

Humanae Vitae

By Greg Witherow

The year 1960 was pivotal for contraception. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration had just approved the birth control pill for use by the American public. This act culminated years of labor by Margaret Sanger, the founder of the American birth control movement and Planned Parenthood, who helped provide funding in its development¹. The Pill was by no means the first contraceptive. But with its ease and near 100% effectiveness it brought contraception into the mainstream. Yet initially, contraceptives were not universally legal in the United States. It was not until the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Connecticut law outlawing contraception² in 1965 and a subsequent 1972 case³ (giving the unmarried access to contraception) that contraceptives were universally available in the United States⁴. With the ensuing use of contraception, dramatic changes were unleashed in Western civilization, often in ways unanticipated by the public. **For the first time in the history of mankind, sexual intercourse had been effectively decoupled from procreation.** The social implications were immense. Women saw the Pill as Liberation. They could now control their destiny and the natural workings of their bodies. No longer would they be burdened with children they didn't choose to have. Men instinctively saw something different; for them the Age of Unfettered Sex was about to dawn⁵. No longer would sex have consequences that required additional social obligations. And in the wake of contraception loomed the abortion and pornography industries. While always existing at the periphery, these trades were now moved to the threshold of the mainstream⁶, with contraception as the necessary stepping-stone. In the decade of the 1960's attitudes and science converged into the perfect storm and the Sexual Revolution was under way. And in its wake, abortion and Playboy® have become ordinary in American life.

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combined_oral_contraceptive_pill for a history of the Pill.

² Griswold versus Connecticut.

³ Eisenstadt versus Baird.

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combined_oral_contraceptive_pill.

⁵ Most people have never given much thought about this topic and most of Christianity has given its approval to the practice. As a result, many fine people who love Christ have unknowingly engaged in activity once universally regarded as gravely sinful. However, because it is sinful (whether an individual acknowledges it or not) the practice is harmful both to the individuals and society at large in that it has skewed our attitudes about sex.

⁶ It is not the purpose of this essay to prove the link between contraception (not just the Pill) to abortion or the spread of pornography. But it should be apparent that the wall of contraception had to fall before abortion could be made legal. Can anyone imagine abortion being legal but contraception not? In regards to pornography, contraception enables pornography from both the supply and demand side. How so? Women working in the pornography industry do not need to worry about pregnancy, a condition that would take them out of the labor pool. To the industry, medical expenses and liabilities of abortions, birthing babies and child support (incurred by the fathers) are minimized and keep the industry humming along. On the demand side, the mindset of childfree sex has led to marketing women's bodies as pleasure toys, meant to be enjoyed. This is not to say other factors have not played into the pornography boom. Color photography, the breakdown of marriage and more recently the Internet are keys to pornography's growth too. But without marriage and procreation positively channeling the male sex drive, the anchors of sex have been snapped and new social attitudes once restrained have been unleashed. Sex as it is depicted today in film, television, music and video games has virtually no connection with the creation of children.

A Break From History

Christians had been groomed for this moment. In 1930 the Anglican Church made the ground breaking and controversial announcement that birth control was a valid moral option. Previously all Protestants from the Reformation on had stood against contraception. Calvin called it “the murder of future persons”. Luther called it “worse than sodomy”. John Wesley (the founder of the Methodist church) said, “such preventative measures would destroy those who practiced them”. **There was complete Christian unity on the moral aspects of contraception until 1930.** But the act of the Anglican Church repudiated over 1,900 years of Christian dogma, both Catholic and Protestant. By 1960 all of Christendom followed⁷, with one notable exception; the Catholic Church. But that was to change soon, or so it was thought.

Paul VI and Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council was convened by Pope John XXIII and held its sessions between 1962 and 1965. No new dogmas or infallible teachings were to be promulgated at Vatican II, but its impact would be far reaching. The Council had four sessions, one each during the falls of 1962, 1963, 1964 and 1965. But Pope John XXIII died in 1963 requiring the remaining sessions to fall under the guidance of Pope Paul VI. In the 3rd session (1964) a statement was to be issued by the Council on the sacrament of marriage, with adjustments in canon law resulting. But at this moment, Paul VI stepped in and lifted contraception, a topic to be addressed during the 3rd session, from the bishops purview⁸. Contraception would be dealt with separately in a papal commission already underway. Why Paul VI did this is not known. Regardless, it was a decisive move.

The papal commission on birth control eventually had 72 members. In 1966 the commission reported to the Pope its findings, stating contraception is a valid moral choice. It recommended the Pope make its findings Church doctrine. Of the 72 members, only 7 dissented⁹. It wasn't even close. The commission report and two working papers (a majority and minority report) were leaked to the press. Pressure on Paul VI was mounting and expectations were that the commission report would be implemented in Church dogma. In parts of the United States and Canada Catholics were already being advised by priests that contraception was okay as the Church was about to rule in its favor. The anticipated ruling was a “done deal” to many. But then something unexpected happened as the Holy Spirit intervened. Scripture tells us, “The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it withersover he will” (Proverbs 21:1). On July 25, 1968 the Pope released the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Latin for “On Human Life”). The historical and unchanging teaching of the Catholic Church was to remain intact. Contraception was rejected as a valid moral choice.

⁷ Here I speak of western Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox accepted contraception around 1970. And there are pockets of dissent on this topic within Protestantism. The Old Order Amish condemn all forms of contraception. And there are individuals that do not practice contraception. But they would state it is a matter of conscience, not a dogma binding on all Christians.

⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Vatican_Council.

⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanae_Vitae.

