

SEX AND FULLNESS: A REJOINDER TO DENNIS HOLLINGER ON CONTRACEPTION

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Dennis Hollinger's essay "The Ethics of Contraception: A Theological Assessment,"¹ is borne out of a very simple but important observation: the sea change that Protestantism underwent in the 20th century from staunch opposition to acceptance of contraception came without significant theological reflection. In an attempt to address this lack, Hollinger has undertaken the task of theologically backfilling the issue, seeking to provide the appropriate justification for contraception from a Protestant perspective. While there may have been no theological rationale for accepting contraception, Hollinger argues that contraception is not only theologically acceptable, but is even an important part of what it means for Christians to live as stewards of the world that God has given. It is the burden of the following essay to challenge Hollinger's argument, and thus the theological legitimacy of contraception, a position that is largely a given in most Protestant thought, whether mainline or evangelical.

There has, obviously, been much deep theological reflection on the issue of contraception, particularly from the Roman Catholic Church. While I appreciate and have benefitted much from Catholic teaching on the matter of contraception, I write as a Protestant and, furthermore, as an Anglican, and thus a part of the body of Christ that, as Hollinger rightly points out, opened the doors to contraception in 1930. But mostly I write as a pastor, for sex gets to the heart of who we are as people (note how many hot-button issues—abortion, same-sex marriage, sexual discrimination—at the center of American culture and politics relate to sex), and even to the witness of the Christian church. It is an issue that, from my pastoral experience, many young couples preparing for marriage address as a given, the question not generally being "*Should* we use contraception?" but "*How* should we use contraception?" Given the importance of sexual intimacy in the health of a marriage, and the further importance of marriage in the life, witness, and mission of the church, the issue of contraception is a matter of foundational importance.

In responding to Hollinger's argument, I will seek to follow his own structure, addressing the traditional arguments he cites (and dismisses) against contraception, focusing on the two central reasons he gives in support of contraception, and finally ending with a few comments supporting the traditional Christian position that

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¹ Dennis P. Hollinger, "The Ethics of Contraception: A Theological Assessment," *JETS* 56 (2013) 683–96.

contraception is outside the bounds of God's will within marriage, particularly in light of the welfare and witness of the church.

I. TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONTRACEPTION

Before he gets to his argument proper, Hollinger discusses three traditional arguments against contraception: exegesis of the "procreative mandate" in Gen 1:28 and the sin of Onan in Genesis 38, "guilt by association," and the argument from the nature of sex. Regarding Gen 1:28, where man is commanded to "be fruitful and multiply," Hollinger observes (1) that the text does not directly address contraception; and (2) that sexual intimacy is by its very nature procreative. To be sure, God's command to be fruitful does not, logically speaking, rule out the possibility of contraception. His second observation concerning the procreative nature of sex, to which we will return, seems on the face of it to move against the notion of contraception. Because he will make much of the procreative character of sex later in his argument, he does not pursue the observation there.

Hollinger is understandably wary of the exegetical value of Genesis 38. There are at least two things going on in the passage—the spilling of the seed and Onan's refusal to fulfill the duty due his deceased brother—which makes it difficult to pin down exactly the reason(s) for the Lord's displeasure with Onan. However, Hollinger goes too far in categorically dismissing the passage as having any relevance, grounding his claim on his observation that most scholars hold that the passage is primarily concerned with Levirate marriage. There are several difficulties with this. First, the penalty for forsaking one's duty to his deceased brother was not death, but rather public humiliation (Deut 25:5–10). While the reference to Deuteronomy is obviously anachronistic, the fact that refusing to marry one's brother's widow is not legislated later as a capital crime ought to give us pause in attributing the Lord's putting Onan to death for this reason.² Second, the detail about spilling the seed, strictly speaking, is not necessary to make the point about Onan's failure to fulfill his obligations. Third, the comment that most scholars (presumably modern scholars, although Hollinger does not specify) take the passage to refer to Levirate marriage fails to acknowledge the strong exegetical tradition that sees the sin of Onan precisely as hindering conception during intercourse.³ My point is not to argue that

² See also Ruth, where the near kinsman declines to marry Ruth, apparently without consequence.

