is a justified case in which a woman has the right to preserve her own life by preventing the life of a child—hence, a case of self-defense. It is true that taking the life of another for the sake of preserving one's own life or the life of another is lawful, but with this qualification: Provided the aggressor demonstrates an intention to do bodily harm to another. When one uses self-defense against a thief who breaks into his home at night, he is justified in doing so for one must assume the intentions of the thief are not to benefit the owner of the home:

If a thief be found, breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him (Exodus 22:2).

However, if it cannot be proved that there is any intention on the part of a person to injure another, then self-defense is not warranted. If, for example, a car is headed for an intersection where a child is crossing the street, it would not be a warranted case of self-defense for the father to pull out a gun and kill the driver who is not able to stop in time. There is no case of necessary self-defense when no evidence exists that one intends the harm of another. Not only has a child in the womb not intentionally provoked such an aggressive attack on the life of the mother, the child passively exists and lives in the mother's womb for the declarative glory of God and for the blessing of mankind (according to the express statements of Scripture as in Psalm 127:3-5). Thus, the intentional prevention of an actual human being, who shall make no intentional attack upon one's life, is a violation of the Sixth Commandment and does not fall into the category of necessary self-defense.

## **HEALTH RISKS TO MOTHER OR CHILD**

Some argue that when certain potential health risks are possible in the future to either mother or child that it is warranted in such circumstances to intentionally seek to prevent the conception of a child. However, consider various biblical cases where either the life of the mother or the life of the child (or both) were in grave danger or at serious risk, and yet no steps were either taken by God's people nor were steps suggested or required by God Himself to prevent the conception of children.

Exodus 1:7 states that after the death of Joseph,

the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty, and the land was filled with them.

The abundance of children that were conceived and brought forth became a problem to the Egyptians. The Egyptians feared that Israel would unite with an attacking enemy and would overwhelm them. The Egyptians first tried to decrease the population of Israel by significantly increasing the work load of the Israelites as servants (Exodus 1:11). However, the Scripture records,

But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew (Exodus 1:12, see also Exodus 1:13,14).

Thus, difficult economic circumstances and tireless work were not stated to be valid reasons for the Israelites to refrain from having children. Instead the Israelites continued to obey the commandment of the Lord (“to be fruitful and multiply”) given to Adam and Eve before the Fall (Genesis 1:28) and to Noah and his sons after the Fall (Genesis 9:1,7). The King of Egypt then sought to enlist the help of the midwives to murder all male children born to the Israelites, but to no avail (Exodus 1:15-21). Finally, Pharaoh decreed that every male child born to the Israelites must be cast into the river (Exodus 1:22). If ever there was a period in biblical history in which birth control measures might have been permissible in order to spare the life of a mother and child, it would seem to have been at that time. However, not a word is spoken by God to the effect that it was the obligation of fathers and mothers to take steps to prevent the conception of children even though it was possible and likely that it might lead to the death of both mother and child if Pharaoh should discover them. To the contrary, a faithful father and mother of Israel put their trust in the Lord and obeyed His commandment (“to be fruitful and multiply”), and the child that was born became the deliverer of God’s people from Egyptian bondage: Moses. If intentionally seeking to prevent the conception of a child (due to some risk that might befall the mother or child) is a righteous act, then the parents of Moses did not avail themselves of that which was righteous (and even necessary) in a most dangerous threat to the life of their child (and possibly to the mother as well).

