The Gift of Contraception: Calvin, Barth, and a Lost Protestant Conversation

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Although birth control remains a controversial topic among Roman Catholics, it has all but disappeared in Protestant discussions of sexual ethics, owing to the seemingly more pressing issues of abortion and in vitro fertilization, as well as to the almost unanimous approval of contraceptive use among Protestant church bodies in the mid-1900s. This essay seeks to revive some past Reformed arguments pertinent to the subject, especially John Calvin’s and Karl Barth’s teachings on marriage and children, which both theologians view as distinct goods. Marriage is seen as a covenant relationship, a good in and of itself, even apart from procreation; while children are a gift or “divine offer” from God that demands response. Reviving distinctively Christian descriptions of marriage and children is crucial to critiquing the utilitarian language that seeks to overshadow current conversations about marriage and children.

In his brief but incisive 1968 encyclical Humanae vitae addressing the question of birth control, Pope Paul VI presented as odious a practice that many people in the world now take as a given. He described each individual act that made use of contraceptives as “intrinsically disordered and hence unworthy of the human person,” and declared that contraceptive use was evil even when considered within the context of Christian marriage, and “even when the intention is to safeguard or promote individual, family or social goods.” Paul VI claimed that “the reciprocal personal gift which is proper and exclusive to . . . husband and wife” was given not mainly for pleasure or even for communion, but was given “in order to collaborate with God in the begetting and rearing of new lives” (Π.8). Even in marriage, he insisted, rightful sex calls for self-mastery, rather than self-abandonment; married life is an ascetic practice that demands the ability to “dominate instinct by means of one’s reason and free will” (III.21). In characteristic fashion, Rome’s official position bears no sign of ambivalence, even in spite of the Catholic report that preceded it. 

On the other hand, among Protestants, it is hardly an understatement to say that contraception has been a virtual nonissue for the past half-century, even
among those who consider themselves theologically conservative. While there are a few Protestant voices calling for a return to natural family planning as a form of Christian discipline, most Protestant couples assume that they will use some form of birth control to put off having children until they feel personally and/or economically ready for parenthood. And a growing number of marrying couples feel comfortable saying they do not feel that God is calling them ever to become parents. Premarital counseling among Protestants might touch on the subject of parenting, but rarely or never on the topic of contraception. Marriage services may or may not include mention of the blessing of children. The question for Protestants (and, it must be noted, also for Catholics who promote natural family planning) is not whether to control conception but how.

The objections to birth control raised in *Humanae vitae* thus seem to most Protestants to represent an utterly foreign culture to which they can barely relate. First of all, Protestants (as well as some Catholics) largely resent the idea of the concentration of power in a church hierarchy with the authority to dictate what they take to be matters of individual conscience. Moreover, the papal notion that the procreative purpose of each individual act of sexual intercourse must never be severed from its unitive purpose is hard for many modern ears to hear. Christians who feel they are already practicing more asceticism than the world might believe possible (by abstaining from sex until marriage, and/or by remaining faithful to one spouse until death) may balk at the idea that it could ever be necessary to abstain from sex with one's lawfully wedded spouse. But the Pope holds firm to the millennia-old tradition against birth control, insisting that abstinence and "[making] use of marriage during the infertile times only" are the only methods of family limitation that do not offend Christian morality.

Opposition to the Pope's stance on contraception has been vigorous for generations, and ranges from the simplified argument that a celibate old man can have nothing to say to women or married couples of childbearing age; to those who insist that natural family planning is just as artificial as a pill or condom; to those who think God's good gift of marriage is damaged by the insistence that sex must be open to procreation at all times. Present in all of these arguments is the underlying idea that sex is, at least provisionally, a matter most properly governed by individual consciences. However, it was not so long ago that Protestant churches, too, rejected the use of "artificial" means of birth control. It was only in 1930 (also the year of Pius XI's *Casti connubii*) with the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops that Protestant churches began to declare that Christians might use contraception morally; but since that moment, Protestants' previous objections to contraception have been all but forgotten. Such forgetfulness of this history can lead to a sort of ethical laziness among Protestants, in which the imperialist economic concept of utility becomes the only important criterion in human decision making, such that reasoning behind individual actions need never be accounted for, even in Christian communities.
As a means of banishing forgetfulness and recovering some of this lost Protestant conversation, we will give special attention here to one strand of thought, the Reformed tradition, including two representatives of pre- and post-Lambeth culture on the subject of contraception, John Calvin and Karl Barth. In seeking ways that their thinking might still prove fruitful for Protestants today, Protestants may ask themselves the forgotten questions that the Pope so urgently raised in 1968: Why do Protestants assume birth control is good, or at least morally neutral? Why do they believe sex can be good, regardless of its procreative power? What is it that allows Christians to think that sex acts can be deliberately separated from procreation without damaging marriage itself? And more basically, what principles or doctrines govern Protestant ethical norms? The answers to these questions have immediate repercussions not just for heterosexual marriage, but for other issues as well, including women’s vocations, homosexuality, sexuality of the single person, adoption, and the ethics of fertility technologies. Protestants need not necessarily agree with Rome’s position, but the appropriate Protestant answers to these questions, if we are to take seriously the task of Christian ethics, must be distinctively Christian answers that rest not simply on individual preference but on Christian descriptions of human life and Christian vocation. What I want to recover from the Reformed tradition are, first, the framework of “gift” in which Calvin sees children; and second, the emphasis on the command of God as it relates to parenthood in Barth’s thought. These two points, I believe, can act as powerful correctives to the market-driven norms that have seeped in and poisoned the life-giving springs of Christian wisdom about children and family.

**John Calvin on Marriage: Order, Companionship, and Procreation**

We begin with John Calvin’s teachings on marriage and its purposes. John Witte Jr. has demonstrated that Calvin’s thinking on marriage underwent significant development during his career in Geneva. Calvin’s early interest in marriage was mainly as a legal institution, useful for keeping order through contravening lust, and therefore properly governed by the earthly magistrates (a perspective he shared with Martin Luther). Later, however, he became convinced of the need to explain marriage more theologically, in order that Christians might approach it not merely as a civic duty but as a calling. Calvin thus turned to the biblical theme of covenant—between God and Israel, between Christ and the church—as a means of stressing that marriage was not merely for the basic purpose of ordering sex, but was also for the equally important purposes of mutual love and support of spouses, as well as procreation and nurture of children.

