

In Praise of the Humble Condom

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“Even in those days there were far too many children. In the balcony there were more children than mothers, while the balance was about even in the orchestra frequented by the more prosperous citizens, who were more cautious in their begetting and conceiving.”

— a scene from old Danzig, as narrated by Oskar Matzerath
in Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*

If one would go to the typical conservative, Reformed congregation, one would probably find at least one, and perhaps many, families that are unusually large, by contemporary American standards. Mercifully, we are usually spared details about deeds better left private, but occasionally we are informed about the conception-friendly practices of our Reformed cohorts. Sometimes we are told outright; sometimes we just hear hints. But the suggestion emerges that use of contraception is immoral and that begetting of many babies is among the virtues of believers standing against the present evil age. In some circles this seems to have already become yet another test of pseudo-orthodoxy and, we might ask, why not? For one thing, stringent moral disapproval of contraception is not exactly a new thing in Christian history. Plenty of Christian theologians through the ages have condemned it, and it enjoys institutional prohibition to this very day in the Roman Catholic Church. For

another thing, it's not as if contraception has been put to the most righteous uses. The thought of condoms being passed out to high school students or active homosexuals in order to allow them to continue their deviant sexual behavior while remaining free of AIDS and fetuses does not exactly endear most conservative Christians to the utilization of such devices.

The fact that something is put to bad uses does not necessarily make the thing bad in and of itself, of course, so the latter point won't take us too far toward an ethical decision about whether married couples may use contraception. The former point—i.e., that prohibition of contraception has been a common place historically in many Christian circles—bears more reflection. What have been the grounds for such an ethical judgment? The Roman Catholic moral tradition deserves much admiration, and it is certainly more profound and thoughtful at any number of points than what seems to pass for Reformed ethics. Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that the prohibition of contraception has not been one of the highpoints of the tradition, but has rather been a source of embarrassment not only to progressive Catholics, but also to many of more conservative inclinations.

A key point for the prohibition, at least until relatively recently, has revolved around a teleological biology: the end of sexual activity is conception, and nothing ought to hinder sexual activity from attaining its end; ergo, contraception is immoral. It is this basic perspective that led Thomas Aquinas to put masturbation right behind murder—and above rape—when he weighed the gravity of particular sins. Unlike rape, after all, masturbation prohibits the possibility of sexual activity from reaching its end. Makes sense, sort of. Such ideas lingered on in Catholic moral theology for a long time, but don't remain very popular today. Nevertheless, some have made rather valiant attempts to save the rule while chucking its reasons. The unflappable Catholic ethicists Germain Grisez and John Finnis have laid out a series of basic goods against which one may not act. Life is one of these basic goods and, since contraception aims to prevent the flourishing of life, contraception is wrong. The intellectual acumen of Grisez and Finnis has never been in doubt, but such an argument is not likely to be persuasive except to the few who adopt their idiosyncratic views on practical reasoning and basic goods. The present pope has also thrown his tall hat into the ring. Pointing us in more personalist directions, John Paul II has reasoned that use of contraception disallows husband and wife to express the full measure of conjugal love

in sexual intercourse. This does sound dashing romantic. It seems to rest, however, more upon subjective experience and feeling than upon objective moral argumentation, and one cannot help but be just a little skeptical about such claims coming from one with presumably no experience of any sort of conjugal love.

The biological and philosophical orientation of the Roman Catholic tradition doesn't jive too well with the way most Reformed folks think about ethics. We want biblical and theological rationales for ethical conclusions. Though other rationales may be extant, there seem to be two principal rationales at work among the rank-and-file of the fertile Reformed crowd. Neither is very good, and both are rooted in the sort of simplistic biblicism that infects our churches. They are the kind of rationales that are appealing because they produce such easy answers. They absolve us from the necessity of hard thinking about our moral life and from the responsibility of the consequences of our actions.

The first rationale that has been spotted on the Reformed horizon is beautiful for its biblical simplicity: God has told us to be fruitful and multiply and has assured us that children are a blessing from him...so let's make 'em! This rationale reads the relevant Scripture texts in a classically biblicist and fundamentalist way. It makes the commands absolute and exceptionless (or at least nearly so), to be pursued at all costs, thereby eliminating hard cases, questions, and debates. All is black and white, and gray areas are eliminated. It is attractive, no doubt, but it does miss some rather fundamental points. As an obvious matter, it may be noted that the command "be fruitful and multiply" doesn't necessarily mean the same thing as "have as many kids as you can." A couple that has produced one child has been fruitful and has multiplied. Likewise, the biblical truth that one is blessed whose quiver is full of children does not specify just how big each person's quiver is. This is not meant to be irreverent, but simply to point out that there is a considerable leap of logic in equating the idea of a "full quiver" with the practice of begetting and conceiving as much as possible.

