Every great president since Abraham Lincoln has learned that political success requires uniting one’s party and splitting the opposition. In the same way, the success of Margaret Sanger in transforming American attitudes toward contraception, without which the government’s forty-year campaign for birth or population control under the guise of “family planning” would not have been possible, has a lot to due with her strategy of splitting her opposition. When Sanger launched the American Birth Control League in 1921, she faced fierce resistance not only on the part of the Catholic church but also among all varieties of American Protestants, including fundamentalists and modernists of the northern denominations. The Episcopal church’s position was typical; the Lambeth Conference of Bishops of 1908 and 1920 had delivered warnings against the use of contraception as well as the false teaching that the conjugal act was an end in itself.¹ In essence, the foe that Sanger would need to split was not a Catholic one; it was the widely shared Christian consensus

against birth control that not even the Reformation had breached.

And split her opposition she did. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the atheist Sanger exploited the anxieties of American Protestants who feared Catholic immigration, winning over liberal Protestants with an appeal to the “science” of soft eugenics and the “health effects” of birth control as a way to build the Kingdom of God in America. Working through the wives of Protestant clergyman on both sides of the Atlantic, Sanger was instrumental in persuading the bishops at the Lambeth Conference of 1930 to reverse course and endorse contraception, as well as the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) to do likewise in 1931. While the FCC endorsement triggered a revolt among its member denominations, by the end of the 1930s, opposition to birth control was fading away from the FCC constituency.2

Sanger faced more difficulty working on Protestants outside the mainline establishment; in fact, she ignored them. The forerunners of the post-World-War-Two evangelical coalition—from the Baptists John Roach Straton of New York and J. C. Masse of Boston to the Presbyterians Mark Allison Matthews of Seattle and Clarence MacCartney of Philadelphia—continued to hold the line against contraception.3 Publications of the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, for example, editorialized against birth control through the early 1930s.4 In contrast to the anti-Catholicism of their liberal counterparts, these Protestants praised Catholic sexual ethics and welcomed Pope Pius XI’s encyclical released December 30, 1930, Casti Connubii, that claimed the “conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children” and that those who “deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose,

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sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.”

But conservative Protestants did not hold out forever. A 1936 federal court decision that allowed physicians to provide birth control “for the purpose of saving life or promoting the well-being of their patients,” served to weaken the Fundamentalist guard as much as the mainline. Moreover, when Billy Graham emerged as the popular leader of a renewed evangelical movement after World War Two, the next generation of conservative Protestants would fall in line with their liberal Protestant brethren even as they represented themselves as the orthodox alternative.

The reversal among fundamentalists and evangelicals was not the result of an outsider lobbying them directly but the work of insiders attempting to adjust to postwar America. The change as such reflects two developments, one cultural and the other theological. First, despite premillennial theological roots, mid-twentieth-century evangelicalism had become closely identified with the American way of life exemplified by burgeoning suburbia and with a certain fusion of religion and politics. Prospects for the old Protestant Empire actually seemed to brighten again, albeit through a series of compromises with modern life. Martin Marty is probably correct in seeing the popularity of Billy Graham as demonstrating “how theologically inclusive and ethically disengaged the [religious] revival of the 1950’s had become.” Second, in their preference for parachurch organizations and autonomous congregations and in their distrust of tradition and ecclesiastical authority, the new evangelicals—in George Marsden’s words—“emphasized all the more the Protestant principle of the exclusive and infallible authority of Scripture.” Indeed, it would be through a new reading of Scripture that evangelicals would join with their mainline foes to end 450 years of Protestant opposition to birth

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control, unraveling the Christian consensus dating back to Augustine that children were the first purpose of marriage.

