

Is it wrong for Christians to use birth control?

Some think that it is wrong for Christians to use birth control. I disagree.

1. Use of birth control is not in itself a failure to trust in God

If I said that "not jumping off high buildings and trying to fly is wrong because it is a failure to trust God" then you would protest that God has not commanded me to jump off off a high building and try to fly.

And you'd be right so to protest. Because claiming that failure to do something is a failure to trust God does not prove somehow that that something is a command of God. Rather it begs the question - "but has God commanded that?"

Trust relates to God's word. Only if God has commanded us to do something is a failure to do it a failure of trust. The "failure to trust God" line, then, doesn't constitute an argument against birth control - it just invites us to examine whether or not God has forbidden birth control.

2. God's command to us to be fruitful and multiply does not make all use of birth control wrong because affirmative duties cannot and should not be being performed constantly

God commands us to be fruitful and multiply.

But we need to distinguish between negative and affirmative duties. Negative duties are those which require us not to do something. Such as "you shall not murder". And we are to be not-doing that something every minute of every day. Affirmative duties are those which require us to do something. But they do not require that we be doing that something every moment of every day. The command to feed the hungry does not mean that we are to be feeding the hungry every moment of every day. If we did then we would be disobeying other affirmative commands such as that of preaching the gospel, working with our hands, teaching our children, clothing the naked and so on.

An affirmative duty is therefore not binding upon all people to the utmost degree every moment of the day but is to be set in relation to other affirmative duties. Otherwise we'd be having sex all the time the wife was not pregnant - but then we'd not be feeding the poor, preaching the gospel etc. Jesus said "no" to the good thing of healing more people in Mark 1 so as to do the better thing of preaching in the next towns. He commended Mary for not doing the good thing of helping with the meal because she was doing the better thing of sitting at his feet and listening to his word.

Affirmative duties need prioritising and there are many good things which it would be sinful to do because doing them would mean neglecting better things. If screams are coming from a burning house on the other side of the road then to continue to climb the stairs in order to have sex in order to obey the command to be fruitful and multiply would be sinful.

3. God's command to us to be fruitful and multiply does not make all use of birth control wrong because we need to understand what the Bible says about fruitfulness

God commands us to be fruitful and to multiply.

True, but we'd better be clear what this means. God intends a world populated by the righteous. This requires fruitfulness. Fruitfulness (as against barrenness) is a kingdom blessing. In the kingdom the eunuchs will have children (Is 54, 56, Luke 1.36, Ps 113 etc). But in the kingdom, some will make themselves (physical) eunuchs - how then will they enjoy kingdom blessings? (Matt 19) Is Jesus a fruitful tree (Ps 1) or not? If so, then fruitfulness may be by means other than physical procreation. And if by other means then it needs weighing up for a given couple at a given time which avenue of fruitfulness God intends for them - because they may be in conflict. Jesus, other single people,

married couples who are not having sex for a while in order to pray (I Cor 7) are all obeying the command to be fruitful and multiply and yet they are all disobeying it *if* it can only be obeyed by physical procreation. Discipling the nations looks like a pretty good way, for example.

4. The fact that children are never seen in Scripture as anything other than a blessing does not mean that all use of birth control is wrong

Some argue that all use of birth control is wrong because children are seen in Scripture as an unmitigated blessing - and it would be wrong to decline a blessing from God.

But all of God's good gifts are unmitigated blessings unless and until they are allowed to obstruct the performance of duties / receipt of greater blessings. And what was said about affirmative duties above (refusing the good in order to do/receive the best) means that we do say "no" to good things. Once again, this begs the question. The eunuch for the sake of the kingdom declines the blessing of children and is commended for it.

(In fact, Jesus declares a woe on "those who are pregnant and those who are nursing infants" in the day of Jerusalem's destruction. It would seem that if asked, he would have said, "as the days for the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem draw near, you'd do well to stop trying to have children". Luke 21.23)

5. The fact that one of the prime functions of sex is procreation does not mean that all use of birth control is wrong

Should sex always have as one of its intentions the production of offspring? Or should it always have that intention at points in the monthly cycle when conception is possible? It is not obvious that the fact that procreation is one of the key purposes of sex means that it is always the primary purpose or must always be a possibility. The physical union of Adam and Eve; the celebration of sex as fun in Song of Songs; the fact that sex points to the union of Christ and the church which itself is not about further progeny; the natural assumption that sex is a good thing even for those who are not fertile (barren, post-menopausal) - all these point to the possibility that sex without the possibility of or intention to have children is lawful.

6. Hard cases may usefully clarify the issue though not necessarily proving the point that all use of birth control is wrong

Lots of hard cases come to mind. Instances of what seem to us to be "over-large" families by reason of righteous paternal absence (he's fighting to defend the country); lack of space; one more baby and you'll die; recent diagnosis with terminal cancer etc.

Those who think that all use of birth control is wrong object to the use of such hard cases, protesting that all that is needed is obedience to the command to be fruitful and then complete trust that God will bless that obedience.

But do not the hard cases at least give us pause for thought? If a couple had a condition which meant that every child of theirs died within a fortnight of being born or a condition which meant that every child of theirs would be severely learning disabled, are they therefore obliged to carry on having as many children as possible? If the answer is that they should only have sex at moments in the monthly cycle when conception is not possible then the only difference between "anti-birth control" and "pro-birth control" would not be whether you are allowed to restrict the number of children you have but whether you are allowed to do so by artificial means. We don't want to go there ("natural" is good and "artificial" is bad) do we?

If you were a couple in a concentration camp where for the last 20 years every person stayed for 15 months and was then executed and every baby born was, at birth, mutilated and then killed, should you then proceed to try and have as many children as possible? If you can see one circumstance in

which it would be legitimate not to try and have as many children as possible then it is clearly not binding upon all couples at all times. If you allow sex except where conception is a possibility you're back with the "natural is good", "artificial is bad" version of having non-procreative sex.

7. A word of caution about binding consciences

We should be slow to declare actions to be sinful which God has not declared to be sinful. The longer the chain of deduction, the more likelihood of human error having crept into it. The less explicit the command or prohibition of Scripture, the more reluctant we should be to bind the consciences of others. This is not an argument against the anti-birth control position as such. Just a caution.

8. A word of appreciation

Although, as explained, I do not believe that all use of birth control is wrong, nevertheless, its opponents are onto something important. A word of appreciation is in order.

Many of the anti-birth control people are appalled at the selfishness which characterises Christians' decisions about how many children they would "like". They are right to assert that kingdom priorities should take first place as we consider the size of family. They are also right to assert that in very many circumstances indeed, a large family is not only a great blessing but a great opportunity to grow the church. Christians' thinking has often been dominated by worldly attitudes and agendas. I believe that Christians who declare all use of birth control to be sinful are seriously muddled and unbiblical but I would rather have their kingdom priorities and endeavours to think biblically about every issue than the worldly selfishness of many of the rest of us.