³ See, e.g., Luther's comment on Onan's spilling semen: "Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed. Accordingly, it was a most disgraceful crime to produce semen and excite the woman, and to frustrate her at that very moment" (*Luther's Works* 7.20–21). Calvin also condemns Onan's sin on similar grounds: "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" (translated from the Latin by Ford Battles, in Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control* [Monongahela, PA: Zimmer, 1989] 20). Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, John King omitted Calvin's comment in his standard 1850 translation of Calvin's commentary on Genesis, and since subsequent English print editions of the commentary (e.g. Eerdmans, Baker, Banner of Truth) reproduce King's translation, the comment has until recently been rather inaccessible to those who read Calvin on Genesis in English. An English translation of the missing

Genesis 38 necessarily condemns contraception, but only to suggest that there are reasons not to rule it out confidently.

The second traditional argument Hollinger cites against contraception is one of “guilt by association.” Here Hollinger notes the historical relationship between contraceptive use and abortion, and contraceptive use and prostitution. Acknowledging that these relationships are real, Hollinger rejects these associations as having any relevance in situations that do not involve either prostitutes or abortion. Surely Hollinger is right to note that “guilt by association is never a definitive moral argument,” but is again I believe too quick to dismiss. Uncontroversial is a marked rise in sexual promiscuity and even divorce that correlate with the widespread introduction and increased use of contraception, particularly from the 1960s. While it does not logically follow that contraception caused the rise in sexual promiscuity and divorce (causation can be at times very difficult to determine), it is not only possible, but intuitively plausible. In any case, that there *is* a relationship between contraception and sexual promiscuity and divorce is plain. We will return to this argument in due course, along with some thoughts concerning the relationship between contraception and abortion.

Of the arguments he cites against contraception, Hollinger seems to have the greatest sympathy with the third, the nature of sex. Hollinger cites Roman Catholic arguments that sex has two basic functions, a procreative function and a unitive function, and that these two functions are not appropriately, or lawfully, separated. While Hollinger appears suspicious of what he suggests is a change in Roman Catholic thought, from opposing contraception solely on procreative grounds to opposing it on both procreative and unitive grounds, he nonetheless stops short of a thorough critique, most likely due to the fact that he implicitly addresses these arguments in his own. In fact, it appears that Hollinger has significant sympathy with the argument from the nature of sex, but will argue, as we will see, that contraception does not do away with the procreative character of sex.

II. HOLLINGER'S CASE AGAINST CONTRACEPTION

Hollinger grounds his argument for contraception in two rationales: man's call to stewardship over creation, and the meaning and purpose of sex. We will look at these in order.

1. *Contraception and stewardship.* Regarding the call to stewardship, Hollinger argues that God has given humanity a cultural mandate in creation, of which being fruitful and multiplying is a part. This cultural mandate is a call to exercise dominion over the earth, working in and with nature to carry forward the purposes of God to be glorified in his creation. Thus humankind is called to a stewardship role over creation. It is this larger call to stewardship that governs the decisions man makes, even decisions concerning childbearing. In other words, the procreation

passage has been reintroduced into King's translation in the electronic edition made available by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xvi.i.html>). Many thanks to Chuck Bumgardner for wisely and extensively looking into this matter.

mandate serves the cultural mandate. Hollinger sees this cultural mandate in terms of intervention into nature:

What needs to be noted in the opening two chapters of the Bible is first that God has granted to and indeed commanded humans to intervene into the natural processes of this world, the cultural mandate. And second, we note that the procreative mandate to “be fruitful and increase in number” is set in the context of and linked to this larger cultural mandate. This would at least hold open the possibility of an ethical form of contraception.⁴