It cannot be reasonably argued that the parents of Moses did not use methods of birth control because they did not have such methods available to them. History is replete with various methods of birth control that were used in ancient times. Kathleen O’Grady writes about Egyptian hieroglyphics that describe a tampon that was used for contraception at about 1550 b.c. (“Contraception and Religion—A Short History”). In a work entitled, *Albion's Seed* (pp.92,93), David Fisher (who makes no claim to being a Christian) contrasts the view of primitive cultures to that of the Puritan culture in New England in regard to the matter of intentional methods of contraception that involved spilling the man's seed:

Most primitive cultures have practiced some form of contraception, often with high success. Iroquois squaws made diaphragms of birch bark; African slaves used pessaries [i.e. suppositories] of elephant dung to prevent pregnancy. European women employed beeswax disks, cabbage leaves, spermicides of lead, whitewash and tar. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, coitus interruptus [withdrawal and spilling the seed] and the use of sheep gut condoms became widespread in Europe. But the Puritans would have none of these

unnatural practices. They found a clear rule in Genesis 38, where Onan 'spilled his seed upon the ground' in an effort to prevent conception and the Lord slew him. In Massachusetts, seed-spilling in general was known as the 'hideous sin of Onanism.' A Puritan could not practice coitus interruptus and keep his faith.

Kathleen London in a course taught at Yale-New Haven Teacher's Institute states:

Douching was used in ancient times but was not very effective. The Greek physician A'tious knew the properties of vinegar but recommended it be applied to the penis rather than used as a douche....

A pessary is a vaginal suppository used to kill sperm and/or block their passage through the cervix. The pessary was the most effective contraceptive device used in ancient times and numerous recipes for pessaries from ancient times are known. Ingredients for pessaries included: a base of crocodile dung (dung was frequently a base), a mixture of honey and natural sodium carbonate forming a kind of gum. All were of a consistency which would melt at body temperature and form an impenetrable covering of the cervix. The use of oil was also suggested by Aristotle and advocated as late as 1931 by birth control advocate Marie Stopes (*The History Of Birth Control*, Kathleen London).

In addition to the Exodus 1 account, we find utterances of the Lord through his prophets in which God makes known that Mothers with child would be cruelly ripped open or dashed against stones by fierce enemies (no doubt killing both mother and child). For example, the prophet Elijah weeps as he is given supernatural knowledge of what Hazeel would do to the children of Israel in the near future:

Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strongholds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and wilt dash their children, and rip up their women with child (2 Kings 8:12).

Likewise, the prophet Hosea predicts that Samaria would soon face the same brutal treatment from the Assyrians (Hosea 10:14,15; Hosea 13:16). Now if birth control methods were sanctioned by God as righteous and necessary for mothers or children who were at risk, we would certainly have expected to hear from God about such an option for parents in a situation like the ones described above. To the contrary, there is never such an option mentioned by God in His Word wherein parents might (even in the most desperate circumstances) intentionally choose to prevent the conception of a child. It is not as though God's people did not face many dangerous events that threatened the life of a mother or a child within her womb. It is not as though methods of birth control were not available to the husband and the wife at that time. However, such methods are never mentioned as a possibility or an option by God.

## **SPILLING THE SEED**

Next, we must briefly examine the practice of intentionally spilling the seed of copulation (whether into a condom, into a spermicide, into a diaphragm, into an IUD, on to the ground etc.) for the express purpose of preventing life. Whereas we have explicit testimony (and good and necessary consequence) concerning abstention from sexual intercourse in certain stated circumstances in God's Word (piety, mercy, modesty, and necessity), we have no testimony at all from Scripture for the use of other methods which prevent conception and involve the intentional spilling of the seed of copulation. Even if one might argue that he is spilling his seed for the right motive (love for God) and for the right end (the welfare of his wife), nevertheless, he must still consider whether the action itself is sanctioned by the Word of God. I submit that the intentional spilling of one's seed in order to prevent life is not an act sanctioned by God's Word.

The classic passage which the Church for thousands of years has used to demonstrate the sinfulness of intentionally spilling one's seed in order to prevent life is Genesis 38:9. THIS IS THE ONLY PASSAGE IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE THAT SPECIFICALLY SPEAKS ABOUT THE USE OF ANY FORM OF BIRTH CONTROL. And as I hope to prove, God not only does not sanction the intentional use of spilling the seed of copulation in order to prevent conception, but actually condemns the practice. From the account of Onan, let us examine the following: The Circumstances That Led To The Sin Of Onan; The Sin Of Onan; The Divine Judgment Upon Onan; and The Testimony Of History As To The Sin of Onan.

