

Birth Control

(An Every-Verse Method Study)

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(All Bible quotes from the New Revised Standard Version)

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This debate is much more heated among Roman Catholics than it is Protestants. However, it affects so many lives that it's worth examining.

While most Protestants seek to establish their beliefs based only on what the Bible says (although we don't always succeed in doing that), Roman Catholics seek to establish their beliefs by a combination of the Bible, church traditions, and the authority of church leadership, which they believe expresses the voice of God.

The Roman Catholic stance is that Birth Control is a sin. What leads them to this conviction? One might expect Catholics to claim that church leadership has received special revelation from God that birth control is forbidden. Such a claim would be difficult to disprove. How can any of us know what God tells the pope in private? Surprisingly, however, the arguments we hear from Roman Catholic leadership usually cite the Bible. And it all boils down to two Bible quotes. Here they are:

Genesis 38:8-10, "Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go into your brother's wife, and perform your duty as brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.' And Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so it came about that when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, so He took his life also."

Context: Onan's brother Er had just died. In ancient Israel, when a man died childless, his brother could impregnate his widow and the offspring would count as the

child of the deceased man, not as the child of the brother who was the biological father. The purpose of this was so there would be someone to carry on the family name and inherit the land. Also, having an heir would then allow the widow to remain on family lands. Without an heir, she was left homeless, or, if she was lucky and her father was living and willing to receive her, she could go back to her father.

Land in Israel was divided among a man's male children, and then further divided among the next generation, and so on. As for daughters, they married into a family and lived on the lands of their husbands. Fathers were eager to give away their daughters in marriage, because in a male-dominated world where women struggled to survive on their own, fathers had to provide for their daughters throughout adulthood, which was a considerable expense.

Analysis: This story is frequently quoted as the biblical prohibition of birth control, because God strikes Onan dead after he pulled out and “wasted his seed on the ground” in order to prevent pregnancy.

But is the technicality of practicing birth control the real reason God was displeased? Or were there other sins of Onan's that, unlike birth control, actually violated God's laws expressed throughout the Bible?

Let's count Onan's sins:

First, Onan disobeyed his father's command—a command that was intended to be for the good of the family. So he angered God by failing to honor his father.

Second, Onan pulled out because he was envious that the child would not be his. Numerous verses throughout the Bible condemn envy.

Third, Onan hated his brother. We see throughout the Old Testament that having descendants was of utmost importance to the Israelites. Had Onan loved his brother, he would have wanted to provide a descendant for him. But Onan failed to love his brother as himself and thus angered God.

Fourth, Onan took sexual advantage of his brother's widow. He used her for sexual pleasure without her permission. She was willing to have sex with him for the sake of having offspring, not for pleasure's sake.

Fifth, Onan lied! He had agreed to obey his father's command. He, his father, and his deceased brother's widow were all of the same understanding that he would attempt

to provide offspring for his deceased brother. In the end, however, Onan broke his vow. He lied. And the Bible opposes lying and deception on over thirty counts.

Sixth, Onan demonstrated disregard for the well-being of his brother's widow. Imagine what she went through. She was willing to have sex with Onan so that she might have a child. This child would be the descendant that she and her deceased husband, whom she loved and missed, had always dreamed of. Also, by having this child, she would get to remain in her home and enjoy the land upon which she and her deceased husband had been living. Not only may the land have held sentimental value for her, but being unable to stay could have meant homelessness for her (although she was able to return to her father, according to the Bible).

So as Onan came into her, she felt great hope that her and her deceased husband's dreams were about to come true. Imagine the horror and the hurt when she learned that Onan had only come to take sexual advantage of her, that her dreams were forever crushed, and that her worst fears had become reality.

When we examine these great sins of Onan, it's no wonder that God struck him down. What is a wonder, however, is that so many people, including the Roman Catholic Church, overlook these sins and conclude that God killed Onan for the technicality of practicing birth control. Had this story been of God punishing a man and his wife for practicing birth control because they couldn't afford anymore kids, the Roman Catholic view would make sense. But the Bible contains no such story.

Genesis 1:28, "And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the ground.'"

Context: God creates the human race and tells the humans to reproduce.

Analysis: Like any species that's small in number, its best chance for survival is to grow in size. If only a few beings of a given species exist, it won't take much to wipe them out. But if a species numbers in the thousands or millions, extinction becomes an improbability. God wanted the human race to succeed and populate the whole earth and have dominion over wildlife. God got His wish. We've succeeded in doing His will as expressed in this verse.

However, now that we've succeeded in filling the earth, we've gotten so good at it that we now face a whole new set of challenges. I revealed in the creationism study that the human race has nearly quadrupled in size over the last century. That means that we'll have 100 billion people on earth by the year 2200 if we continue at our current pace. These humans will occupy 20 times more land than they do now, leaving far less room to grow food. Yet the need for food will be 20 times greater than it is today.