There is no doubt that humankind is called to stewardship over creation, and that the cultural mandate and the procreation mandate are linked. However, there are several problems with the conclusions Hollinger draws from Genesis 1–2. First, it is not altogether clear that we are warranted in seeing the cultural mandate as taking priority over the procreative mandate. Hollinger is of course correct that they are linked, but his claim that procreation serves the cultural mandate is an assumption. For the sake of argument, could the priority not as easily be reversed, seeing man called primarily to be fruitful and multiply, and so to steward creation in a manner that welcomes an abundance of children, who are raised to be fruitful and to steward the good world that God made? In other words, exegetically speaking it is equally plausible that the cultural mandate serves the call to procreation. While we will return to this issue later, my point here is not to elevate one mandate over the other, only to suggest that it is not obvious that the text elevates culture over procreation in the way Hollinger assumes. And yet the elevation of the cultural mandate above the procreative mandate is crucial for Hollinger’s argument, for faithful stewardship depends upon our understanding of the purposes for which God created the world, and man’s role within it. Otherwise, the notion of stewardship can slide into serving our own interests, rather than the interests of God.

Second, Hollinger’s argument that humankind is called to intervene into nature requires more definition to be helpful. In speaking of humanity’s call to make wise decisions for God’s glory and the good of the world, Hollinger writes that:

Humans can and do revert to idolatrous and unethical ways of carrying out God’s mandate, but we can legitimately enter into the course of nature, not to change God’s ultimate designs, but to steward those designs. Moreover, because of the fallenness of our world, including nature, we sometimes seek to alter nature by alleviating suffering and pain as a sign of and participation in God’s ultimate triumph over evil and suffering.⁵

Hollinger’s observation that we can carry out God’s mandate in an idolatrous and unethical manner raises the all-important question: given that intervening in the natural world can mean all kinds of things, how do we discern whether a particular intervention is ethical or unethical, faithful or idolatrous? For instance, having planted and staked a row of tomatoes, should a farmer mulch the row to keep

⁴ Hollinger, “Ethics of Contraception” 691.

⁵ *Ibid.* 692.

weeds down, or should he use a strong chemical weed killer? Both could be seen as interventions into nature. To comment on the ethical merits of either or both is not my concern, only to suggest that these interventions are not of the same order. To use another example, a tractor is an example of non-natural technology that allows the farmer to till the ground, thereby working with nature to produce a crop. Is a tractor an ethical intervention into nature? Notice that the tractor enables nature to function as it was intended to, in this case to plant a seed into the kind of ground that allows it to grow. Contraception, on the other hand, moves in exactly the opposite direction. Rather than working with nature, it explicitly works *against* nature by impeding what would happen if nature were allowed to run its course. Certainly Hollinger's larger point that man is called to work with nature through man-made means is valid, but more precision is needed in assessing whether or not contraception is a legitimate or illegitimate intervention into nature. As he discusses the notion of intervention, Hollinger appears to assume the legitimacy of contraception, rather than arguing for it.

Although Hollinger does not give any guidance for discerning between legitimate and illegitimate interventions, he does give an example, in the quotation above, of what he sees as a legitimate intervention in nature to support his case: altering nature to alleviate the pain and suffering that are the lot of a fallen world. I doubt that Hollinger means this, but his example parallels the thinking in much of the world that treats pregnancy as a disease (and therefore contraception as health care). For instance, the human intervention that is cancer surgery is legitimate because cancer, surely a product of the fall, destroys the way the body is intended to function. In other words, such intervention seeks to work in a manner that restores God's purposes for a life. Contraception runs precisely in the opposite direction, for conceiving children is not the product of a fallen world, and pregnancy is not a disease. Rather than enabling nature to do what is intended, contraceptive technologies prevent the body from doing what God created it to do. To lump two distinct kinds of medical intervention together as if they were equivalent misunderstands the relation of each to the purposes of God, and seems to mirror the thinking of our culture that fertility is, in some cases, a problem to be managed rather than a given that must be respected, or even a blessing to be embraced.