**Birth Control in Christianity Today**

Nowhere is this change better reflected than in *Christianity Today*, the “magazine of record” of the postwar evangelical movement. The fortnightly was first drawn into the birth-control question by the 1959 report of the President’s Committee to Study the United States Military Assistance Program, chaired by General William Draper. Fueled by Malthusian fears during the 1950s, when the American Total Fertility Rate approached 3.8 children per woman, the “Draper Report” recommended that support for “family planning” programs be a part of foreign-aid programs. The “news” article on this subject stands as one of three turning points in evangelical opinion. The news report gives an account of a Thanksgiving statement by the U.S. Catholic Bishops that opposed public assistance for promoting artificial birth control. The magazine agreed with President Dwight Eisenhower and Senator John F. Kennedy that a federal policy promoting birth control would be a “mistake.” Yet, the article continued: “Among evangelicals, the hullabaloo perhaps served to crystallize some convictions,” turning them “anew to the Bible for a re-examination of views on the legitimacy of sex severed from its procreative function.” Registering opposition to birth control was Herbert E. McKee, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), who was “firmly against any form of birth control. God has never revoked his great command to be ‘fruitful and multiply.’” Seeming to channel the anti-contraception crusader Anthony Comstock, Merrill C. Tenney of Wheaton College argued that birth regulation must be a personal matter of “prayerful agreement and self-control rather than promiscuous use of chemical or mechanical aid.”

More striking were the evangelical leaders speaking in favor of birth control. P. Kenneth Geiser, M.D., of the Christian Medical Society said that “some use of contraceptives is necessary. I do not see that they are

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harmful or unscriptural.” From Fuller Theological Seminary, Edward Carnell argued that “the question of contraceptives is simply one expedient within the creative possibilities of love.” NAE co-founder Harold J. Ockenga opined that birth control was needed to control the “population explosion,” adding: “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with birth control per se.” Shifting into an editorial mode, *Christianity Today* concluded that the Bible did not discuss birth control, since “avoidance of parenthood was unheard of in biblical times.” This meant that the evangelical position “is one of the liberty of a good conscience before God.” However, the magazine noted the irony that this controversy had flared up just as Christians prepared to celebrate the birth of Jesus, so that “God’s sovereignty over the human reproductive process, exhibited nowhere more strikingly than in the incarnation, fell into the background.”

Further evidence of shifting opinions came the same month in an interview by the *New York Times* with Billy Graham. The article reported that “the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham believes there is nothing morally wrong in the practice of birth control,” although he felt that population-control aid to countries requesting it should be provided by private agencies, not by governments. Graham, himself a father of five, emphasized that birth control was an answer to the “terrifying and tragic” problem of overpopulation, that there was nothing in Scripture that barred its responsible use, and that the majority of Americans used contraception in any case, “whether they be Protestants or Roman Catholics.”

During the next year, however, most commentary in *Christianity Today* reflected continued opposition to birth control. A February 1960 editorial acknowledged that “exploding world populations pose new problems,” but that “much of the prattle stressing birth control as the main solution is more wordy than wise.” Indeed, birth control offered at best “a quantitative solution” to moral and spiritual problems, and led churchmen to “sheer relativism.” While taking a slap at Catholic “pretensions” in arguing “that birth control is moral by natural law but immoral


by artificial means,” the editorial ended on an ambiguous, yet still critical note: “Many churchmen are uneasy because attempts to justify birth control by appeal to population explosions come dangerously near to making the end justify the means. So responsible parenthood, not exploding population, gets more and more emphasis. But just which parents are responsible for whose children?”

A review in the same issue by E. P. Schulze slammed the 1959 book by Alfred Martin Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood and Birth Control in the Light of Christian Ethics*. A Missouri Synod Lutheran, Rehwinkel was the first among Protestants outside the mainline to embrace birth control and endorse Margaret Sanger’s birth-control organization, which had changed its name to Planned Parenthood in 1942. After noting Rehwinkel’s endorsement of birth control and scorn for continence, Schulze replied that “the command, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ has not yet been repealed, and children are still ‘an heritage of the Lord!’” Citing Old Testament precedents, he argued that Christians should “let the omniscient Father of us all determine the size of our families. He does it with infinite wisdom, and often permits us fewer children than we wish.” The reviewer predicted that the “outstanding influence” of this book would be “to foster a sexual life divorced from its basic purpose and responsibilities.”

A subsequent review of Richard Fagley’s *The Population Explosion and Christian Responsibility*, a commentary on the 1959 “Mansfield Report” on the “population explosion” produced by the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council, drew similar scorn. Reviewer Sherwood T. Wirt blasted the mainline Protestant churches for advocating planned parenthood, “not for its own sake but as a deterrent to keep the hordes of the future from being born.” The reviewer accused the Anglican Fagley of distorting Scripture, as when the latter argued that 1 Timothy 2:15 “did not mean that faithful women would be saved through childbearing, but that they would come ‘safely through childbirth.’” Wirth

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asked: “Will barrenness produce godliness in America? . . . Is a thinned-out population morally and spiritually superior to other kinds? Is this the divine path to peace and the abundant life?” He answered: “The truth is that God has ways of confounding the statisticians.”