In his discussions of celibacy and adultery in the *Institutes*, Calvin reverts to the basics regarding marriage, namely a quotation from Paul: “If they cannot
exercise self-control, they should marry." This no-nonsense approach to marriage fairly sums up John Calvin's early case for it. Writing for his church in sixteenth-century Geneva, which mainly included parishioners who had been brought up in the Catholic faith, Calvin feared they had absorbed the Catholic idea that marriage was a lesser good than the "better" state of celibacy. While Calvin did not oppose celibacy altogether, he was deeply skeptical of it, believing it to be an extremely difficult state to which few were called and fewer could attain perfectly:

Now, through the condition of our nature, and by the lust aroused after the Fall, we, except for those whom God has released through special grace, are doubly subject to women's society. Let each man, then, see what has been given to him. Virginity, I agree, is a virtue not to be despised. However, it is denied to some and granted to others only for a time. Hence, those who are troubled with incontinence and cannot prevail in the struggle should turn to matrimony to help them preserve chastity in the degree of their calling.

This is surely not the most romantic of visions, but no one can accuse him of being unrealistic. Calvin acknowledges that the human condition is to long for physical and emotional intimacy. In fact, he believes that humans were created not to lead solitary lives, but to have helpers joined to themselves; and he believes whole-heartedly that God has provided marriage to satisfy that longing (III.viii.41). Far from having a negative view of marriage, Calvin believed God commands it. He writes:

Let no man rashly despise marriage as something unprofitable or superfluous to him; let no man long for celibacy unless he can live without a wife. Also, let him not provide in this state for the repose and convenience of the flesh, but only that, freed of this marriage bond, he may be more prompt and ready for all the duties of piety. And since this blessing is conferred on many persons only for a time, let every man abstain from marriage only so long as he is fit to observe celibacy. If his power to tame lust fails him, let him recognize that the Lord has now imposed the necessity of marriage upon him.

While celibacy may make it possible for some to respond more easily to God's overarching call to all Christians to serve their neighbors, Calvin insists that it is in no way a superior Christian state to the marriage in which sex is enjoyed properly.

But "properly" is the active word here. Not unlike Pope Paul VI, Calvin calls for a certain level of self-mastery in marriage. This is consistent with what has sometimes been called Calvin's "worldly asceticism"—that is, he embraces and affirms the worldly goods normally rejected by monasticism, including
wealth and marriage; but at the same time he insists on moderation and self-denial in all cases. Even though sex in marriage is blessed by God, Calvin admonishes married couples “not to pollute it with uncontrolled and dissolute lust. For even if the honorableness of matrimony covers the baseness of incontinence, it ought not for that reason to be a provocatio thereto” (II.viii.44). Thus, even though it is the human tendency to “burn,” Calvin calls married couples to enjoy sex “soberly,” modestly, and moderately. Marriage is for satisfying lust—but not too much! With Ambrose, he calls the man “who has no regard for shame or honorableness in his marriage practices an adulterer toward his own wife” (II.viii.44). What is most noteworthy for our study here is that nowhere in this passage (nor in the 1 Corinthians passage) does the topic of children enter the discussion, either as a deterrent for adultery with another person’s spouse, nor as that which makes marriage and sex permissible or benefic. With regard to questions of sexual purity, the main thing that recommends marriage (as opposed to celibacy) to Calvin, like Augustine, is its ability to keep otherwise lustfully wandering humans under control.

Thus we see that for Calvin, with the New Testament as witness, a primary good of marriage—especially for humans living after the Fall of humanity—is its usefulness in preventing uncontrolled lust. In many cases he might have brought up children as marriage’s main purpose, or even a secondary purpose, but he does not. Rather, it is companionship that takes a very close second place in Calvin’s list of the purposes of marriage. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin teaches that God’s peculiar method of creating woman was so as to create the mutual respect and understanding that comes from recognizing one’s own likeness in another person. For the bargain price of a rib, Adam “obtained a faithful associate of life; for now he saw himself, who had before been imperfect, rendered complete in his wife.” As a single being, Adam was deficient in some way; he needed a like partner to make him perfect. In this illustration of perfection through weakness, Calvin says, we see a true picture of our union with Christ. Partnership between the sexes is a sign of a great mystery. In this, it is also a generous gift from God, since “Adam did not take a wife to himself at his own will, but received her as offered and appropriated to him by God.”

This appreciation for marriage was not unconnected to his own life experience. As Albrecht notes, Protestant clergymen knew firsthand the pleasures and pitfalls of married life, including fertility: “The impact of this lived-world experience in covenantal relationships with mothers, wives and daughters cannot be overstated.” Calvin was married for a short time—happily, according to his own reports, until his wife, Idelette de Bure, died. The most significant part of their marriage, it seems, was fellowship. Upon her death, Calvin wrote in a letter to a friend, “truly mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, if anything more difficult had
befallen me, would not only have been the willing sharer of my exile and indigence, but even of my death."  

His wife was not there to be a servant or producer of children, but was primarily a friend in Calvin’s precarious and probably lonely position as a Protestant minister in a Europe hostile to Protestants.  

But we must not conclude that Calvin’s appreciation of the goods of marriage apart from the production and rearing of offspring implies any devaluing of children, for this is far from being the case. While “fatherly” may not be the image many of us have in mind when thinking of Calvin, his pastoral writings provide evidence that he took his parental calling extraordinarily seriously. In one letter Calvin wrote, “God had given me a little boy: God took [him] away... And yet I have myriads of children throughout the Christian world.”  

His own experience of losing his only child in infancy, as well as his elderly role of watching over his spiritual children, may have influenced Calvin to look beyond the importance of biology in parenthood. He encouraged barren couples to adopt orphans rather than to divorce and seek new (fertile) partners or surrogates. He not only raised his wife’s children from a previous marriage after her death, but he also took in students and showed great pastoral sensitivity to other parents who lost their children. Although marriage and children are sometimes treated as distinct topics, and though he saw order and companionship as primary objectives of marriage, Calvin certainly affirmed in word and deed the goodness of parenthood and the blessing that children bring to a life; moreover he censured those who forewent children in favor of the pursuit of luxury.  

In the context of his commentary on the Jacob-Leah-Rachel story of Genesis 29, questions of childbearing finally come to the forefront. He begins with Jacob, a man guilty of many sins according to Calvin (not the least of which was polygamy), including excessive lust for Rachel and an irresponsible lack of kindness and honor given to his first wife, Leah. For these reasons, God saw fit to step in and help Leah, who “acknowledges God as the author of her fruitfulness”:

The Lord... interposes as her vindicator, and, by a suitable remedy, turns the mind of Jacob into that direction, to which it had been most averse. This passage teaches us, that offspring is a special gift of God: since the power of rendering one [Leah] fertile, and of cursing the womb of the other [Rachel] with barrenness, is expressly ascribed to him. We must observe further, that the bringing forth of offspring tends to conciliate husbands to their wives... because they avail, in no slight degree, to increase and to cherish mutual love.  