The lack of criteria concerning how wise decisions are made does not mean that Hollinger finds no boundaries that govern human stewardship. In fact, he gives several examples of things that should not be changed in the course of human stewardship of creation: the male/female distinction he calls "a fundamental reality in nature that is clearly normative and not to be dissolved" (Gen 1:28; 2:23–25), the integrity of the human species as a given in nature, and procreation through the union of husband and wife.⁶ Hollinger is surely right here, on all counts. Yet, on what grounds does he go on to say that "there is no biblical indication or clear rationale for precluding contraceptives on natural grounds, if one maintains the procreative context of sexual relations"? He cites Gen 1:28 as support that the

⁶ Ibid. 692–93.

male/female distinction must not be dissolved, *without qualification*, and yet suggests that the command to be fruitful in Gen 1:28 should be understood *with qualification*. To say it differently, why does Gen 1:28 provide support for the inviolability of male/female distinctiveness, but not for the inviolability of the sex and procreation that the command implies? For instance, a sex change operation can be understood as an “intervention into nature” undertaken to alleviate the pain and suffering of an individual in distress concerning his gender. Why is this illegitimate, but contraception legitimate? Part of the answer lies in his understanding of “procreative context,” which we will explore in the next section, but from an exegetical perspective, Hollinger’s argument will not likely convince anyone who was not already prepared to agree with him in the first place.

Curiously, in his discussion of stewardship Hollinger does not address natural family planning, or NFP, where a couple abstains from intercourse during the fertile window of the woman’s monthly cycle. However, he does speak to the issue of a woman’s cycle:

The fact that God created the natural female reproduction cycle with only a small window in the month in which conception can occur demonstrates that sex is for more than procreation. Given our stewardship role within nature, the natural cycle suggests that we are not at the mercy of nature alone in stewarding procreation. That God has ordained sex for more than procreation means the possibility of working within the natural world to steward it, rather than allowing nature itself to become the only determinant of what happens in the fruitfulness of our sexual acts.⁷

That sex is for more than procreation is certainly true. It is also true that a woman’s cycle opens the possibility of exercising control over childbearing. The problem here is that Hollinger assumes that contraception is the only means by which this kind of stewardship can be carried out. Thus, he fails to distinguish between two distinct questions: *whether* to exercise control in childbearing and, if so, *how* to exercise such control. The woman’s natural cycle makes it entirely possible to exercise control without recourse to contraception, and in a manner consistent with the way God has ordered sexuality, for God did not render a woman fertile continually, but only during certain times each month. But note that this question is a stewardship question, and a question that most Christians, Catholic or Protestant, find to be a legitimate one. By failing to address NFP, Hollinger implies that those who reject contraception find no place for human decision making in the process of childbearing.

But is not NFP and contraception ultimately the same thing, in that both are seeking to engage in sexual intimacy while avoiding conception? The reason that they are different is that contraception artificially hinders conception by introducing

⁷ Hollinger’s appeal to nature here takes the argument, linguistically speaking, a step away from acknowledging God as creator. Consider Hollinger’s sentence, if we were to substitute the term “created order” for “nature”: “That God has ordained sex for more than procreation means the possibility of working within the created order to steward it, rather than allowing the created order itself to become the only determinant of what happens in the fruitfulness of our sexual acts.”

something foreign into sex (whether providing a barrier or altering hormones), whereas couples that practice NFP seek to avoid conception in a manner consistent with the way that God has designed a woman's cycle. Again, God did not make a woman fertile continually, but normally only during relatively predictable and consistent times. Hence, despite the claims of those who would defend contraception by appealing to NFP, there is a legitimate distinction between the two in that NFP seeks to control childbearing in a manner that honors God's created order. In other words, sexual intimacy between couples outside the peak of her fertility is nonetheless entered into wholly. To use Hollinger's phrase, his would seem to be the most natural and obvious way of "working *within* the *natural* world to steward it" (italics mine), rather than *against* the natural world, which contraception necessarily does.

2. *Contraception and the purposes of sex.* Hollinger's second argument in support of contraception deals with the multiple purposes of sex. He defines these purposes as (1) the consummation of a marriage; (2) procreation; (3) love; and (4) pleasure. There is no reason to quibble with Hollinger's four purposes, even if one might articulate them differently, such as with the more common notions of procreative and unitive purposes. Clearly there are purposes of sex that can be distinguished, even if they cannot be separated. Hollinger acknowledges this, arguing that legitimate sexual intimacy must hold all four purposes together, with the corollary implication that reproductive technologies that violate any of these purposes are therefore not legitimate.

