

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Contraceptive Pill at 50: Some Reflections

In May 1960, the FDA approved a new oral contraceptive, which ushered in a veritable revolution in American culture—indeed for the whole world. It truly was one of those watersheds in human history. Today, over 100 million women use this oral contraceptive. But we are still working through the massive effects of this pill, which altered so much in our culture. How should we think about the social revolution brought about by the pill?

- First, a few facts about the history of this oral contraceptive. Margaret Sanger coined the term “birth control” in 1914, as she dreamed of a pill that would give women control over their bodies. She founded what she called a family planning clinic in Brooklyn but found herself constantly in trouble with the law over her ideas and practices. For many, she is a heroine of the birth control movement. Sanger linked up with a wealthy woman named Katharine Dexter McCormick, who provided the funds for Sanger’s movement. Sanger and McCormick were followed by the pharmaceutical work of Gregory Pincus and John Rock, who conducted clinical trials in Puerto Rico, where many women were desperate for some better means of birth control. They perfected their research and in 1959 the pharmaceutical firm G.D. Searle and Co. applied to the FDA for approval of the Pill (called Envoid). On 9 May 1960, the FDA gave its approval of the drug; history would never be the same. [This historical summary is based on Nancy Gibbs, “Love, Sex, Freedom and The Paradox of the Pill,” *Time* (3 May 2010), pp. 41-43.]
- Second, what have been the effects of this oral contraceptive?
 1. For the first time in history, it provided women with an effective, convenient and noninvasive means of avoiding pregnancy.
 2. On a major scale, the Pill made it possible for women to pursue pleasure—and promiscuity rates went up dramatically. Theologian Albert Mohler argues that “the Pill made sex outside of marriage far easier to conceal, lowering the social cost of extramarital and premarital sex.”
 3. In 1965, the US Supreme Court, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, ruled that the Bill of Rights implicitly included the right of privacy and overturned all state bans on contraceptive use by married couples. (Many states at that time prohibited contraception and had indeed criminalized it.) Public policy at the national and state levels now embraced this form of contraception.

4. Gibbs writes: “By the 1970s the true impact of the Pill could begin to be measured, and it was not only the sexual behavior of American women; it was [also] how they envisioned their lives, their choices, and their obligations. In 1970 the median age at which college graduates married was about 23; by 1975, as use of the Pill among single women became more common, that age had jumped 2.5 years. The fashion of large families went the way of the girdle. In 1963, 80% of non-Catholic women said they wanted three or more children; that plunged to 29% by 1973. More women were able to imagine both a family and a job, which changed their childbearing calculations.”
5. The Pill also persuaded colleges and graduate schools not to reject female applicants on the assumption that they would just wind up pregnant and drop out of school.
6. The Pill also weakened the marital bond in that it separated sex from procreation. Theologian Albert Mohler contends that “the idea that sex would be severed from childbearing is a very modern concept—and a concept made meaningful only by the development of the pill and its successor birth control technologies. The severing of this relationship represents a quantum change in human life and relationships, not to mention morality.” The Creation Ordinance of God (Genesis 2) makes it quite clear that sex, sexuality and reproduction are central to human life, to marriage and to the future of the human race. Mohler: “The Pill turned pregnancy—and thus children—into elective choices, rather than natural gifts of the marital union. But then again, the marital union was itself weakened by the Pill, because the avoidance of pregnancy facilitated adultery and other forms of non-marital sex. In some hands, the Pill became a human pesticide.”
7. The Postmodern world in which we now live has championed the core value of freedom. Freedom in this worldview means license, the right to do anything one wishes and in turn being answerable to no one for one’s choices. Being answerable only to self is defined as liberating by the postmodern world, especially in the area of sex. Sexual freedom has been the mantra of this culture. Individuals should be free to do whatever they want with whomever they want so long as all participants are consenting adults. That is freedom? As columnist Janie B. Cheaney has observed, “For hundreds of years, ‘free love’ advocates have told us that all the complications of sex—the jealousy, rivalry, heartbreak, miserable marriages, murderous rages, and actual murders—were due to repression. Something so powerful shouldn’t be bottled up into monogamy. Something so beautiful should be free to flower at will. But free love was always considered a crackpot idea until the early [1960s], when the Pill (majestic in its lack of modifiers) removed the practical obstacle to full enjoyment. Social upheaval removed the stigma. And 50 flowering years later, what do we find? Jealousy, rivalry, heartbreaks, miserable (though much shorter) marriages, murderous rages, and actual murder. Still crazy after all these years.” We now have decades of empirical evidence that the “free love” movement has been one of history’s most dismal failures.

See Gibbs’s entire article in *Time* (3 May 2010), pp. 41-47, Janie B. Cheaney in *World* (21 April 2012), p. 22 and Mohler’s blog (26 April 2010).