Thus children are given by God, but it is especially interesting to note what kind of gift they are. In this passage, Calvin describes children as being not so much ends in and of themselves, but as especially valuable insofar as they are a
"pledge," a means to enhancing the companionship between spouses. In this particular case, Leah's bearing of sons caused her neglectful husband to love her in a way he had not loved her before, thus helping to make their marriage what it ought to have been. Correspondingly, Calvin argues that Rachel was left barren so as to punish Jacob's immoderate love for her—the opposite extreme of marriage gone awry. In the case of Rachel and Jacob, it is the lack of children that would put their companionship back into right order, according to God's will. Rachel, however, rebels against her God-given barrenness, offering up her maid Bilhah rather than praying to God for a child, thus angering Jacob (Calvin says), "because his wife ascribes nothing to the providence of God, and, by imagining that children are the offspring of chance, would deprive God of the care and government of mankind."32

While Calvin's language is lamentably androcentric (both women and children are objects of men's affections), we can still take the broader point that the begetting of children is an act of providence, rather than purely of human design or even natural processes. In his commentary on the Psalms, 127:3, Calvin revisits the activity of God in the begetting of all children:

The majority of mankind dream, that after God had once ordained this at the beginning, children were thenceforth begotten solely by a secret instinct of nature, God ceasing to interfere in the matter; and even those who are endowed with some sense of piety... do not acknowledge that his providential care descends to this particular case.... With the view of correcting this preposterous error, Solomon calls children the heritage of God and the fruit of the womb his gift.33

The honor God gives in allowing humans to be parents is not something to be controlled, regretted, or gloated over, but to be humbly received. It is after God's image—not individual humans' own—that these children are formed.

This theme is important enough to Calvin's thinking that he emphasizes it again in the story of Jacob and Esau's reunion:

... when [Jacob] replies that his numerous seed had been given him by God, he acknowledges and confesses that children are not so produced by nature to subvert the truth of the declaration, that the fruit of the womb is a reward and gift of God. And truly, since the fecundity of brute animals is the gift of God, how much more is this the case with men, who are created after his own image. Let parents then learn to consider, and to celebrate the singular kindness of God, in their offspring.34

This is the crux of Calvin's teaching on parenthood: because it is a gracious gift, it must be undertaken both with great modesty and with gratitude. Humans who prevent procreation when God wills to give them children may be no less
guilty of “preposterous error” than Rachel. We can see him moving in a di-
rection away from the use of any birth “control” that encourages humans to be-
lieve they are masters of their own procreative destinies, able to refuse God’s
providence.

A word must be said about the story of Onan and Tamar in Genesis 38, which is the only explicit biblical reference to a deliberate act of contraception, and Calvin’s reaction to it represents a departure from his usual teachings. Cal-
vin sees it as fitting for Onan and Tamar to give offspring to Tamar’s late hus-
band (Onan’s brother) because it is a “defect of nature” for anyone to die with-
out offspring. Procreation is presented as a duty to one’s family and for the
furthering of the human race—a teaching that is quite distinct from Calvin’s
talk in other contexts of marriage as covenanted companionship or childbearing
as a means to mutual honor and love between spouses. Marital fellowship is not
the topic at hand; in this context, Calvin is concerned primarily with Onan’s de-
cision to spill his seed on the ground rather than raise up a child for his brother.
While nature is not normally a primary concern for Calvin, he here condemns
Onan’s action as a sin against nature and the entire human race; and ignoring
the fact that Onan and Tamar were bound by a particular levirate custom, Cal-
vin declares the principle to be authoritative for everyone—even non-Jewish

Where can Reformed Christian sexual ethics go from here? Although Calvin
views fellowship and continence as two crucial purposes of the marriage rela-
tionship, there is no doubt that, when it comes down to specific instances like
Onan, the Reformed tradition is heir to the same disgust at “unnatural” forms
of contraception as the Catholic tradition. Moreover, the belief that children
are gifts rules out, in Calvin’s mind, any deliberate decision to frustrate God’s
giving of them. The easiest tactic might be to throw Calvin away altogether,
dismissing his thought as irrelevant to modern life, but to do so would be to
lose a number of other inheritances of Calvinist thought that enable the tradi-
tion to critique itself—such as the willingness to interpret scripture appropri-
ately to one’s own time and culture, even to such an extent as to dismiss certain
Old Testament prohibitions; the beliefs in the priesthood of all believers and
in Christian freedom (III.xix.2–8); and the idea that marriage is significantly, if
not primarily, a covenant that fosters companionship and continence in addi-
tion to procreation.

Most important for my argument is Calvin’s affirmation of children as gifts
of God, not merely products of biology or human will. The significance of this
idea cannot be underestimated in light of current discussions (or nondiscus-
sions) on contraception. If children are gifts that God wants to give us, then
Christians’ deliberations about using contraception must take the form of a
conversation with God. It is not difficult to see how this also applies to abortion,
adoption, prenatal testing, in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, same-sex marriage,
and virtually any question related to children and family; thus it behooves Prot­
estants to pay close attention. It is with this point—conversation with God—
that I will resume with Karl Barth, but first I will offer a snapshot of the histori­
cal events surrounding the shift in Protestant thinking on contraception.

**Historical Interlude: The Twentieth-Century Turn toward Contraception**

Although Protestant views of marriage shifted toward an emphasis on fellow­
ship (and away from procreation) in the centuries after Calvin, Christian views
on birth control (at least as committed to writing by male theologians) re­
mained largely unchanged until the end of the nineteenth century. Religious
objections to birth control were largely undeveloped, addressing only *coitus in­
terruptus*, and relying almost solely on the Onan story. It was not until there
began to be an active and vocal social movement (first among women, and fol­
lowed by religious supporters) for birth control at the turn of the twentieth
century—amidst industrialism and its formation of the kind of “family” unit we
now recognize—that the Catholic Church was forced to make a more extensive
argument against it.

One version of the story of this social movement may trace its beginnings to
1798 when Thomas Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population*,
in which he warned that population, if unchecked, grows at a far greater rate than
food production ever could. He drew up a horrifying vision of England by
1900 when he supposed there would be food enough for only about one-third
of the population. This population scare would prove extremely salient in later
arguments about contraception, although the solution he proposed was not arti­
ficial birth control, which he still considered a violation of the marriage bed,
but rather “moral restraint” and/or late marriage, which he (rightly) supposed
would cut down on the number of children born to each married couple. Mal­
thus was particularly concerned about birth rates among the poor. In spite of his
status as a Christian clergyman, he described the children of the poor in brutally
utilitarian terms as “redundant,” “too many,” and having “no right” to food if
their parents could not provide it for them. Helping the poor, he thought, only
encouraged them to make more such children—an argument that is striking in
its familiarity.

