

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Teens and Birth Control

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently reported that about one-third of American girls become pregnant as teenagers. He further summarizes some other staggering statistics:

- American teenagers become pregnant at a rate of about one a minute
- Some 82% of births in the US are unplanned
- American and European teens seem to be sexually active at roughly similar rates, Americans starting a bit earlier. But the American teen birthrate is three times Spain's rate; five times France's; 15 times Switzerland's
- Young Americans show a lack of understanding of where babies come from!!!

Kristof then makes a compelling case for an aggressive campaign for various birth control methods—from condoms (82% effective in preventing pregnancy) to “long-acting reversible contraceptives” (e.g., IUDs). He also advocates reopening many women's health clinics, recently closed due to the ongoing struggle over abortion. Leaving aside the entire issue of teen's responsibility for having sex in the first place and the role of their parents, I want to focus on the issue of birth control. It is controversial and difficult. So, let's process this as Christians.

The introduction of the birth control pill in the 1950s and the financial and legal support of the pill from the federal government moved contraceptives from being illegal to being the norm for most of 21st century humanity. As culture has accommodated itself to the norm of contraception, an effective separation of sex from procreation has occurred and the cultural consequences are hardly positive. Sexual activity now occurs without any concern for pregnancy, such that procreation is one of the least important aspects of marriage and sex. There is little doubt that the contraceptive revolution has played a major role in the moral decline of western civilization. Hence, contraception is an ethical issue.

As we consider the ethics of contraceptive medications, the perplexing nature of this issue is enhanced when one understands that some of the medications exclusively prevent fertilization and some hinder the implantation of the week-old embryo in the uterine wall of the mother. For example, RU-486 (Mifepristone) blocks a hormone required to sustain a pregnancy, which is then accompanied by another pill (misoprostol), which induces contractions and expels the fetus from the mother's body. Also, there are “Emergency Contraceptive Pills,” which involve estrogens, progestins and other hormones that prevent ovulation or fertilization and some that prevent the implantation of the embryo in the uterine wall. Finally, Plan B is a brand of

hormones promoted by Planned Parenthood and others as a “morning after pill.” All of these are in effect abortifacients (i.e., cause an abortion of the embryo).

Less controversial methods of birth control include the rhythm method, which involves a couple refraining from sexual intercourse during a certain number of days when the woman is thought to be fertile. Similarly, the Natural Family Planning method observes the physical changes in a woman’s body to determine when she is ovulating and susceptible to contraception. Avoiding sexual intercourse during these days prevents a pregnancy. In addition, there are various barrier methods, including male condoms, the diaphragm, contraceptive sponges, cervical caps and female condoms.

Finally, in terms of basic contraceptive products, there is the oral contraceptive pill (there are about forty types of these on the market), which are hormonal contraceptives that prevent ovulation and override the woman’s normal reproductive cycle, in effect tricking the body into thinking a pregnancy has occurred. At least 10 million women in America and over 100 million worldwide use this kind of contraceptive pill.

So, what do we do as Christians? Should Christians use birth control of any type? Are some acceptable and others not? Certainly, those chemical contraceptives that are in effect abortifacients are questionable and probably ethically unacceptable for the Christian couple. In an article this size, it is impossible to detail specific observations about the medical or ethical appropriateness of the many contraceptive products on the market. There is therefore a degree of biblically oriented wisdom needed on this matter. To that end, permit me to quote from Old Testament theologian Michael Grisanti of Master’s Seminary:

*Any decisions we make must be compatible with recognition that God has ultimate sovereignty, and this is not an area for us to regard as a secular province under our control. God values children highly and so should we. Since the Bible does not explicitly condemn or condone birth control, we must employ biblical (rather than worldly) wisdom in determining how we as couples can best bring God great glory through this stewardship of marriage and sexual intimacy (pp. 111-112). [This entire section on birth control is dependent on Grisanti’s valuable article in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 23/1 (Spring 2012), 85-112.]*

As with all things, we must begin our thinking and then make our ethical decisions based on God’s Word and the wisdom that comes from our study of His Word. May God give us that passion and that wisdom as we serve Him and represent Him, even in difficult issues such as contraception.

See Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* (12 November 2014) and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics* (2013 edition), pp. 31-33.