What the Editors Were Thinking

For the next four-and-a-half years, the birth-control issue largely vanished from the pages of Christianity Today. All the same, the issue was on the minds of its editors Carl F. H. Henry and Harold Lindsell. Within the archival collection for Christianity Today, housed at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, there are few “subject” files from the early 1960s. Prominent exceptions are two thick files, marked “Population Information—General,” which provide insight into what the editors were reading. The materials bear two themes. The first is the catastrophe of the “population explosion.” Items from 1962 include a Malthusian commentary on the “Pitfalls of Progress” appearing in The Nation and a news release from the Population Reference Bureau, “Birth Rate, Down; Baby Count, Up.” The latter warned that the decline in the U.S. birth rate after 1957 was deceptive. Given the number of American women about to enter their prime child-bearing years, “the number of babies will go up, a way [sic] up.” A “Population Doubling Table,” possibly hand-drawn by Carl Henry, showed particularly scary numbers for the Congo, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Brazil. Another article, “The Birth-Control Explosion” from the Canadian magazine Maclean’s, reported: “Now, at last, attitudes are changing toward the only thing anybody, anywhere can do about the population explosion.”

The one discordant note was an article, “East Bloc Frets over Birth Rate,” from the New York Times. Exploring fertility decline in Eastern Europe, it attributed low birth rates to housing shortages, the “large-scale employment of women,” high divorce rates, and legal and illegal abortions. One official reported three abortions for every live birth in Hungary, what


he called “an institutional killing of the nation.” Hungarian author Gyula Fekete lamented: “The new hedonistic religion is everything for the present, nothing for the future. For 15 years our plays, novels and editorials rated participation in production work higher than motherhood—we emancipated childless women, but not mothers.” Henry’s memo attached to the article noted that “not all populations are expanding,” and he might have seen in this report portents of a future America once the contraceptive mentality had broken through. Instead, Henry seemed mesmerized by the “population explosion.” As another commentary in this file put it: “It is clear that only an evangelistic advance of a proportion we have never imagined can save the Church from being buried, not by the Russians, but by a numerical landslide of our own kinfolk. . . . This peril is present and real.” In an odd way, evangelism was blurring into birth control.17

The second theme in the archives is the mounting support for a liberalization of birth-control teachings within the Catholic church. For example, a 1961 issue of Population Bulletin examined “New Trends in Roman Catholic Opinion.” It noted that Pope Pius XII, in 1951, had agreed that certain people “can be relieved of this positive obligation” to procreate, for legitimate “medical, eugenic, economic and social reasons.” It featured John O’Brien, a theology professor at Notre Dame University, who argued that “the time has come for citizens of all faiths to unite in an effort to remove this divisive and nettlesome issue [of birth control] from the political and social life of our nation.” The issue also carried an essay by John Rock, one of the researchers responsible for the birth-control pill—and a Catholic. Relative to public policy, he urged that all restrictions on birth-control methods, “written or unwritten,” should be lifted, so that “the communicant of any faith will be able to choose a method in accord with the dictates of his own conscience.” The associate editor of Catholic World, Father Louis McKennan, hoped that the “population explosion” would lead Catholics to “sentiments more noble and more realistic than: there’s enough food for everybody, so what are we getting

excited about?”^{18}

Joint attention to the “population explosion” and debate among Catholics finally brought *Christianity Today* back to the birth-control question in 1965. The magazine reported in January that the archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota, had stopped showing a television series on birth control. This was part of an effort by church authorities to minimize debate until the Vatican had clarified its position.^{19} An April article pointed to mounting pressures within the Catholic church for change. Twenty leading lay Catholics in England had declared the absolute prohibition of contraceptives “strangely unintegrated” in light of Rome’s acceptance of the “safe period” and teaching on the “unitive” purpose of sexual intercourse. Another archbishop had predicted that the church would lose vast numbers of members unless it changed policy. And the pope had summoned his Birth Control Commission to a special meeting in Rome, seeking advice on the progestin-estrogen pill. “There seems little doubt,” the article concluded, “that public sentiment, religious and otherwise, is shifting increasingly toward acceptance of birth control.”^{20}