Another important catalyst for the widespread popular movement toward
birth control came in 1877, when the English government tried two people for
distributing an American procontraception pamphlet, Charles Knowlton’s *The
argued on utilitarian grounds that the use of contraception was virtuous if it re­
duced the pain of unwanted pregnancy and overpopulation, while also increasing
pleasure and happiness in the world. The case against the British distributors was highly publicized, injecting the public with new interest in the eugenics movement, and spurring on the formation of new Malthusian Leagues in countries across Europe, particularly the Netherlands and England, dedicated to reducing the birth rate. In the United States Margaret Sanger, distressed by high birth rates, “misery and ill health caused by undesired pregnancies” among the poor, began her movement in 1913. Popular opinion increasingly began to support female-controlled methods of birth control, not only for reasons of women’s health and economic relief (especially among the working classes), but also, as Malthus had first suggested, for what they believed to be reasons of the “common good,” namely the prevention of overpopulation and war.

It was in this atmosphere of mixed concerns—women’s health, population fears, and a desire for “well-born” children—that the Lambeth Conference of the Church of England took place in August of 1930, and it marked a turning point in the Protestant world. Previous to that year, virtually all Christian churches opposed any form of artificial birth control. But at the conference, the Anglican bishops voted by a large majority to adopt the following landmark resolution:

Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood the method must be decided on Christian principles. The primary and obvious method is complete abstinence from intercourse as far as may be necessary in a life of discipline and self-control lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless in those cases where there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood and where there is morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles. The conference records its strong condemnation of the use of any method of contraception control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.

In this resolution, the bishops left open the previously unheard-of possibility that faithful Christian marriage might include the limitation—or even avoidance—of parenthood, through the use of artificial means, as long as it was for (loosely defined) unselfish and Christian reasons. Soon after, in 1932, the United Church of Canada affirmed that childbearing need not be left up to chance, and that there might be a number of valid reasons for parents to limit their fertility; and the Federal Council of Churches in the United States made a statement in 1931 that the use of contraceptives by married people was “valid and moral,” partly because sex between mates was “right in itself.” Lutheran churches were somewhat slower to join in, but in 1952 the Lutheran bishops of Sweden made a cautious move toward contraception: “There is something wrong,” they maintained, “in any marriage where the couple are biologically normal but want no children. Yet children are not the sole purpose of mar-
riage. . . . Seriously considered, this situation does lead us to concede that under certain circumstances contraceptives may be permitted."54
The question for Protestants had shifted from method to motivation. Each of these churches expressed the conviction that parenthood is good but that marriage and sex are about more than just procreation, and that "certain circumstances" of different couples may call for different yet equally responsible Christian choices regarding contraception.55 Protestants, whose polity tends to reflect an approach that allows for "shared discernment"56 of the word of God, thus made the move away from "top-down" hierarchical church orders, trusting Christian couples to make their decisions according to their consciences. However, each of these churches still deemed birth control a matter to be carefully considered, used only as necessary, and not to be assumed or taken lightly. Christians were still called to view all of their actions in light of God’s claim on them.

Karl Barth: Marriage and Parenthood as Responses to the Command of God

It was in this post-Lambeth environment that Karl Barth wrote concerning marriage and birth control.57 First, a word should be said regarding Barth’s thinking on the command of God. “The task of theological ethics,” Barth wrote, “is to understand the Word of God as the command of God.”58 What he calls “general ethics” deals with the doctrine of God and those claims the triune God makes on humanity; while “special ethics” deals with concrete humans and their actions under the command of God. Human action can be considered “good” only insofar as it is done in obedient response to the command of God. But it is important to note that, for Barth, the “Word of God” is not limited to modern appeals to scripture (or to natural principles) that can be neatly applied across the board to individual ethical case studies.59 Rather, the Word is Christ, the living triune God, who confronts each and every human at each and every moment with a specific and concrete command. And it is only this living God who may judge the goodness of human action—whether or not it is done in free obedience to God’s command.60 Although humans very much like to put themselves in the judgment seat, knowing right from wrong, Barth is adamant that God’s own freedom prohibits this kind of legalism. The command is God’s alone to give; the human’s job is to respond accordingly (though they are regrettably sometimes mistaken).61

Not unlike Calvin’s later teachings, Barth portrayed marriage in his Church Dogmatics primarily as an exercise in relationship, and an expression of the relationship between God and Israel, Christ and the church. “Humanity,” he wrote, “the characteristic and essential mode of man’s being, is in its root fellow-humanity.”62 Like Calvin, Barth believed that neither man nor woman is
complete without the other; each recognizes in the other what each lacks in herself or himself, and the experience that ensues is necessary for helping humans to understand properly their creaturely relation to God and God’s command. Like Calvin’s later teachings, Barth says marriage is above all the supreme witness to God’s covenant with humanity. In it, the grace given to all in baptism is intensified for marriage’s special purposes, which are, “to love each other not only with natural but with supernatural love, to maintain conjugal fidelity, to remain indissolubly bound to each other and to bring up their children in the fear of God.” God’s will for all people is redemption, and although marriage is not a universal vocation, it is in continuity with all of God’s other actions to that effect.

In the context of his discussion of marriage, Barth emphasized that the command of God makes sex not merely a matter of genital intercourse but “a question of the whole man and not merely of the use which he makes or does not make of his physical sexual organs.” The human being is a totality, not a body–mind partnership, and any act the human does concerns the whole person. Like Calvin, he affirms the goodness of the (heterosexual) sexual relationship and makes no special plea for celibacy; but he is clear that sex “should have no independent life” outside of marital fellowship. Sex, as with all parts of human life, takes place under the command of God. He writes:

[The command of God] requires no liberation from sex. How can it, when the commanding God has undoubtedly created man sexually, as male or female, and both with a physical sexual life within the totality of their being? Nor does it require any denial or repression of sex. How can it, when man has been created male and female and therefore for the encounter between them in which the fulfillment of the sexual relations may and must present a problem for consideration? But the meaning of the call to freedom at this point is that the physical sexuality of man should form an integral part of his total humanity as male or female, and that the completion of the sexual relation should be integrated into the total encounter of man and woman.

This is to say that sex considered within the whole of the person is good and right, while sex in abstraction from the rest of life is wrong and even demonic. Like Calvin, who warned against allowing a spirit of prostitution enter the marital relationship, Barth also recognizes that a legal marriage does not necessarily rule out the possibility of the corruption of the sexual relationship between woman and man. Truly chaste sexuality takes place, he says, in the context of “fellow-humanity,” of a life lived together in covenant and true “co-existence.”

Barth thus makes the all-important shift away from the individual sex act and toward the broader sexual relationship.