Hollinger finds contraception consistent with these four purposes of sex, arguing that contraception is not necessarily at odds with the "procreative context" of sex:

Both the Genesis text [1:28] and nature itself teach us that sex is inherently a procreative act. This does not mean that every sexual act will lead to generation or must aim at generation. It does mean that every sexual act must be in the context of procreation with a willingness to assume the potential fruit that comes from the act.⁸

Hollinger goes on to distinguish his position from the Roman Catholic position, stating that while the Catholic position maintains that each act must be open to generation, "the view being espoused here is that one must be open to procreation due to sex's inherently procreative nature, but that openness allows for a stewarding intervention into the natural processes."⁹ The language is not entirely clear to me, but looking at the two statements above I assume Hollinger means two things: first, that a couple is open to having children, even if not in every act of intercourse, and secondly, contraception is legitimate as long as, if it fails, the couple does not resort to abortion. Yet later he quotes with sympathy Paul Ramsey's assertion that, because sex is an act of love, "whether or not a child is engendered, the act is in itself procreative,"¹⁰ but here the word procreative appears not to have

⁸ Ibid. 694.

⁹ Ibid. 695.

¹⁰ Ibid. 696.

childbearing in view, and therefore means something different, which only obscures what Hollinger means by the term.

Whatever his precise understanding of “procreative context,” it is difficult to see how contraception honors the procreative purpose of sex when the explicit purpose of contraception is to obstruct procreation. Even Hollinger’s language seems to waver at this point: “in sex we were wired for pleasure, though always in the context of the full purposes of sex”¹¹ or “[c]ontraceptives can be allowed because there are multiple purposes of sex, but the multiple purposes of sex can never be isolated from one another.”¹² Yet isolating the purposes of sex is precisely what contraceptives are intended to do, to allow a couple to enjoy sex *apart* from the possibility of procreation. True, contraceptives do not guarantee a couple will not conceive, but preventing procreation is nevertheless the intention. To define “procreative context” in such a manner that suggests one can honor the procreative intent of sex while simultaneously seeking to prevent procreation confuses the argument, for he seems to be using a crucial word in a manner at odds with its plain meaning. Furthermore, it is somewhat odd, and perhaps telling, that Hollinger uses the example of infertile couples or those beyond childbearing age to argue for contraception, suggesting that the very nature of sex calls for them to be willing to bear the fruit that comes from that act. To take an example where a couple is unable to have children to support contraception for couples able to have children again confuses the issue. Those who use contraception are unwilling to conceive (even if they would carry a baby to term if they did so), whereas those unable to have children are often very desirous to conceive. In the end, the issue is not whether or not conception must be a possibility in all acts of sexual intercourse, for no one argues that sex is illegitimate for infertile or older couples, but whether it is legitimate to step in and actively hinder the possibility of conception in any act of intercourse.

Hollinger is right when he says that the purposes of sex cannot be isolated from one another, but perhaps in a different way than he intends. It is one thing to say that the purposes of sex ought not be separated. It is another to say that they cannot. It is not at all clear that the different purposes of sex *can* be isolated from one another without doing violence to what sex is. For instance, on what grounds do we assume that if we seek to set aside one purpose of sex (procreation) we may nonetheless enter fully into another purpose of sex (unity)? Or, to use Hollinger’s language of love as the purpose of sexual intimacy, if the essence of love is self-giving, on what grounds do we assume that the purpose of love in sex can be realized fully if either (or both) spouse withholds part of himself or herself in the act of intercourse? To say it differently, why do we assume that we can interfere with how God created marital intimacy and be unaffected? Do we really think that the barrier that is contraception is simply and neatly limited to bodily fluids? While Jesus’ words “what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:6), were said directly in the context of marriage, we do well to recognize that God has joined

¹¹ Ibid. 695.

¹² Ibid. 696.

marriage, sex, and procreation, and therefore should be very wary of separating them.

III. CONTRACEPTION AND THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

Jesus's own words suggest another way to assess the moral legitimacy of contraception: "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn-bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush" (Luke 6:43–44). We do well to ask the question, what is the fruit of contraception? In closing this essay, I want to suggest that contraception harms both marriages and the witness of the church.