A firestorm ensued. Undoubtedly the most controversial encyclical in the history of the Catholic Church met defiance across much of the West and it shook the Church to its core. Within two months the Canadian bishops published the Winnipeg Statement, essentially nullifying the encyclical. A leading theologian at the Catholic University of America¹⁰ declared the conscience of the individual overruled dogmatic teaching. Women across the West heard the same thing repeated by priests in the Confessional¹¹. The Age of Dissent had begun. Paul VI was shattered. He would never again publish an encyclical. But while most Catholics turned their back on this dogmatic instruction, the teaching and the truths behind it remain intact. Why is the Catholic Church so stubborn on this? It is because she is faithful to her Lord Jesus Christ who is the Word. But what does the Word of God have to say about contraception?

Scripture Speaks: The Sin of Onan

In Genesis 38 we have the story of Judah and his three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. Judah himself was a son of Jacob (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). His first son Er married a woman by the name of Tamar. It turns out that Er was a scoundrel while Tamar was noble. As a matter of fact, Tamar is the first woman mentioned in the New Testament¹², an honor indeed. Because Er was so wicked, God put him to death. We are not told how Er was wicked or how he was put to death; only that it happened. As Tamar was childless upon Er's death, Onan (the brother of Er) was obligated to marry the widow and give her a child. This was a Levitical law specific to Old Testament Israel, but it wasn't mandatory. If Onan did not want to carry out his obligation he would incur shame, but no more¹³. Onan decided to meet his obligation. Or so it was thought.

Scripture tells us, "But Onan knew the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And **what he did** was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and He slew him also. Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter in law, 'Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up' – for he feared that he would die, like his brothers...[and later]... she [Tamar] saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage". The important question is this; did God kill Onan because he spilled his seed (a contraceptive act) or is it because Onan denied his brother offspring? Let's look.

In this story three men denied Tamar a child but only one was put to death. Judah and Shelah denied Tamar a child when they conspired against her. But they were not put to death because the penalty for such behavior was only shame. So how was Onan's crime worse, worthy of death? We must revisit the crime scene.

¹⁰ The Reverend Charles Curran. He and 600 other theologians authored a dissent to *Humanae Vitae*. He was eventually removed from the faculty of the Catholic University and excommunicated by the Vatican.

¹¹ One of the first Catholic women I met (an older woman) after converting confided this to me.

¹² See Matthew 1:3. A close friend, Phil Rosenbaum, pointed out this fact to me. He will expand on this in a forthcoming book entitled, "The Footsteps of the Flock".

¹³ See Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

Onan had three options in dealing with Tamar. Option #1, he could have refused to marry Tamar. While denying “offspring to his brother”, it was not a capital offense. Option #2 was to marry Tamar but deny her access to the marriage bed. In this case he would spare himself the public shame while simultaneously denying to “give offspring to his brother”. But does anybody really think Onan would have been put to death for this? It doesn’t seem plausible, nor has anyone I am aware of made such a case. Option #3, Onan marries Tamar and uses contraception. All three options produce the same result, no offspring. But Option #3 gets Onan killed. In describing the crime we are told of both his **deed** (spilling seed) and his **intentions** (denying offspring to his brother). *And which of these was the motivation for God to strike him down?* Scripture states, “And **what he did** was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he slew him”. Onan crossed the line into a capital offense when he chose to spill his seed.

But some would argue that the Bible nowhere commands us not to contracept. But is that so? Is not the story of Onan meant to be instructive? **Why do we think these stories exist?** The apostle Paul answers that question in 1 Corinthians 10. Paul reviews the Old Testament story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt where they were punished with death in the wilderness. He then informs the reader why scripture records such events. He writes in verse 6, “Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did”(RSV). **In other words, the Old Testament stories are meant to instruct us how we should live.** God does not teach by merely listing out commands. He also teaches through stories, whether they are in parables or redemptive history. Through Onan, God instructs us on contraception¹⁴.

For 2,000 years the Catholic Church has consistently taught contraception is a sin. And today in Christendom she stands alone. For the first time in history mankind’s attitudes towards sex have been entirely decoupled from its procreative purpose. Contraception has acted as a boon for men, allowing them to pursue sex without the restraint of social consequences. And rather than liberating women¹⁵, contraception has enabled men to make women’s bodies tools of sexual pleasure, a primary theme of our popular culture. Today, adultery and fornication are much more tempting for men as it is easier to get away with such pursuits. Pornography flourishes without the expensive problem of pornography-produced pregnancies. The demand of today is, “No limits on sex!” – and increasingly there are none. We eat at the table of sex, enjoying the pleasures God created for us to enjoy. But then we induce vomiting, lest what we have eaten generates life within us. We do not eat from the Tree of Life, we eat from the Tree of Death. Satan told Eve that if she ate of the tree she would liberate herself. But while the fruit looked and tasted delicious, she enslaved herself with unintended consequences. Today civilization eats of the Tree of Contraception and has unintentionally become an addict to warped sex. We can be thankful the Catholic Church shows us the way out¹⁶.

¹⁴ There are other passages we can look to that address contraception, if not indirectly. For example, while homosexual sex is always a sin, only in the case of the male homosexual acts are the parties put to death (see Leviticus 20:13). Lesbian sex has no death penalty as no seed is spilled. The Protestant Charles Provan makes this point on page 17 of his book, *The Bible and Birth Control*.

¹⁵ Natural family planning is a valid way to space children while open to life. Sadly, this is discounted.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body” and Paul VI’s “*Humanae Vitae*” show us the way out. The Theology of the Body instructs us on the beauty and positive aspects of sex as God intended for us.