This brings us back to the questions raised for us earlier by Paul VI’s teaching: Is sex separated from the willingness to procreate an example of such a de-
monic abstraction? Does contraception necessarily corrupt the marital relationship? The answer from Barth is a clear negative, perhaps hinted at already in the fact that he dedicates an entirely separate chapter to the topic of parenthood. He begins with a pastoral concern to avoid “a relapse into an abstract Old Testament mode of thinking” that might imply that infertile couples have incomplete or abnormal marriages; this is in marked contrast with *Humanae vitae*, which begins by affirming the necessity of procreation in marriage, and may therefore do little more than offer lame condolences to involuntarily childless couples.69 (*Donum vitae*, the 1987 Roman Catholic teaching on fertility technologies, follows a similar line of argument.) Like Calvin, Barth exhorted involuntarily childless couples to set their hopes in God as the giver of children;70 but unlike Calvin who stressed the need for the perpetuation of the human race, Barth believed their comfort lay in the knowledge that posterity is no longer a necessity, but that in fact “the Child who alone matters has been born for them too.”71

The idea that Christian hope is in eternal life rather than in many generations of their own genetic offspring is crucial. A marriage without children is already a true marriage because of the God-given nature of the covenant relationship. Barth also sees the child-free state as a special opportunity—a calling, much like celibacy, to look elsewhere for other ways a couple might respond to God’s call, ways they would have missed had they been occupied with children. Indeed, the childless may even have the advantage. In a most unequivocal statement against the necessity of procreation, he writes:

 Parenthood may be a consequence of marriage which is both joyful and rich in duties, but from a Christian point of view the true meaning and the primary aim of marriage is not to be an institution for the upbringing of children. On the contrary, children may be at least a serious threat to what man and wife should together mean in marriage for the surrounding world. From this point of view, childlessness can be a release and therefore a chance which those concerned ought to seize and exploit instead of merely grieving about it. And finally, should we not ask whether a man and his wife, and even those who are single, are any the less called to be elders, to fatherliness and motherliness, because they are not parents in the physical sense—elders who in regard to all young people have the same task as physical parents have towards their physical offspring?72

For those who live after Christ, biological children may be a blessing, but are no longer the norm. Like Calvin, Barth also affirms an expanded sense of parenthood that is not only possible but required in the Christian community, where true generativity lies not in genetic likeness, but in the relationship each person has to the firstborn of creation.73
Barth’s choice to approach parenthood with a pastoral regard for those who are involuntarily childless leads him on a particular trajectory, toward the conclusion of allowing birth control for fertile couples. But because he considers everything in relationship to humans’ totality and their response to the command of God, he does not therefore say that birth control for fertile couples is a simple matter of personal choice. Sexual intercourse, as he made clear in his discussion of man and woman, is demonic when practiced for its own sake. Instead it must always be part of marital fellowship, and must take its meaning from that love relationship, which is a gift of divine goodness. In this is Barth’s one reservation about birth control, that “every act of intercourse which is technically obstructed or interrupted, or undertaken with no desire for children, or even refrained from on this ground, is a refusal of this divine offer, a renunciation of the widening and enriching of married fellowship which . . . under the command of God . . . includes sexual intercourse.” For this reason, the prevention of procreation must be undertaken with a couple’s utmost care and self-examination with regard to faithful obedience to the command of God. Although sexual intercourse and procreation each have their own dignity and do not exist solely for the purpose of the other, each one represents an active response to the command of God, a “decision between Yes and No” on the part of the actors. In other words, Barth is expressing the revolutionary idea that parenthood is not the default (or what he calls “laissez-faire”) state of married people; rather, it is as much a response to a command, a proactive decision, as contraception is.

Significant to Barth’s extraordinary argument is his idea that “the providence of God and the course of nature are not identical or even on the same level.” Here we are reminded of Calvin’s insistence that the begetting of children is not simply a natural function from which God is absent, but that God is the giver of each child. Just as Leah (according to Calvin) prayed to God for a child and gave thanks when her first son was born, so Barth believes each person must ask God, “May I try to have a child?” Because God is the true parent of all, and earthly parents exist only by God’s grace, it is not for married couples to have sex and leave conception up to chance; they must rather place themselves in God’s hands where “intelligent reflection may and must constantly and particularly prevail, and nothing must be done except in responsible decision.” (Barth goes so far as to claim that “even the unmarried mother” is the recipient of a great gift and honor.) God calls humans to freedom and responsible decision making, and no action is released from this command. Birth control may therefore be an appropriate Christian action. Barth believes he is thus far in accord with “all serious Christian moralists,” who agree that conception and child-bearing are not simply matters to be left to chance but should be undertaken by a couple in free obedience to God.

The only disagreement that remains, he believes, particularly between Protestants and Catholics, “concerns the question how the negative decision . . . is to
be put into effect in harmony with this command and therefore in responsibility." In Barth’s opinion, the use of contraceptives is no different than abstinence, the rhythm method, or withdrawal, each of which can be painful in its own way; and he calls the Catholic prohibition to task for focusing on the “normality or abnormality of the sexual act as such” rather than on the underlying question of whether it is proper to seek not to have children at all. What is at issue for Barth is not method, but motivation. Any means of birth control—including natural family planning—can be evil if used for reasons of “self-seeking, pleasure-seeking, or expediency.”

The real question at hand is whether or not these methods are undertaken in obedience to God’s command. This is something each couple must seek to discern, but Barth was clear that sexuality is not a private sphere of life in which humans can be their own “lords and masters.”

Thus, Barth’s position is not so far from Calvin’s, in that it first recognizes the goodness of marriage in itself, as a godly vocation regardless of whether or not it is biologically procreative. Second, he affirms that children are from God, who is sovereign over nature and whose own freedom implies that children are not (against what he sees as the Catholic overemphasis on nature) a necessary function of natural processes. And last, Barth recognizes that begetting children requires a couple’s conversation with God with regard to their parental vocation in the world—that is, may they have biological children, or should they be elders in some other way? The Christian’s response is an act of free conversation; even if some find contraception objectionable, Barth says, “they must not make their repugnance a law for others.” The divine command might take different forms for different people in different times and places. The ongoing struggle for Christians (and it should be seen as a struggle) is to discern what that command is and what their free response to it should be.

**Protestants and Contraception circa 1968: Population Control and the Good Life**

Before concluding, I want to offer a brief look at Protestant conversations surrounding contraception at the time of *Humanae vitae*. A number of Protestant thinkers were looking for wisdom in scripture, exploring both Onan and Paul for hints as to whether a single rule about contraception could be made for all Christians. Many of them appealed to the idea of freedom of Christian conscience, while also addressing medical and social factors, such as the psychological health of individuals and world overpopulation. It is remarkable that, almost across the board, the various methods of contraception were viewed as morally neutral; the main warnings were against having bad motives for using contraceptives. Also remarkable is the fact that by 1968 Protestant discourse (still dominated by men at the time) had already moved past the question of whether
or not to use contraception in marriage, and was heavily into the debate that continues today concerning induced abortion.