Contraceptive methods being readily available for roughly 50 years now, we have had sufficient time to begin seeing their effect upon our culture. Dr. Janet Smith gave an important talk in 1994 titled "Contraception: Why Not?" in which she tracked the effects of contraception in American culture.¹³ One of the findings she cited was a strong correlation between the rise in contraceptive use and divorce, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, when contraception was becoming increasingly available—the divorce rate roughly doubling, rising in tandem with contraceptive use for roughly ten years, when both leveled off at the point when any couple who wanted contraceptives had access to them.¹⁴ While it is statistically difficult to prove causation, the relationship between contraception and divorce is striking. Whether contraception is the cause of marital difficulty, is an effect of marital difficulty (albeit unlikely since marriages often begin with contraception), or exists alongside of marital difficulty for another reason(s), the correlation shows that contraception is no help to marriage, and very likely a hindrance. Consider the testimony of Edward Peters, a practitioner of canon law overseeing annulment cases for the Roman Catholic Church, who argues that contraception is a significant threat to the welfare of a marriage. While acknowledging the difficulty of statistically proving causation, Peters approaches the question from another angle:

After a decade of working on annulment cases, I have studied some 1,500 marriage and divorce histories, probably more. Yet, I can only recall only one, *maybe* two, cases where Natural Family Planning, as opposed to some form of artificial contraception, was seriously tried by the parties prior to their divorce, and at most one or two other cases where it was even considered. This kind of figure, of which I am very confident, should be read in light of numerous studies published by the Couple to Couple League and others which demonstrate that regular practitioners of NFP have remarkably, some might say astoundingly, low divorce rates.¹⁵

¹³ A printed version of Janet Smith's talk can be found at <http://onemoresoul.com/pdfs/TCWN%20single%20sheet.pdf>.

¹⁴ Smith cites Robert T. Michael, "Why Did the U.S. Divorce Rate Double Within a Decade?," in *Research in Population Economics* (ed. T. Paul Schultz; Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1988) 367–99.

¹⁵ Edward Peters, "Contraception and Divorce: Insights from American Annulment Cases"; online: http://www.canonlaw.info/a_contraceptionanddivorce.htm. Italics his.

One does not have to agree with the Catholic Church's understanding or practice of annulment in order to appreciate the connections that Peters discerns in his counseling.

Why might contraception harm marriage? Contraception is not irrelevant to the health of a marriage for the very reason that sex is not irrelevant to marriage. Sex in marriage is for far more than pleasure or even intimacy. Sex nourishes marriages and enables a couple to grow in Christ. But for sex to be the strength and blessing God intends in marriage assumes that it is entered into in conformity with God's design. To look at it from the other direction, the extent that sex departs from God's intention is the extent to which couples fail to benefit from a critical means God gives to strengthen marriage. If couples that don't use contraception are living in closer conformity with how God designed sex and marriage, Peters's observation is precisely the kind of observation we might expect.

Nor are children irrelevant to marriage. Contraception harms marriage in that it deprives a couple of the children that by their very presence make us better people. Contrary to popular thinking, the perfect marriage is not a marriage where there is no conflict. Rather, the perfect marriage, if it is even appropriate to use that term, is a marriage where a husband and a wife grow together in grace. Marriage is meant to sanctify us, to make us more like Christ. And children are a major part of that purpose. Joel Budziszewski says it well:

Offspring convert us; they force us to become different beings. There is no way to prepare for them completely. They crash into our lives, they soil their diapers, they upset all our comfortable arrangements, and nobody knows how they will turn out. Willy-nilly, they knock us out of our complacent habits and force us to live outside ourselves; they are the necessary and natural continuation of that shock to our egotism which is initiated by marriage itself. To receive this great blessing requires courage.¹⁶

Budziszewski's comment concerning courage is penetrating, for few would argue that the Western church enjoys an abundance of courage. Sanctification, properly understood, is a fearful prospect, and reminds me of C. S. Lewis's comment, through the beaver, about Aslan: "Course he isn't safe. But he's good."¹⁷