Over the coming centuries, billions will starve, while wars and disease run rampant as a result of the food shortage. This was not God's intent when He instructed humans to multiply. He intended good, not harm. His mandate worked for the good of the human race for thousands of years, but now the situation is drastically different. Is God so inflexible that he won't make a change for our benefit? Is He more concerned with upholding His original command than He is with the well-being of the human race?

If that were the nature of God, then He would never have altered the Old Testament covenant expressed in the Mosaic Law by giving the world a Savior through whom our sins may be forgiven. He would have just stuck with the original plan, never changing for the good of His people. But God proved to be flexible, because He cares about people.

Birth control is the one solution that can save billions of humans from a dreadful future. God is flexible and caring enough to allow this invention to change the direction of population growth. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church leadership is not.

Is their ruling consistent with God's desire to reduce suffering in the world and His love for the human race?

It is not.

Rather, it is the epitome of religious oppression: a non-biblical, man-made religious rule that adds to human misery, rather than decreasing it as God's laws are designed to do.

Erroneous Arguments Opposing Birth Control

The Bible never says that birth control is a sin, because the Israelites already knew it was wrong, totally avoided it, and, therefore, didn't need to be told about it:

Leviticus 18:23 says, “Also you shall not have intercourse with any animal to be defiled by it, nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it; it is a perversion.”

Are we to believe that the Israelites instinctively knew that birth control was unnatural and a sin, but had no idea that sex with animals was unnatural and a sin? If God had to tell people not to have sex with animals, then it’s safe to conclude that God mentioned all sins in the biblical law. If there was any chance at all that people might commit a given sin, God addressed it.

The death penalty was not the biblically prescribed penalty for a brother refusing to impregnate his deceased brother’s wife; therefore, God must have killed Onan because he practiced birth control.

Indeed, the Bible did not require the death penalty for refusing to impregnate your deceased brother’s wife. Let’s think about why this might be. Perhaps it’s because a man might have no sexual attraction to his brother’s wife and would then be unable to perform? In fact, if he has the death penalty hanging over his head, that would really make it difficult to perform—talk about pressure! Putting a man to death because he’s unable to become sexually aroused by a given woman is inconsistent with the love of God.

But that does not describe Onan’s situation. He was very much attracted to his deceased brother’s wife, so he had no excuse for refusing to provide offspring, especially once he started having sex with her. The fact that Onan had sex with her changed everything. At that point, this situation became nothing like that of a man who had no sexual attraction to his deceased brother’s wife.

The fact that the Bible uses the words, “wasted his seed,” to describe Onan’s sin means that it’s a sin to let sperm go to waste.

If that’s the case, then all men are guilty, because the body makes sperm on a daily basis. That sperm is then replaced with new sperm every few days. So the sperm

situation is one of use-it-or-lose-it. Abstinence wastes sperm too, and even sexually active married men fail to use all of the sperm their bodies make.

However, the ancient Israelites were unaware of these realities of human anatomy. They probably assumed that the body contained a limited amount of sperm that could not be replaced once leaving the body. To them, sperm that fell outside the female body was wasted; therefore, their language reflected that belief.

Birth control interferes with God's plan, because humans he intended to use for His purposes will never be born.

This argument underestimates the power of God. We see throughout the Bible that all of God's plans come true. Never does it mention even one instance in which a person's action, even if it was murder, interfered with God's plan. While none of us knows exactly how He does it, God is able to work our deeds together with His plans.

If our actions got in the way, all of God's plans would fail. Even if we didn't use birth control, our choices of who to marry or when to have sex would interfere with God's plans for a person yet to be born. God knows what we're going to do, including our use of birth control, and our actions are already a part of His plan.

Sex is for procreation only

This argument has grown in popularity in recent years due to opposition to homosexuality. The idea is that any sexual activity that fails to result in a chance of pregnancy is a sin, whether it be birth control, masturbation, homosexuality, or sex with animals.

This is a nice and tidy theology. It can even be beautiful in that it promotes the belief that life is such a wonderful thing that God wants every sperm cell to be used to create it.

The problem with this theology (aside from arguments I've already made) is that the Bible never states it. Also, the Bible never states that it's a sin for a man to have sex with his wife when she's pregnant—a time when she's unable to conceive. Nor does the Roman Catholic church say (to the best of my knowledge) that it's a sin to have sex with

a woman who has had a hysterectomy and, therefore, can no longer produce children. If sex were only for procreation, it would be a sin in these scenarios, too.

The Bible is a big book with lots of rules. If birth control, masturbation, and sex with pregnant women were sins, the Bible would say so. But since the Bible doesn't, the Roman Catholic belief that sex is only for procreation falls apart due to lack of biblical support.