A collection of articles in The Christian Century and Christianity Today from that time gives us a hint as to what Protestants were talking about. Some scholars emphasized the (apparently obvious) idea that, unlike in biblical times, "children tend to be a financial hindrance rather than help" in modern industrial life. Given the (assumed) reality of "overpopulation," it might be the case that God wants humans to use their "technological achievements to maintain a balance for the good life." Others appealed to Paul's teaching on Christian freedom, while also encouraging all Christians to balance individual and community interests. In one fairly indicative "Christian View of Contraception," an author argues that women were created for companionship, not the propagation of the species; that sex is not only for procreation but also to prevent "sexual irregularities" and to promote union; and that sex for mutual pleasure is nowhere banned by scripture. He does not appeal to "gift" language with regard to children, and concludes that the decision to conceive or not to conceive falls under the heading of Christian liberty, as long as couples have good reasons for limiting their families. And for every Christian who wanted to move cautiously toward a liberalizing of Christian social ethics, there were others who wanted to throw aside the old-fashioned scriptures altogether and rely on individuals to make their own decisions.

This tension between Christian tradition and individual conscience is a consistent theme. A 1968 Protestant symposium of 25 evangelical scholars on matters of human procreation came to a consensus that was published as "A Protestant Affirmation on the Control of Human Reproduction." The symposium affirmed that values come from God, but that where scripture was silent on specific matters, different Christians might come to different conclusions. For this reason, the symposium (in characteristically Protestant fashion) did not seek to speak authoritatively for the whole church; it affirmed that procreation is not the only purpose of the sexual relationship, but that God's gift of sex is to be enjoyed only within marriage. The prevention of conception—by whatever method—is not necessarily wrong, provided a couple's reasons are "in harmony with the total revelation of God for the individual life." Predictably, the symposium appealed to the "desperate needs not only of individuals and families but also of nations and peoples," and specifically encouraged Christians to be involved in population control efforts (where requested) around the globe. In all things, the symposium insisted that, "the prescriptions of the legal code should not be permitted to usurp the authority of the Christian conscience as informed by Scripture."

While it requires some creative exegesis, I would argue that the idea of the command of God, and of parenthood as a vocation, can be inferred from the symposium's references to conscience and to the "total revelation of God for
the individual life." However, what I see as entirely missing in Protestant 1968—and what continues to be lacking today—is the idea of children as gifts from God. In fact, there is virtually no theologizing of children in the conversation about contraception at all, an oversight that might seem laughable if it were not so detrimental.

Reclaiming Christian Language: Covenant, Vocation, Elderhood, and Gift

I want to conclude by reclaiming the rightful inheritance of twenty-first century Reformed Christians, namely the traditional language of covenant, vocation, elderhood, and gift. Far from being left to our own devices to figure out whether or not to use contraception, Protestants can draw from the unique wisdom of the Christian traditions for ethical discernment regarding procreation. I will highlight two minor points concerning marriage, and two major points on parenthood and children.

First, Calvin and Barth have shown that the Reformed tradition teaches that Christian marriage is a special vocation. It is not a given duty for all, nor a concession of the weak to the sin of lust. It is rather a covenanted love relationship that reflects a covenant between God and God’s people. To enter into marriage—much like a life of vowed celibacy—is not to escape from a call to serve God in the world, but rather to answer a call to a particular way of serving. It is for that matter not a mere matter of economic prudence, as some economists and politicians argue, but is a way of cultivating Christian virtues, including fidelity, hope, and love.

Second, the Reformed tradition emphasizes that procreation is not the main purpose of marriage as a whole, much less of each individual sex act. While a broad hospitality to children is unequivocally a good and important part of marriage, it must not be assumed that the prototypical marriage results in the birth of children. In married life, as in the church, the support and edification of one another is an equally important purpose that enables spouses to be of greater service to the world. (It should also be noted here that procreation has never, according to Reformed tradition, been the default or only calling of married women; on the contrary, even among prefeminist thinkers, women were seen as being called by God to a variety of vocations other than biological parenthood. Marriage should not hinder but should rather enable women—no less than men—seeking to respond to the command of God through roles other than or in addition to that of mother.)

Turning to children and parenthood, my third point is that the Reformed tradition affirms that all Christians are called to be parents or “elders” in one form or another. Barth emphasized, and Calvin lived out, the importance of
elderhood or spiritual parenthood—that is, of caring for more than just one’s own children, a Christian practice that is miserably underrepresented in contemporary rhetoric about contraception. Christians must acknowledge that all children are created in God’s own image—an image that takes priority over biological connection. Christians are called to view all children as being, in some way, part of their family and therefore their responsibility. Christians with children are never free to be isolationist with regard to their families; nor may child-free Christians conclude that the needs of other people’s children are not their problem. Furthermore, Christians who are able are called to offer elderly support to other parents who may need support in their own parental vocations, rather than merely judging them for being incompetent. As Barth noted, the birth of the “Child who alone matters” relativizes all other parent-child relationships in a way that is entirely foreign—perhaps even offensive—to the idealized nuclear family we know today.

But last, and most important, what I want to raise as the single most counter-cultural Christian argument regarding conception and contraception is the deceptively simple description of children as gifts from God. While this may seem ridiculously obvious, the belief that children are gifts—rather than mere products of biology or human will—is a crucial corrective to the overwhelmingly economic and utilitarian language that permeates discussions, even Christian discussions, of contraception and abortion. Virtually all contemporary discussions in favor of fertility control hinge upon the economic and ecological disincentives to large families, claiming that the “realities” of modern, industrialized urban life dictate the limitation of family size, whereas large families have value only in areas of high infant mortality, where agricultural labor is needed, or where women have no other life options. Even Calvin acknowledged that “the majority of children are not always a source of joy to their parents,” but are often predominantly a source of “tears and groans.” But to speak solely in terms of cost-benefit analysis betrays an underlying idea that children are either commodities deserved only by those who can afford them (who, ironically, seem to want fewer of them, presumably due to the law of diminishing returns) or liabilities to be minimized (especially the ravenous children of the West, whose cost to the rest of the world may far outweigh their benefit to it). As in the time of Malthus, it is still economics that sets the terms for our conversation.