## **THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO THE SIN OF ONAN**

We are told that Onan's brother, Er, married a woman by the name of Tamar (Genesis 38:6), but due to some wickedness committed by Er, God slew him (Genesis 38:7). As a result of Er's death, Judah, the father of Er and Onan, told Onan to marry Tamar and to raise up "seed" (or a child) to be the legal heir of Er's estate. It is important to note that there was no DIVINE LAW explicitly stated authorizing this marital relationship until the time of the Mosaic Law some 300 years later (Deuteronomy 25:5,6). Onan obeyed his father and took Tamar to be his wife, but instead of copulating with a view to bringing forth a child, he intentionally "spilled" his seed of copulation on the ground in order that he might not raise up an heir for his brother.

## **THE SIN OF ONAN**

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the universal view of Jewish and Christian commentators alike that Onan was slain particularly for the sin of intentionally spilling his "seed" of copulation upon the ground in order to prevent the conception of a child. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, various methods of birth control have gradually become tolerated, then accepted, and finally promoted within the Christian Church. And along with this trend within Christianity has also come another

interpretation of Onan's sin: Namely, Onan was slain for having refused to raise up seed for his deceased brother. No one is denying that Onan spilled his seed in order that his brother would not have a legal heir by him. No one is suggesting that Onan was not motivated by selfishness and covetousness.

But the question that must be answered is this: Would God yet have slain Onan if he had NOT intentionally spilled his seed, but simply had refused to raise up an heir for his brother? Interestingly, this question is answered for us in Deuteronomy 25:7-10 where the penalty for refusing to raise up a legal heir for a deceased brother is not death, but shame.

So how do we explain the severity of the punishment received? I would submit, Onan's sin was aggravated by the specific act he committed. The specific act was not inconsequential to the punishment he received. For the text states,

And the thing that he DID displeased the LORD; wherefore the LORD slew him also (Genesis 38:10).

The thing that he DID was that he intentionally spilled his seed on the ground. And he did so in order to prevent conception. Thus, what is expressly abominated in the sin of Onan was his intentionally practicing some form of contraception (coitus interruptus) in order to prevent conception. Likewise, essentially any form of contraception that intentionally wastes the seed of copulation so as to prevent conception (whether it be a condom, birth control pills, a diaphragm, IUD, spermicide, tubal ligation, vasectomy etc.) is here likewise condemned by God as a taking away of the life of a real person (even though that real person does not yet exist). It is to usurp the place of God who says that He alone is the one who gives life and takes life away (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6), who opens the womb and closes the womb (Genesis 29:31; Genesis 30:2,22; 1 Samuel 1:5,6).

It is not without significance that the word of God uses the same Hebrew word for "seed" (zerah) whether it refers to the seed of copulation (Leviticus 15:16,18,32) or to an actual child that has been conceived or born (Leviticus 12:2; Leviticus 18:21). In Genesis 38, there is a remarkable connection between the seed of copulation and the seed of conception/birth. For in Genesis 38:8, Onan is commanded by his Father, Judah, to raise up the "seed" of conception/birth (i.e. a male heir) for his deceased brother, Er. In Genesis 38:9, Onan knew that the seed of conception/birth (i.e. a male child) would not be his legal heir, but his brother's, so he spilled "it" (i.e. the seed of copulation) upon the ground so that he would not give the seed of conception/birth (in the form of a male heir) to his brother. Now the point is not that the seed of copulation is a person as is the seed of conception or birth, but rather that the Lord makes an intimate connection between the seed of copulation and the seed of conception/birth. In other words, it is the seed of copulation that becomes the seed of conception/birth. Thus, to intentionally destroy the seed of copulation is to intentionally destroy the seed of conception or the seed of birth. God has intentionally joined together in the same verse the seed of copulation (although stated implicitly) with the seed of conception and with the seed of birth (although stated explicitly) by using the same Hebrew word (zerah). For

these are various stages of the seed of mankind. It is, therefore, no insignificant act to intentionally destroy the human seed of copulation in order to prevent conception. It is a violation of the Sixth Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill") which supplies the only sound reason why God judged Onan with such a severe penalty: death. Onan took life and his own life was likewise taken.