While *Christianity Today* gave no notice of the Supreme Court’s 1965 *Griswold* decision overturning Connecticut’s “Comstock” law that had proscribed the sale of contraceptives, it noted a legislative effort in Massachusetts to repeal a similar measure. Two weeks later, under the title “Birth Control Bombshell,” the magazine highlighted a “remarkable declaration by 37 American Catholic scholars,” which called arguments against birth control “unconvincing” and labeled contraceptive use not intrinsically immoral. Meanwhile, a perplexed Paul VI lamented in Rome: “We cannot remain silent. But to speak out is a real problem. The Church has not ever over the centuries had to face anything like these problems.”^{21}


Constructing an Evangelical Alternative

This was the context in which Christianity Today published its own bombshell, the second turning point in evangelical opinion, “How to Decide the Birth Control Question,” in the March 4, 1966, issue. The author was John Warwick Montgomery, a Lutheran who taught church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago. His purpose was to present the case for a distinctive evangelical embrace of birth control. To do so, he accentuated contrasts with Catholic teaching and an amalgam he called “Secularists and Liberal Protestants.” Regarding the former, he emphasized the “strange inconsistency” in the way Rome held up celibacy as the clerical ideal, while seeming “to do all within its power to encourage child bearing on the part of the married.” Montgomery called the application of “natural law” thinking to birth control “especially bizarre,” for it held that man can appropriately control “natural” phenomena like animal populations and vegetation, “but cannot without sin control his own numbers in the face of severe population pressures.” He favorably quoted John Rock’s condemnation of the Vatican-approved rhythm method as “unnatural,” without noting the Harvard physician’s role as co-inventor and promoter of the birth-control pill.22

Turning to his amalgamation of “Secularists and Liberal Protestants,” Montgomery traced its origins to “the courtly love tradition” of the medieval era and “the romantic movement” of the nineteenth century. This tradition “sees the union of man and women not as a means to an end but as an end in itself.” When blended with “a thinly disguised contemporary humanism,” the result was a sexual ethic—“the so-called new morality”—that cast “the love relation” alone as “the fulfillment of human aspirations and the manifestation of God-as-Agape,” notably, one not limited to marriage. Among such people, “the ethics of birth control becomes situational and ad hoc,” while “the overpopulation issue engulfs birth-control thinking.”23

Both of these formulations were argumentative straw men, particularly the latter, in light of the Mansfield Report. In any case, Montgomery

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23. Ibid., p. 9.
Carlson, *Paving the Way for Title X*

argued that both Catholics and liberal Protestants had “fallen into a more acute form of the same error.” He labeled this the “naturalistic fallacy,” the notion that the descriptive (that which is) automatically gives rise to the normative (that which ought to be). In contrast, Montgomery said, the evangelical relied on Scripture. It was here that he introduced his novel argument: Ephesians 5 trumps Genesis 1–2 as the focal point of scriptural teaching on marriage and procreation:

The center is not to be found in the first two chapters of Genesis, so often cited in isolation, but in Ephesians 5:22–32, which quotes Genesis in the context of the New Covenant in Christ. Understood in the light of New Testament fulfillment, marriage cannot be regarded simply as a means (‘Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth’) or unqualifiedly as an end (‘They shall be one flesh’). Rather, it is to be seen as an analogy—indeed, as the best human analogy—of the relationship between Christ and his Church.24

This meant that the evangelical could avoid “the Hegelian-like dialectic extremes of the Roman and liberal Protestant views.” Because Christ’s bond to the church was a complete love relationship, “one must not view marriage simply as a procreative function.” This meant that where “birth control can contribute to ‘subduing the earth’ in order to achieve a better human relationship, it is not to be condemned.” He acknowledged that “the marital union is properly fulfilled in natural birth” and he underscored that the use of birth-control devices by the unmarried “is not to be tolerated,” since this would violate “the high analogy of Christ and Church.” All the same, evangelicals could responsibly use birth control “in light of their own physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual situation, and in light of the population picture in their area of the world.” In this way, “the Christian stands free from the shackles of legalism [Catholics] and from the chaos of libertarianism [liberal Protestants].”25

Evangelical leaders were delighted with Montgomery; his piece would be frequently cited as the authoritative commentary on the birth-control

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24. Ibid., p. 10.
25. Ibid.
question. Indeed, when Christianity Today published its editorial on Pope Paul VI’s Humanae Vitae in 1968, it cited the Montgomery article as providing the authentic alternative. Leading up to that editorial were two years of commentary on the Catholic birth-control crisis, with a growing sense of quiet satisfaction over Rome’s struggles. One article, “Thirteenth Century Thinking in Boston,” complained of opposition to a repeal of the Massachusetts “Comstock” law by a state representative from Roxbury, “where the percentage of chain-pregnancy, child-a-year married couples is higher than in any comparable place in the nation.”