Meanwhile, the limited resources of the earth we live on lead some to speak of “overpopulation,” “too many babies,” and “excess children.” Such talk begs the question—which part of the population, which babies, which children, represent the “excess”? Which people are gifts, and which should never have been born? And who is to decide? While many humanitarian and environmentally minded thinkers are well intentioned, such rhetoric cannot help but lend support to hegemonic policies that discriminate on the basis of class, race, gender, or disability, and may defeat the very freedom of conscience they are trying to promote. The accusing finger is usually pointed at the mythical “welfare
queen,” the unmarried urban mother of five who never should have given birth. This is a far cry from Barth’s belief (revolutionary in certain circles) that “even the unmarried mother” is the recipient of a great gift and honor.93 Traci West puts her finger on this truth in her observation that fertility, or “the spreading of life,” once seen as a good, can be twisted by racism and classism until it is seen as “the spreading of pathology, of ... a disease of catastrophic potential.”94 The ability to bear children is viewed as something in need of control, and it probably goes without saying that it is disenfranchised women who are most deeply affected by this desire to control communal fertility.

Finally, the 1968 Protestant symposium’s well-intentioned affirmation that “The partners in marriage should have the privilege of determining the number of children they wish to have in their family”95 ironically ends up being troubling (rather than a relief) to scrupulous middle- and upper-class Christian consciences, in that children are no longer seen as gifts from God but as consumer choices in need of explanation. It thus requires parents to “speak about parenthood as if each potential child, each possible life, must be justified.”96 Placing children back into Calvin’s framework of “the singular kindness of God” is not going to solve every ethical problem Christians face, but it is a powerful antidote to the utilitarian view that children are either blessings or burdens, depending on the relative pleasure and pain they supply to those affected by their existence.

I want to be clear that the argument that children are gifts does not mean that contraception is forbidden to Christians, nor does it mean that Christians must reproduce indiscriminately. Quite the contrary. Reformed tradition has always maintained that the relationship between God’s grace and human response is a dance, not an either-or proposition.99 But with regard to parenting, the fact that Christians live their lives in response to the command of God means that they must inquire of God on (at least) two things: whether or not they should (try to) have children; and if so, how many. The methods by which they respond to these commands are ultimately less important than their free obedience to God. To be sure, the command of God may indeed make itself known through church tradition, psychological needs, ecological concerns, and even economic pressures. But these are secondary. The final criterion of Christian behavior—what makes it “good” or not—is not necessity or scarcity, but obedience to the command of God and responsiveness to a divine offer, as discerned by free individuals living a shared life in covenant with Christ.

Notes


3. It must be noted that there are indeed a growing number of evangelical Protestants who are shunning “artificial” forms of contraception in favor of “natural” ones, but the impetus seems to be at least as much a measure against lust as it is an affirmation of God’s contraceptive methods. See for example, Sam Torode and Bethany Torode, Open Embrace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002): “There is no need to thwart [God’s] design, to artificially block fertility during a naturally fertile time. One only has to wait for a few days. If that is too difficult for us, something is wrong [xvi].” But in general, recent Protestant articles on birth control (other than the so-called “morning after pill” which is considered abortive and therefore controversial) are few and far between, having been superseded by the abortion question. See however Gloria H. Albrecht, “Contraception and Abortion within Protestant Christianity,” in Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions, ed. Daniel C. Maguire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Lisa Griffin, “Plan B (for Bad),” Christianity Today, April 2004; Beverly Wildung Harrison, Our Right to Choose (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983); Gilbert Meilaender, “Sweet Necessities: Food, Sex, and Saint Augustine,” Journal of Religious Ethics 29, no. 1 (2001); Erik J. Alsgaard, “Tick, Tick, Tick, Tick . . .,” Christian Social Action 13, no. 3 (2000), 2; Werner Fornos, “Family Planning: An Investment in Prevention,” ibid., 6–7; Stephen Charles Mott, “Filling the Earth Intelligently,” ibid., 33; Kate Roberts, “Preventing the Deaths of Mothers and Babies,” ibid., 8–9; [no author], “What the United Methodist Church Says . . .,” ibid., 16.

4. Adrian Thatcher argues that “unitive” language with regard to the purposes of sex is a relatively recent Catholic innovation, not present until Casti connubii. See “A Strange Convergence? Popes and Feminists on Contraception,” in The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism, ed. Lisa Isherwood (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Press, 2000), 139.

5. Gudorf writes, “Church teaching on contraception and abortion developed before the late modern era has been consistently negative, though by no means uniform. Both contraception and abortion were generally forbidden,” and treated equally as homicide. See “Contraception and Abortion in Roman Catholicism,” 60–61.

6. Paul VI, Humanae vitae, II.16. It must not be overlooked that Pope Paul VI does not necessarily promote large families; he understands the need to limit family size, and believes that natural family planning is as effective as “artificial” means of contraception, but without overstepping humankind’s God–given boundaries, III.24.


14. Calvin argues for three purposes of marriage: companionship (Gen. 1:27, 2:18, 2:21); the blessing of procreation, in order to foster the creation of community among the human race (1:28); and the sober exercise of God-given sexuality (2.22). *Commentaries on Genesis*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948).


16. While it has been argued that Calvin was relatively liberal for his time with regard to women—see Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom, and Calvin* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985)—it is still apparent that Calvin, like his predecessors, wrote predominantly for men.

17. Rather than viewing celibacy merely as a privation, Calvin suspects that the luxury and ease of not having to provide for a family may actually be the greater temptation for some men.


19. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.41. He writes, “by the curse of sin [the human being] has been still more subjected to this necessity [of not living a solitary life],” though it was already part of God’s plan for creation.


21. Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, vol. I, 133. In a sermon on Deuteronomy (24:1–4) he writes, “a married man is only half a person, and he can no more separate himself from his wife than cut himself into two pieces.” Witte, “Between Sacrament and Contract,” 47.

22. Calvin sees the bond between woman and man as a means of comparison by which feeble human minds can understand the mystery of the spiritual marriage of Christ with the church, *Institutes*, IV.xix.35–36.

23. Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, vol. I, 134. He marvels that this marriage bond is so strong that a man is commanded to love his wife more than his father, 136.


26. In a letter to Farei before Calvin's marriage (May 19, 1539), Calvin wrote: "This only is the beauty which allures me, if she is chaste, if not too nice and fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about my health," and [Witte adds] if she could produce children." Witte, "Between Sacrament and Contract," 50

27. Pitkin, 160 [Respionso ad Baldunni convicia, OC 9:576].


29. Upon the death by plague of one young man who was boarding in Calvin's home while studying in Geneva, he wrote to the boy's father: "When I first received the intelligence of the death of... your son Louis, I was so utterly overpowerd that for many days I was fit for nothing but to weep. . . . He was one whom I loved as my own son because on his part he showed such respectful affection toward me as he would to another father." McKee, ed., John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety, 293–94 (Letter to M. de Richebourg, OC 11:188–94). Calvin seeks to assure the father that Louis had "finished the course which the Lord had marked out for him" (298), but does not insist that the father put aside fatherly grief, acknowledging that Christians who hope for the next life are still human and not "turned into stones" (300).