Carefully note that even when a man ACCIDENTALLY spilled his seed of copulation (e.g. while he slept), it was treated by God as an "uncleanness" under the Levitical Law requiring separation, cleansing, and atonement (Leviticus 15:16-18,30-32). Now if the seed of copulation is in God's sight of such significance (because it bears His life) so that to spill it ACCIDENTALLY required separation, cleansing, and atonement, how much more seriously does God take the INTENTIONAL spilling of the seed of copulation in order to prevent conception? The judgment that fell upon Onan tells us how serious God is about the sin of INTENTIONALLY spilling the seed of copulation so as to prevent conception.

## **THE DIVINE JUDGMENT UPON ONAN**

Finally, let us consider the divine judgment that fell upon Onan for his sin. We learn that as a result of Onan's sin that God "slew him" (Genesis 38:10). What law did Onan violate in order to be judged so severely? Did Onan violate some DIVINE LAW regarding the levirate marriage (wherein a brother was commanded to marry the widow of his deceased brother in order to raise up a legal heir to his brother)? If so, it must have been a law that was not codified, for no such law exists in Scripture until the time of Moses, some 300 years later (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

The Law of God may be divided into three categories: MORAL, CEREMONIAL, and JUDICIAL. The MORAL LAW is a perfect rule of righteousness that binds all people in all ages (and is summarized in the Ten Commandments). The CEREMONIAL LAW is that which was given to Israel as an ecclesiastical society containing various typical ceremonies, objects, and offices (such as sacrifices, temple, priesthood etc.) which prefigured Christ and His benefits. This aspect of the Law was abrogated as to its outward form at the crucifixion of Christ (except for the moral principles that underlie it which continue to bind all people and all churches at all times). The JUDICIAL LAW is that which was given to Israel as a civil society containing various ordinances to regulate that people within the Promise Land. This aspect of the Law expired when the state of Israel ceased with the destruction of Israel in 70 a.d. (except for the moral principles that underlie it which continue to bind all people and all nations at all times).

Now if Onan was required by God's Law to marry the widow of his deceased brother and to bring forth a legal heir, which of the three categories of God's Law (listed above) did Onan violate when he refused to bring forth a legal heir for his deceased brother? In other words, under what category of God's Law was the levirate marriage and its duties comprehended AT THE TIME OF ONAN? At the time of Onan, the levirate marriage was certainly not comprehended under the JUDICIAL LAW, for the JUDICIAL LAW had not yet been given to Israel

under Moses. The levirate marriage was never comprehended under the CEREMONIAL LAW (either before or after Moses), for the levirate marriage was not typical of Christ or His benefits, nor did it have anything to do with formal worship. Nor was the levirate marriage comprehended under the MORAL LAW, for it did not and does not bind all people at all times. When the levirate marriage was instituted as a JUDICIAL LAW within Israel (at the time of Moses), it had in view particularly keeping tribal hereditary lines pure so that families and tribes within Israel did not lose their inheritance to outsiders. This prevented strangers from outside Israel from seizing the inheritance of Israelites. It was, therefore, a law that pertained to Israel in the Holy Land. Thus, since the levirate marriage of Onan was not an aspect of the JUDICIAL, CEREMONIAL, or MORAL LAW, it was not a divine law. I would submit that the levirate marriage at the time of Onan was a CULTURAL PRACTICE (not a moral law). That being the case, is it likely that God would have slain Onan for violating a mere cultural practice? I think that is very unlikely.