Another piece boldly concluded that, under the Catholic rubric of “Probabilism,” “Catholics can now freely and legitimately use the birth-control pill without any sin at all, nor need they confess its use in the confessional.” Still other articles focused on Catholic authorities “limping behind on birth control” while dissenters calling for change grew in number and volume.

Humanae Vitae, issued by Paul VI in late July 1968, startled everyone, including the editors of Christianity Today. An editorial in the August 16 issue said that the pope “deserves to be admired for the courage of the encyclical,” which was not just another accommodation to secular whims. Yet, “the evangelical can but wish that the pontiff had reserved his valor for an authentically biblical commitment.” The encyclical’s “Achilles heel” was that “it is alien to biblical revelation,” with the editors adding: “The Bible says clearly that marriage alone sanctifies sexual intercourse. But it does not teach—as the Pope does—that intercourse is justifiable only if conception may result.” The editors further rejected traditional Protestant interpretation of the sin of Onan (Genesis 38:8–10). Since there was “ample evidence” that birth control had existed in biblical times and since Scripture “does not speak directly to the issue,” evangelicals “tend

to conclude” that methods which prevent conception—“as distinguished from those that abort a fertilized egg”—could be “good or bad, depending upon the motives.” That this summation of the evangelical position was of quite recent origin was not noted.31

An article in the same issue focused on the “groundswell of dissent” spawned by *Humanae Vitae* and “the crisis it seemed to be precipitating among the half billion members claimed by the Roman Catholic Church.” Schadenfreude was again the theme. The encyclical “was a statement of pathos, almost of apology” and it probably had “no counterpoint in papal history.” As “a major sign of defiance,” the article pointed to a statement by more than a hundred Catholic theologians rejecting the pope’s logic: “Never before in modern times has there been such open resistance to a papal edict.” Among the “Outsider’s Reactions” reported was a statement by Billy Graham: “In general I would disagree with it [*Humanae Vitae*]. . . . I believe in planned parenthood.” The article added: “Graham spoke of seeing the effects of the ‘population explosion’ in his worldwide travels.”32

In an editorial the next month, the editors gloated over the rising tide of dissent within the Catholic church. More brashly, they compared the promulgation of *Humane Vitae* to an act of Communist repression: “confronted with the same type of problem that the U.S.S.R. faced among the freedom-seeking people of Czechoslovakia—erosion of authority—Pope Paul VI chose to halt the threat to his ecclesiastical structure by the means that the totalitarian inevitably must use: a show of power.” While admitting that some Catholic dissent “stems from humanistic, secularistic presuppositions,” the editorial scrupulously avoided any mention of nearly 450 years of Protestant opposition to birth control. Rather:

What are Protestants to make of the current crisis in Catholic authority? Those whose theological roots rest deep in the biblical theology of the Reformation recognize the present challenge to the papal authority that elevates church tradition over biblical teaching as a possible step toward Christian freedom and truth. They join with dissenting Catholics in

their opposition to a position on birth control that exhibits a non-scriptural misunderstanding of the role of sex in marriage.

The editors saw an opportunity, hoping the crisis would guide Catholics “to a complete rejection of the false doctrine of Papal infallibility.”33 Another editorial called *Humane Vitae* “the most crucial test of papal authority and supremacy in centuries,” noting with implicit hope that the Catholic church “may be on the verge of collapse.”34