Where sex is misunderstood, marriage is misunderstood. Here we move into the realm of the church's witness, and the importance of sexual faithfulness in that witness. Our culture is less interested in what the gospel teaches, and more interested in whether or not it works. And this is true particularly in a culture where relationships, by and large, do not work, precisely because it has become so confused concerning the nature of marriage. The "freedom" contraception affords from pregnancy has led to a separation between sex and marriage, leading in two decidedly different directions. On one hand, non-married couples are willing to have children, the stigma of a childbearing apart from marriage largely removed, which of course leads to single-headed households and all their attendant problems. On

¹⁶ Joel Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know* (Dallas: Spence, 2003) 92.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1950) 80.

the other hand, contraception has led to a situation where couples marry less, and when they do marry, they marry later in life, usually bringing with them wounds from past sexual relationships. The couples that do marry late tend to have fewer children, sometimes due to choice and sometimes due to the fact that couples have waited too long to marry.

Furthermore, marriage is being redefined, both in law and in practice. This is not just a comment upon the legal recognition of same-sex unions, but also upon the erosion of the meaning of marriage in our culture. While much of our culture still says marriage is a lifelong commitment, the prevalence of divorce suggests an unspoken recourse to divorce in case the couple finds themselves “incompatible” or if the relationship “doesn’t work out.” These excuses, however, raise important questions. If we say we are incompatible, how were we supposed to fit together? If the relationship did not work out, how was it supposed to work? There are real answers to these questions, and the church can answer them. Marriage is far more than a commitment between a man and woman to stay together for life. Marriage has a particular form—roles, contours, and purposes that shape marriage into the blessing that God intends. These can be taught by word and reinforced by example, living out that form of marriage before a confused culture, so that the culture becomes curious and begins to ask questions. And the more our culture loses its understanding of marriage, the more important the particular witness of marriage and family becomes, for the same reason that light shines most brightly when the surroundings are darkest. In our day there is no witness more powerful than marriages that work as they live into the form that God has given, and therefore experience his blessing.

The witness of marriage can be taken a step further. Marriage is a picture, even a foretaste, of the gospel. The way Paul speaks of sexual intimacy may be for some uncomfortable and awkward, but it is clear: “‘therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31–32). Here Paul picks up on the witness of the Scriptures, OT and NT, from the marriage in the Garden of Eden to the Song of Songs to Hosea’s marriage to a prostitute as a prophetic picture of Israel’s spousal unfaithfulness. In this first miracle at the wedding at Cana, Jesus alludes to his death on the cross as the inauguration of a wedding feast in which he is the bridegroom.¹⁸ Finally, the Scriptures end with the marriage to which all other marriages point:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev 21:1–3).

¹⁸ For this connection, see especially John 3:25–30 and John 12.

God has given mankind a longing for sexual union. Behind that longing is a longing for marriage. And behind the longing for marriage is a longing for God himself. Many in the world do not recognize a longing for God. But they do recognize a longing for sexual intimacy, of the kind where one can know and be known without shame. Marriage faithfully lived out in the church can speak to this longing, thereby proclaiming the gospel clearly in deed, if not word. Or perhaps deed and then word. But, again, this depends upon marriage conforming to God's design and purpose. To the extent the church does not live out marriage as God has ordered it is the extent to which we misrepresent the gospel in precisely the area where the gospel is most apparent.

Another way that contraception hinders the witness of the church is in the arena of life, particularly our ability to speak clearly on behalf of the unborn. One of the reasons Hollinger supports contraception is that he dismisses the historical relationship between contraception and abortion as having contemporary relevance. I am not convinced that this relationship has ceased. When Hollinger states that, in the past, "abortion was frequently the primary means of thwarting the birth of a child and thus equated with contraception," he ignores the fact that abortion is still a major means of birth control, albeit often resorted to after the failure of other methods. The Supreme Court itself has recognized this, arguing in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* that

[t]he Roe rule's limitation on state power could not be repudiated without serious inequity to people who, for two decades of economic and social developments, have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail.¹⁹