What then was the reason for God's severe judgment upon Onan? I submit it was because Onan intentionally spilled his seed of copulation so as to prevent the conception of a child. This was an abomination to the Lord. It was to practice the same kind of sexual intercourse (non-procreational) that sodomites practice which is also an abomination to the Lord (Leviticus 18:22).

## **THE TESTIMONY OF HISTORY AS TO THE SIN OF ONAN**

Because there have always been various means of contraception which involved the intentional spilling of the seed of copulation in order to prevent the conception of a child, faithful Churches and ministers took occasion to speak against the act of Onan as a grievous sin forbidden by the Word of God. I am indebted to the historical work which Charles Provan has furnished in his helpful treatment of the subject, *The Bible and Birth Control* (available through Still Waters Revival Books).

AUGUSTINE is clear in his denunciation of Onan's sin:

For it is illicit and shameful for a man to lie with even his lawful wife in such a way as to prevent the conception of offspring. This is what Onan, son of Judah, used to do; and for that God slew him (*De adulterinis coniugiis ad Pollentium* 1b.IIc.12 (PL 40 [1887]479).

JOHN CALVIN, when considering the case of Onan, likens the intentional spilling of a man's seed of copulation in order to prevent conception to abortion:

The voluntary spilling of semen outside of intercourse between man and woman is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is doubly monstrous. For this is to extinguish the hope of the race and to kill before he is born the hoped-for offspring. This impiety is

especially condemned, now by the Spirit through Moses' mouth, that Onan, as it were by a violent abortion, no less cruelly than filthily cast upon the ground the offspring of his brother, torn from the maternal womb. Besides in this he tried, as far as he was able, to wipe out a part of the human race. If any woman ejects a fetus from her womb by drugs, it is reckoned a crime incapable of expiation and deservedly Onan incurred upon himself the same kind of punishment, infecting the earth by his semen, in order that Tamar might not conceive a future human being as an inhabitant of the earth (Calvin's Latin Commentary on Genesis 38:10, as cited in Charles Provan's book, *The Bible and Birth Control*, p. 26).

THE SYNOD OF DORDT in 1618 commissioned annotations to be written for the whole Bible (which was completed and published by authority of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in 1637). In *The Dutch Annotations Upon The Whole Bible* we note the following comments on the Onan incident wherein Onan's sin is likened to premeditated murder:

This was even as much, as if he had (in a manner) pulled forth the fruit out of the mother's womb, and destroyed it.

ANDREW WILLET ( a minister in England) wrote a massive commentary on the book of Genesis, *Hexapla in Genesis* (which was published in 1632). He states that the sin in intentionally spilling the seed in Genesis 38 consisted in the following several sins:

[It was] against the order of nature, using the act of generation for pleasure only, and not for generation; it was against God, whose institution he brake; against his wife, whom he defrauded of the fruit of her womb; against himself, in preventing his issue; against mankind, which should have been increased and propagated... this sin of envy [was] against his brother, to whom he should have raised seed.

WILLIAM GOUGE, Presbyterian minister and member of the Westminster Assembly, addresses the due benevolence that a husband and wife owe to one another (according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:3) and mentions that the sin of Onan is to be avoided in marriage:

To deny this duty being justly required, is to deny a due debt, and to give Satan great advantage. The punishment inflicted on Onan (Gen. 38:9,10) shows how great a wrong this is. From that punishment the Hebrews gather that this sin is a kind of murder. It is so much the more heinous when hatred, stoutness, niceness, fear of having too many children, or any other like respects, are the cause thereof (William Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, p.223, original spelling altered to conform to modern standards).