**Evangelical Leaders React to *Humanae Vitae***

Running concurrent with Catholicism’s civil war over *Humanae Vitae* was an August 1968 consultation on “The Control of Human Reproduction,” sponsored by *Christianity Today* and the Christian Medical Society and involving a Who’s Who of evangelical leaders. The conference appears to have been conceived by Walter O. Spitzer, general director of the Christian Medical Society, and Carl Henry, during 1967. Just as with the Mansfield Report, “the medical missionaries whose thoughtful inquiries from many lands” served as “the principal stimulus” to the project.35 Spitzer selected the medical doctors and researchers who participated; Henry chose the theologians and sociologists. Spitzer reported that “scores of foundations” turned down his funding requests “because they were afraid of the controversial nature of the proceedings.”36 Harold Lindsell, Henry’s successor as editor of *Christianity Today* in mid-1968, covered the project’s deficit with enhanced “honoraria” for papers published in the magazine, money sent not to the authors but instead to the Christian Medical Society.37 These papers were completed by June 20, 1968, about a month before the release of *Humanae Vitae*. The symposium convened in New Hampshire in late August; its consensus document, “A Protestant Affirmation on the Control of Human Reproduction,” drafted under Lindsell’s direction, was

36. Letter, Walter O. Spitzer to Harold Lindsell, October 21, 1968; in CTI-BGC, Box 17, File 93: “Correspondence, Author’s File.”
37. Letter, Walter O. Spitzer to Harold Lindsell, October 15, 1968; and letter, Harold Lindsell to Walter O. Spitzer, October 17, 1968, in CTI-BGC, Box 17, File 93.
clearly conceived as an evangelical reaction to *Humanae Vitae*. Lindsell and Harold Ockenga co-chaired the session. The honorary chairman was Tom Clark, retired justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.\(^{38}\)

Four of the papers were published in the November 8, 1968, issue of *Christianity Today*. Bruce Waltke of Dallas Theological Seminary tackled the question of contraception and abortion in the Old Testament. While Assyrians of the 1450–1250 era B.C. had treated the fetus as a person and had so prohibited abortion, he said, “the Old Testament . . . never reckons the fetus as equivalent to a life.” Indeed, according to Waltke, “God does not regard the fetus as a soul, no matter how far gestation has progressed.” Regarding the sin of Onan, the author rejected the argument of “Catholic exegetes” that God punished him for practicing birth control (with no mention that Luther and Calvin also held to this view); rather, “the context clearly indicates that Onan’s sin lay in his selfish unwillingness to honor his levirate duty.” Waltke concluded “that the Old Testament prohibits infanticide, sterilization, and continence as means of avoiding pregnancy, but it does not prohibit contraception.” It was also ambivalent toward abortion. Moreover, he turned the divine injunction in Genesis 1:28 upside-down, concluding that to “subdue” the earth “may apply to cases of overpopulation” where “God enjoins man to use his technological achievements to maintain a balance for the good life.”\(^{39}\)

“The Relation of the Soul to the Fetus” came from Paul Jewett, professor of systematic theology at Fuller Seminary. He boldly stated that while the mother’s “humanity cannot be doubted,” the humanity of the fetus “cannot be demonstrated.” In fact:

> Scripture offers no direct teaching on the question of the participation of the fetus in the divine image. The narrative of man’s creation presents as full grown the one made in the image and likeness of God. Since the creation narrative speaks of God’s ‘breathing into man’s nostrils the breath of life,’ it might seem plausible to argue that the soul informs the fetus when the first breath is drawn, that is, at birth.


Jewett conceded that there is a problem with Psalm 139:13–15 (“For thou didst form my inward parts. Thou didst cover me in my mother’s womb. . . My frame was not hidden from thee, when I was made in secret.”), and acknowledged that “the psalmist did not think of his humanity as uniquely tied to the moment of birth.” So the fetus should be seen as “a potential person” or perhaps a “primordial person.” This meant “that the Christian answer to the control of human reproduction” should focus on “the prevention of conception,” with abortion as “a last recourse.”

Robert Meye of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary examined “The New Testament and Birth Control.” He acknowledged that “primitive” Christians had held to Judaism’s “reservations” about birth control and “disavowal” of abortion; yet “this does not at all mean . . . that such practices are contradictory to the heart of the New Testament faith and practice.” Meye rejected the arguments of Augustine: “Neither the Old Testament nor the New speaks of procreation as the end of the sexual union.” The true end was “one flesh,” with the sexual relationship itself—not the bearing of children—“assigned a redemptive significance.” Regarding birth control, New Testament passages “on balance . . . seem to leave the door open for its responsible use.” Regarding abortion, he insisted that the New Testament said nothing. Hence, on these matters, “the Christian is not bound by a legal code; he is free to walk in the spirit through the world and to take the measure of all possible practices.” The one restraint was care that one not offend a Christian brother. The time was past when the use of contraceptives might so offend; “not so with abortion.” All the same, “there are those within the Christian community who can see no final offense in abortion when entered into responsibly by a woman in consultation with her physician.”