In other words, while abortion is not, strictly speaking, a contraceptive, it is still very much the fruit of a contraceptive mentality that divorces sex from pregnancy, and is a necessary component in a society committed to sex apart from childbearing. And, with roughly 1.2 million babies aborted annually, abortion is clearly not rare, but is rather a devastatingly common method of birth control. When the church in effect blesses the separation between sex and childbearing, we are not surprised when the world insists that the two be kept apart, even at the expense of young lives. We are also not surprised when men look upon women as a means of sexual pleasure, and seek to use them accordingly. When the world takes the parts of sex it likes and discards the parts it does not, it becomes very difficult for the church show a different way when we are doing the same thing.

Such a position raises an inevitable, and important, question. In speaking with a friend of mine, a Presbyterian pastor, he shared that he and his wife had chosen to limit their children to two because that was what he could afford given his level of support from the church. While sometimes the decision for contraception is grounded in a desire for a higher standard of living, the financial issue is very press-

¹⁹ See <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=505&invol=833>.

ing for many who seek simply to make ends meet. This raises an issue that we do well to consider anew—the example and teaching of the early church regarding finances. One of the chief characteristics of the early church was practical generosity of a nature peculiar to the much of the Western church: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45; cf. 4:32). The explicit teaching of the NT likewise runs along these lines:

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” (2 Cor 8:13–15).

The issue is larger than a local church generously supporting its pastor. Where large families require more resources there is an opportunity for the Body of Christ to step in and take care of our brethren. This not only allows some families not to be anxious concerning how to make ends meet should they bring more children into the world, but also provides an opportunity for enriching the giver and authenticating the witness of the church:

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! (2 Cor 9:10–15).

The way that the church responds to one another as we welcome children into the world is another way that childbearing is a gospel issue.

There was a time when couples who did not want to conceive children abstained from sex. This was the unified position of the Christian church until 1930. It is surely true that, logically speaking, just because the acceptance of contraception did not arise from theological reflection does not mean that contraception is wrong, or that the church’s theological justification could not come after the fact. Hollinger’s effort to seek to understand the issue theologically is therefore legitimate and important. But the question of why contraception was embraced apart from theological reflection is not insignificant. The implication would seem to be that either the church was lucky launching out into a direction that God approves, or that the Holy Spirit guided the church away from her historical position apart from a clear theological rationale. Neither seems satisfactory. There is, of course,

another possibility. We embraced contraception because we wanted to.²⁰ As fallen people we have a tendency to believe what we want to believe. One of the clear implications of Paul's words "although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21) is that the darkened mind will follow the heart that is not fully submitted to God. This is not to suggest that anyone who supports contraception is more sinful than one who does not, but rather to acknowledge the strength of a cultural mindset that exerts its influence deeply, and at times upon the church. To be transformed by the renewal of our minds is always God's call to the church, the exhortation itself clearly implying that we are far too easily conformed to the world's thinking. While Hollinger is right that guilt by association is not a definitive argument, it is wise to pay close attention, for significant overlap between the thinking of the world and that of the church should make us suspicious.

There is no specific proof text that, narrowly speaking, supports or rejects the use of contraception. In other words, the explicit command "Thou shalt not use contraception" cannot be found in the Scriptures. What we do have in Scriptures is unqualified enthusiasm for the blessing of children, lamentation at barrenness, and the affirmation that it is the Lord who opens and closes the womb. Absent from the Scriptures is any hint of the kind of contraceptive mentality that is pervasive in our culture, and often in our churches as well. In the end, the call to the church is a call to repentance, to allow our minds to be transformed. Our culture plans children around life. The idea that one might plan life around children is peculiar. And yet the church is a peculiar people, and because this is so, it has the opportunity to bear an unusual witness in a world that has lost its wonder and enthusiasm for life, particularly young life. This is part of what it means for the church to be the light of the world, a city set upon a hill.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations
be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the
nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise
you! The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us. God shall
bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him! (Psalm 67)

²⁰ For a penetrating discussion concerning the cultural denial of the effects of contraception, see Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve after the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012).