VARIOUS PRESBYTERIAN MINISTERS IN LONDON in 1657 completed *Annotations Upon All The Books Of The Old And New Testament*. The comments on Genesis 38:9 are as follows:

V.9. On the ground] The lewdness of this fact was composed of lust, of envy, and murder; the first appears, in that he went rashly upon it, it seems he stayed not till night, for the time of privacy for such a purpose, else the bed would have been named as well as the ground; the second is plain by the text, he envied at the honor of his dead brother, and thereupon would not be father of any child, that should be reputed his [brother's], and not his own; the third, in that there is a seminal vital virtue, which perisheth if the seed be spilt; and by doing this to hinder the begetting of a living child, is the first degree of murder that can be committed, and the next unto it is the marring of conception, when it is made, and causing of abortion: now such acts are noted in the Scripture as horrible crimes, because, otherwise many might commit them, and not know the evil of them.

MATTHEW POOLE'S remarks likewise coincide with the above teachers of the Church on this text of Scripture:

Two things are here noted: 1. The sin itself, which is here particularly described by the Holy Ghost, that men might be instructed concerning the nature and the great evil of this sin of self-pollution, which is such that it brought upon the actor of it the extraordinary vengeance of God, and which is condemned not only by Scripture, but even by the light of nature, and the judgment of heathens, who have expressly censured it as a great sin, and as a kind of murder. Of which see my Latin Synopsis. Whereby we may sufficiently understand how wicked and abominable a practice this is amongst Christians, and in the light of the gospel, which lays greater and stricter obligations upon us to purity, and severely forbids all pollution both of flesh and spirit. 2. The cause of this wickedness; which seem to have been either hatred of his brother, or envy at his brother's name and honor, springing from the pride of his own heart.

In the Minutes Of THE GENERAL MEETING OF THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (which met in 1888, the year after David Steele's death), the following is listed as one of the Causes Of Fasting,

We believe that uncleanness, in all its polluting and debasing forms, is increasing. We fear that many, who are members of the Church, employ means to prevent offspring, using the marriage bed to gratify their lusts, destroying their own lives, and bringing on themselves the wrath of a holy God.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Scripture is our alone infallible rule of faith and practice. In the matter of birth control, we may confidently look to the Bible knowing that God reveals His will about such significant

issues. For the ethical issues surrounding birth control relate to matters no less important than life and death. I have sought to demonstrate that the intentional use of birth control to prevent the conception of a child is contrary to the supreme standard of God's infallible Word for the following reasons in summary.

1. It is God's prerogative to give life and to take life away, and to open and close the womb.
2. Before the fall of man into sin, God commanded man and woman "to be fruitful and multiply" (and repeated the same command again after the fall of man into sin to Noah and his descendants).
3. God has never rescinded the command "to be fruitful and multiply" whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament.
4. God has commanded us not to kill (the Sixth Commandment), but to intentionally prevent the conception of a child is to intentionally take away the future life of a real human being.
5. God has declared that children are a heritage from Him and that the man who has his quiver full of them is greatly blessed (and not cursed).
6. God never warrants (in precept, approved example, or good and necessary inference) abstaining from sexual relations or spilling of the seed for the express purpose to prevent conception, but on the contrary, God EXALTS parents (such as the parents of Moses) who viewed the commandment of God ("be fruitful and multiply") more important than even the future risks to their own lives or to the life of their baby, and God EXECUTES Onan for intentionally wasting his seed in order to prevent the conception of a child.
7. The universal testimony of the Church until the 20<sup>th</sup> century has also viewed the practice of intentional birth control to prevent the conception of a child to be contrary to the light of nature and to the will of God in Scripture.

Thus, I submit in concluding this brief overview that the overwhelming weight of evidence supports the virtuous practice of allowing our sovereign, good, and wise God Himself to determine the number of children each family should have. We must do nothing intentionally on our parts to prevent the conception of children. This DIVINE COMMAND relates to all of us—whether we are male or female, whether we are young or old, whether we are rich or poor, whether we are at risk or not at risk of potential danger, whether we are Jew or Gentile, or whether we are Christian or non-Christian. For this is the MORAL LAW of God.

Samuel Rutherford, *et al.*) are at <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/newslett.htm> and more free audio (MP3) Reformation resources by Greg Price (and many other Puritans, Covenanters, and Reformers) are at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/go/699> or at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/swrb>.