If we consider for a moment the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, perhaps it's helpful to contrast the nature of such a command with a command such as "do not steal." The latter command is negative, in that it tells us what we ought not do. As such, it is indeed a black and white instruction: either one steals or one doesn't. This is not to say that there are no difficult, marginal cases in which one might be uncertain

about whether a given action would constitute stealing, but once one makes one's ethical judgment, the command can be observed by simply refraining from acts of theft. The command to be fruitful and multiply is much more complicated. Unlike the command not to steal, the command to be fruitful and multiply is a matter of degree. When contemplating the command not to steal, the question "how much" is improper: one should not steal at all. But when faced with the command to be fruitful and multiply, asking "how much" is legitimate. The couple with one child has been fruitful and multiplied—but need they keep going? The couple with three children has been fruitful and multiplied—but need they keep going? The couple with thirteen children has been fruitful and multiplied—but need they keep going?

Such questions become particularly pointed when we consider that the command to be fruitful and multiply is not, by a long shot, the only such command that we've been given. We are commanded not only to beget children, but also to care for them and train them. We are commanded to work hard for six days of the week. We are commanded to pray and worship. We are commanded to respect our bodies, which means that we must sleep, eat, and exercise. It would seem to go without saying that any of these tasks, noble and right in themselves, pursued single-mindedly to the exclusion of the others, would be a perversion of the moral life. To work so hard that one cared not at all about the health of one's body would be a twisting of the command to work hard. To spend so much time training one's children that one had no time to work and hence to provide for their bodily necessities would be a twisting of the command to train one's children. To spend so much time praying that one neglected to train his children would be a perversion of the command to pray. Of course—and this is the rub—this makes Christian ethics a difficult task, much more difficult than a system in which one simply follows a bunch of ready-made rules (as fencing-the-law Pharisees knew). One is called to think, to reflect, to exercise wisdom and prudence. People are called to order their lives in a way that allows them to fulfill the multiple responsibilities that they have, doing justice to them all. Thus, when God said "Be fruitful and multiply," he didn't make it easy for us, but called us to exercise this good task in conjunction with any number of other good tasks, in accordance with the inevitable limitations of body, soul, and time that each person, to various degrees, possesses. The bearing and raising of children require a great deal of time, emotional energy, physical strength, and financial resources that all people do not

have in equal measure. To be thoughtful about one's begetting and conceiving, far from being a sign of moral turpitude, is much more a sign of moral maturity.

This leads to a second rationale for opposition to contraception that has been spotted in the Reformed world. It's a rationale that might conceivably be a counter-argument to the argument against the first rationale. This rationale is that when pregnancy happens, "it's God's will" and that "God is the one who makes babies." Who are we to assert our own wisdom into the equation when God's wisdom is so much higher than ours? Why not let God plan our families, since he knows best? Perhaps you've never heard such a claim among Reformed folks. Consider yourself lucky, for members of both laity and clergy are making it.

In a certain sense, it is perfectly true to say that pregnancy is "God's will" and that "God is the one who makes babies." In a certain sense. Conception does indeed take place according to God's *decretive* will. Likewise, God as the first cause of all things does indeed make babies. But to lapse from the realm of God's decretive will to that of his *preceptive* will is an inexcusable error, as seems sufficiently illustrated by the claim "the Holocaust was God's will." The fact that the Holocaust did occur according to the sovereign, inscrutable plan of God does not absolve the perpetrators from responsibility for their actions. In the same way, to affirm that God is the one who makes babies in some primary, ultimate sense, is to say little about the significance of making babies in another sense, according to secondary causation. (If you don't know how secondary causation works in the realm of conception, ask your mom or dad.) If it were true that refraining from contraception is an absolute biblical command, then it would be right to follow this course and to leave the results to God. But if it is not true, as I have argued above, and decisions about use of contraception must be made through wisdom and according to circumstances, then appeals to God as Master Family-Planner tend to function as little more than mantras designed to absolve us from responsibility for our actions.

When it comes right down to it, this second rationale is not that much different from the first. Both eliminate the need for hard thinking, the assumption of responsibility, and the exercise of wisdom in the interests of having a neat, clean, and tidy answer to a potential messy moral question. Both can hide themselves behind biblical doctrines and exhortations—taken in a one-sided, absolute, and therefore deceptive way. Both grasp at the divine and the immediate without much attention to

the human and the mediate, the latter of which God himself has ordained. Certainly it is an inconvenient fact, but we must be constantly reminded that living in a fallen world is often a messy affair—which makes the infamous condom in some ways an appropriate symbol of the Reformed life.