

# God's Sovereignty in Conception

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I want to thank Ken DeJong and Geri Klaassens for their thoughtful letters in response to my article in the *Beacon Lights*, "Augustine on Sex and Marriage." In that article I pointed to the fact that Augustine (and the Roman Catholic Church to this day) error in their teaching that only when a married couple desires to have children is their sexual relations pleasing in the eyes of God. I argued that sexual relations that express the union of husband and wife as one flesh and symbolize the relationship of Christ and the Church are pleasing to God even when bearing children is not the objective. From this point of view I argued that birth control under certain circumstances is permissible for a Christian husband and wife.

Mr. DeJong and Mrs. Klaassens disagreed with this view. Although their specific arguments differ at points (I hope to take up these specific issues in the next article in this rubric) much of their argument is the same: we should leave the issue of bearing children to God to determine in his sovereignty and not take the matter out of God's hands and put it into our own hands.

I disagree with this basic point that both letter writers make in that it appears to present a faulty notion of God's sovereignty and our duty as Christians. Simply put we cannot take the matter out of God's hands, we cannot put the matter into our own hands. God in his sovereignty controls all things even our sinful actions and the sinful actions of the world. When the unbelieving world commits countless murders through abortion they do not take the matter out of God's hands. Even these sinful actions are part of God's divine counsel that He established before the foundation of the world. We often have difficulty understanding this teaching, but it is the plain teaching of scripture. God is sovereign in everything, even in our sinful actions and those of the world.

So the fact of God's sovereignty (which we must believe with all our hearts and is a great comfort to Christians, Romans 8:28) alone is not a sufficient guide in this matter. God in his sovereignty has given us a different guide for our actions his law and commandments. At a conference I heard one of our ministers put it this way, "Our duty is not determined by God's sovereignty, counsel, or eternal decrees it is determined by his commands." If you doubt this for a moment imagine what horrible sins could be deemed permissible if one says, "well I did thus and so because it was part of God's sovereign plan." Calvin noted such a tendency in all of us and replied to those who take such a view with the teaching, "let them inquire and learn from Scripture what is pleasing to God so that they may strive toward this under the Spirit's guidance." (Institutes, Book 1, Chapter 17, article 3)

So what are God's commands concerning sex and marriage. The first command we must consider is in Genesis 1 and is literally the first command that God gave, "Be fruitful and multiply." We must not view the matter of having children indifferently. In our marriages we must want to have children and try to have children. This command teaches us that we should say, "I want to have a child now." We should actively try to have as many children as we can. This is the simple command of our Heavenly Father and the first words we need to consider whenever we consider sex and marriage.

Does this command, however, mean that we can never refrain from trying to conceive a child in our marriages? At first it might seem so, but if we allow Scripture to teach us on this matter we will see that it is not so. Mr. DeJong asks, "but where in God's Word is birth control ever supported?" If we examine I Corinthians 7 verse 5 we read, "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer, . . ." Here the Spirit teaches us an exception to the general rule that in our marriages we must be fruitful and multiply. This passage teaches that a husband and wife may abstain from sexual relations (which certainly is a form of birth control or conception prevention) for a season for the purpose of serving and glorifying God if they both agree. I believe this passage teaches that we may use birth control in our marriages but only for a season and only to glorify God in some other way.

Mr. DeJong in his letter described the difficult decision that he and his wife had to make when they decided not to use birth control. To illustrate my position, I will give an account of the difficult decision that my wife and I have made to use birth control. When my wife was pregnant with our first child, my daughter had a very serious infection while she was still in the womb and was taken by cesarean section a little over 2 months early. She nearly died and we thank God daily for the wonder that she is happy and healthy. My wife's second pregnancy appeared to proceed without difficulty—my son was born on his due date by cesarean section. However, two weeks later my wife developed a serious infection from which she almost died. In analyzing my wife's situation several doctors came to the conclusion (as I understand it) that she probably carries bacteria in her body (a variant of the flesh-eating bacteria that you may have heard about) that normally is held in check by her immune system. When she is pregnant, however, her immune system seems to weaken and allows the bacteria to grow and develop. This they feel caused the premature birth of my daughter and caused the severe infection my wife experienced after the birth of my son. Three different doctors have advised that having another child would put my wife and the child in serious jeopardy. The near death of my daughter and then my wife makes this account quite believable.

Given this knowledge we feel it would be wrong to try to have another child. We feel deeply the desire to follow God's command to be fruitful and multiply. We would dearly love to have another child and we hope that we will find a way for my wife to have another child without the serious risk that appears at this time. However, we believe that to simply wait and see if my wife were to get pregnant—that is to have sexual relations without using birth control—would be to violate the sixth commandment. To use the language of the catechism (Q & A, 105) to allow my wife to become pregnant would be to willfully expose her to danger, which is, of course, a violation of the sixth commandment. From our perspective we must for a season put aside the commandment to be fruitful and multiply in order to serve God in keeping the sixth command not to commit murder. We pray that this season is short and that perhaps a treatment for my wife's condition will be found. For now we often shed a tear that we are not able to serve God by bringing forth more children, but we firmly believe that we are following the teaching of scripture. This conviction and the knowledge that this too is all part of God's sovereign plan provides tremendous comfort.

We believe that God is acting sovereignly in our decision to use birth control in our marriage. Calvin put it much better than I ever could (Institutes, Book 1, Chapter 17, article 4) "We are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will. The reason is obvious. For he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care; he has provided means and helps to preserve it; he has also made us to foresee dangers; that they may not overwhelm us unaware, he has offered precautions and remedies. Now it is very clear what our duty is: thus, if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if he makes remedies available, not to neglect them." ❖

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