32. Ibid., 141.


35. Ibid., 281.

36. Noonan notes Calvin and Luther both held to the Catholic line that the purposes of marriage included the begettting of children; and he surmises that Protestants' rigidity on the issue of contraception likely encouraged the Catholic Church not to change its position. John Noonan, Contraception (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1986), 353.

37. One Presbyterian minister raged that, "in the age of Kinsey, Hefner, and Enovid, the church and its spokesmen continue the futile attempt to extrapolate a full understanding of sex from the thought of Moses, Augustine and Calvin." Gordon Clanton, "Understanding Sex in the Age of the Pill," The Christian Century, January 8, 1969, 43.

38. For example, on usury see Georgia Harkness, John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics (New York: Henry Holt, 1931), 206 (OC xii 210, De usuris). Also Albrecht, "Contraception and Abortion within Protestant Christianity," 80–85.

39. Birth rates in France had already begun falling toward the end of the 1700s, which historians credit mainly to the quiet spread of contraception; Noonan, Contraception, 387–91. Puritans in the American colonies had begun to emphasize the role of marriage as a "friendly fellowship" by the end of the sixteenth century; and Albrecht argues that contraception was in wide use in England and the United States by the end of the eighteenth century, 90–91. On the other hand, women who openly fostered the use of contraceptives were often associated with witches and did so at their own peril; see John M. Riddle, Eve's Herbs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1997).

41. Albrecht infers that male Protestant ministers were quick to see "the nonprocreative benefits of marital intercourse, as well as the disruption to families of too many children." "Contraception and Abortion within Protestant Christianity," 93.

42. Ibid., 91-92. She traces the reconfiguration of family identities, gender roles, and fertility to economic necessity, as does Gudorf, "Contraception and Abortion in Roman Catholicism," 63. Some of these reasons also led Pope Paul VI to address the birth control question again in the 1960s; see *Humanae vitae*, I.2.


46. "Owing to his ignorance, a man may not be able to gratify a desire without causing misery (wherefore it would be wrong for him to do it), but with a knowledge of means to prevent this misery, he may so gratify it that more pleasure than pain will be the result of the act, in which case the act to say the least is justifiable. Now, therefore, it is virtuous; nay, it is the duty of him who has a knowledge of such means, to convey it to those who have it not, for, by so doing, he furthers the cause of human happiness." Charles Knowlton, *The Fruits of Philosophy: An Essay on the Population Question* (Chicago: Wilson, 1832), 3.


48. Ibid., 408. See Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York: Norton, 1938); "Too Many People!" *Together*, September 1957; and "Why I Went to Jail," *Together*, February 1960. Greer puts a more sinister spin on Sanger: "From the outset Sanger's interest was to limit what she saw as the excess fertility of the poor. . . . She continued to believe that high fertility was the cause of poverty and oppression and, moreover, that despite the fact that she herself came from a very large family tainted with tuberculosis, that the fertile strains were genetically inferior and should be cut off"; *Sex and Destiny*, 303-4.

49. Alfred M. Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood and Birth Control in the Light of Christian Ethics* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 29-30. Sanger wrote that her suggestions to women to employ condoms and coitus interruptus "were invariably brushed aside as unacceptable. They were of no certain avail to the wife because they placed the burden of responsibility solely upon the husband—a burden which he seldom assumed. What she was seeking was self-protection she could herself use. . . ." Sanger, *Autobiography*, 87.


51. Population fears may act as a thin cover for racism; Albrecht, "Contraception and Abortion within Protestant Christianity," 93-94.


53. Ibid., 39-40.

54. Ibid., 41.

55. Their apparent objections were centered on issues of sexuality and its proper expression, rather than the usurping of God's power to give children according to God's will.

56. Albrecht, "Contraception and Abortion within Protestant Christianity," 83.


58. Ibid., 4.

59. Ibid., 8. "The way of casuistry is basically unacceptable."
60. Ibid., 13.
61. Ibid., 271.
62. Barth saw man and woman as functionally and structurally different (177); moreover, the human is made in the image of God only in the community that comes from the differentiation of man and woman (186). It is outside the scope of this paper to analyze how problematic is Barth's teaching for questions of homosexuality and gender; see however Jaime Ronaldo Balboa, "Church Dogmatics, Natural Theology, and the Slippery Slope of Geschlecht: A Constructivist–Gay Liberationist Reading of Barth," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 4 (1998); Edward Batchelor Jr., ed., *Homosexuality and Ethics* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980).
63. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 123.
64. Ibid., 183. In this he differs from Calvin, who was deeply skeptical of celibacy for all but a very few persons (and some widows), see Witte, "Between Sacrament and Contract," 51.
65. Ibid., 130–31.
66. Ibid., 132.
67. Ibid., 133–34.
68. Ibid., 266.
69. The Catechism likewise begins with the importance of fertility (2373) and ends with cold comfort for the infertile (2379). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican, 1997); available at: www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm.
70. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 246.
71. Ibid., 267. Also Hauerwas, "The Radical Hope in the Annunciation," 512.
72. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 269 (emphasis added).
73. See again Hauerwas, "The Radical Hope in the Annunciation," 515.
74. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 269–70 (emphasis added).
75. Ibid., 275.
76. Ibid., 270.
77. Ibid., 271.
78. Ibid., 277.
79. Ibid., 273.
80. Ibid., 274. Diverging from Calvin, Barth argues that Onan was punished for refusing to obey the levirate law of marriage, rather than for the act of contraception.
81. Ibid., 275.
82. Ibid., 132.
83. Ibid., 275.
85. Ibid., 5. Waltke argues that the Old Testament purposes of marriage are company, unity, pleasure, and procreation. He also defends abortion based on Exodus 21:22–24.

89. Perhaps most surprising is the group's early approval of abortion, which they agreed might sometimes be necessary and permissible. Mitigating circumstances included: (1) when the life or health of the pregnant woman was threatened; (2) cases of rape and incest; and (3) eugenic abortion to prevent the birth of a child "with grave physical deformities or mental retardation... Much human suffering can be alleviated by preventing the birth of children where there is a predictable high risk of genetic disease or abnormality. This appears to be a reasonable Christian objective." Ibid., xxv.

90. Ibid., xxix–xxxi. Gudorf argues that it was population and environmental fear that also "broke the back of pronatalism" in the Catholic hierarchy in the 1990s, "Contraception and Abortion in Roman Catholicism," 65.

91. Ibid. and Saylor, ed., *Birth Control and the Christian*, xxvi.


94. Gudorf, "Contraception and Abortion in Roman Catholicism," 57.

95. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 277.


99. It is sometimes presented as such; e.g., calling the church to accept "responsibility for constructing a sexual ethic for humans rather than displacing responsibility for human codes onto God." Gudorf, "Social Construction," 53.