A Canadian medical doctor, M. O. Vincent, presented “A Christian View of Contraception.” While there was “no specific text in Scripture” to settle the matter, he argued, “the overall scriptural view of the nature of God, man, marriage, and sexual intercourse leads to the conclusion

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that we have a right to control conception.” God’s words that humans “be fruitful and multiply” were given “more as a blessing than a commandment,” Vincent insisted. Woman was created as a companion to man, not as a breeder. Paul “implies frequent sexual relations as the norm in marriage, without any mention of procreation.” The Song of Solomon cast sex as “a sensuous delight.” Vincent saw contraception as “the means of preventing the birth of unwanted children.” The “population explosion” meant that the “over-production of children may be as sinful as selfish avoidance of parenthood.” Since some couples “do not like children,” they had “a right to marital companionship without children.” While Vincent opposed the rhythm method, he favored sterilization. In sum: “Contraception in Christian marriage not only is permitted, but has a very significant value.”

An Affinity for Abortion

Other papers reflected a surprising affinity for abortion. John Scanzoni, a Wheaton College graduate who taught sociology at Indiana University, rejected the argument that abortion is the “killing of a human being.” Indeed, he agreed with earlier writers that abortion is “a very effective birth control method.” In support, he referred primarily to Garrett Hardin, a strident non-Christian who also favored a fairly aggressive program of euthanasia. Hardin had asserted that the “early stages of an individual fetus have had very little human effort invested in them; they are of very little worth. The DNA of a zygote is not a human being.” Citing the example of war, Scanzoni argued that “there are times when it is permissible to snuff out human life. The same then would apply to the fetus.” Abortion could also alleviate “the conditions which spawn the cycle of poverty,” because “infinitely more important” than the right to life was “the right of the child to be a wanted child.” In short, “in the case of abortion, if the couple is convinced the fetus is not human or if certain conditions warrant its termination, it then becomes legitimate (where legal) as a method of fertility control.” Put another way, “I am persuaded that the decision to

abortion or to sterilize is a matter of Christian liberty.”

Professor of human genetics at the University of Minnesota, V. Elving Anderson, also embraced Hardin’s argument that “the DNA in a zygote is only a promise of things to come.” As Anderson summarized: “it is more accurate to say that the zygote is potentially human than that it is fully human.” In order to restrict conception for genetic reasons, couples could morally choose between contraceptives, sterilization, and abortion. In the end, he agreed with Scanzoni: “Responsible decisions concerning the use of conception control, sterilization, and abortion require the freedom implied in Christian liberty.”

John Warwick Montgomery, writing on “The Christian View of the Fetus,” found himself in a new and difficult situation. Two years earlier, he had built the case for acceptance of birth control. Now, he labored to salvage the humanity of the unborn. Montgomery argued that conception was the time when soul and body unite: “The pressure of modern embryological knowledge has pushed creationist theologians more and more to the view that the soul is supplied by God when conception itself occurs.” He found this affirmed in the New Testament and warned of the consequences of any other choice: “To argue otherwise is to become caught inextricably in a maze which would deny true humanity to those who, through organic defect, are incapable of carrying out certain rational activities.” While pointing to human experimentation in the Third Reich, Montgomery acknowledged that some evangelical theologians—notably Bruce Waltke and Kenneth Kantzer—had “definite reservations as to the genuine humanity of the fetus.” Moreover, while declaring that “abortion is in fact homicide,” he added: “it must be clearly seen that Christians have no business ‘legislating morality’ in such a way that their non-Christian neighbors are forced to adhere to laws which create impossible stresses for them.” The clear inference, even for Montgomery, was that abortion


should be legal and available on demand, with no stated limits.45

Meanwhile, Lloyd A. Kalland, professor of philosophy of religion at Gordon Divinity School, attempted to deconstruct the pro-natalism of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Nine years earlier, Richard Fagley had launched a similar project, but concluded: “For all practical purposes, the ethos of Wittenberg and Geneva and Canterbury was as strongly pro-fertility as that of Rome.”46 Kalland took a different approach. He ignored Luther’s numerous affirmations of fertility and denunciations of birth control and abortion, focusing instead on Luther’s desacramentalizing of marriage. He incorrectly stated that, for Luther, “Love is the very essence of marriage.” Kalland was also wrong in asserting that “nowhere does Calvin treat in a definitive way the control of human reproduction.” He was doubly wrong in concluding that:

The point of importance with Luther and Calvin is that both emphasized the love relationship in marriage and their attitudes against a scholastic mentality were so decisive that both refused to be bound where the Scriptures were not explicit and thereby kept the channels open for further study on subjects such as the control of human reproduction.47

Carl Henry, however, drove the final nails into Anthony Comstock’s coffin. “Eros has come alive again,” he argued. Not since Paul had written his letters to the wayward Corinthians had Christian reflections on sex been so urgently needed. How could evangelicals gain a hearing for “sound biblical perspectives” in 1968 America? “Not, surely, by the repetition of clichés or by an uncritical reasserting of Victorian traditions in the name of the Gospel and the Law of God. Needless defense of Victorian attitudes may provide unmerited sympathy for the ‘new morality’ because, as Jesus warned the Pharisees, tradition too can make the Word of God void.” By taking a critical stance toward past and existing church pronouncements and by “testing its own mood as well as the contemporary mood by the

scriptural standard,” evangelicalism “may be able to exhibit its cutting edge at the frontiers of ethical discussion.”48

In the sweep of church history, “A Protestant Affirmation on the Control of Human Reproduction” stands as a remarkable document. The Affirmation contained some inherited Christian standards regarding sexual behavior. It said that sexual intercourse “is the gift of God and shall be expressed and experienced only through the marriage relationship.” It acknowledged that coitus “was intended by God to include the purposes of companionship and fulfillment, as well as procreation,” a statement that even strict Catholics would affirm. However, reflecting the content of the papers, the innovations in Protestant thought were more striking:

- The Bible does not expressly prohibit either contraception or abortion;

- The prevention of conception is not in itself forbidden or sinful providing the reasons for it are in harmony with the total revelation of God for the individual life;

- The method of preventing pregnancy is not so much a religious as a scientific and medical question to be determined in consultation with the physician;

- There may be times when a Christian may allow himself (or herself) to be sterilized for compelling reasons which appear to be the lesser of two evils;

- About the necessity and permissibility for [abortion] under certain circumstances we are in accord;

- The prescriptions of the legal code should not be permitted to usurp the authority of the Christian conscience as informed by Scripture;

- Changes in state laws on therapeutic abortion that will permit honesty in the application of established criteria and the principles supported in this statement should be encouraged;

• Much human suffering can be alleviated by preventing the birth of children where there is a predictable high risk of genetic disease or abnormality; [and]

• This Symposium acknowledges the need for Christians’ involvement in programs of population control at home and abroad.49

At the evangelical leadership level, Margaret Sanger’s victory was complete.

In a letter to Spitzer a few weeks later, Lindsell remarked: “I have concluded that the Affirmation is a good piece of work.” Yet he wondered how readers might react after it appeared in Christianity Today: “Maybe by that time you’ll have to run for cover!”50 In a letter to Henry after the issue had appeared, Lindsell wrote: “Concerning the issue on birth control and abortion I’m happy to say that apart from the usual crank letters the thoughtful responses on the subject have been quite interesting.”51

Three of those letters did appear in the December 20 issue. A reader from Missouri complained: “I was shocked at the permissive attitude toward abortion expressed in” the affirmation. A woman from Oregon asked: “Why was the question of God determining and limiting the number of children in a given family of believers not mentioned even once in the articles on contraception and abortion?” The Rev. M. P. Krikorian of Philadelphia resurrected the voice of Comstock: “I consider such plebian, flesh-featured, and sex-oriented subjects are wholly alien to a periodical supposedly dedicated to evangelical emphasis and to the exaltation of the Word of God and testimony of Jesus Christ. Such articles serve no fundamental purpose no matter by whom they are authored.”52

Some evidence suggests that the Christianity Today project may have run into a hostile reception at a high level. In August 1969, the magazine


50. Letter, Harold Lindsell to Walter O. Spitzer, September 19, 1968; in CTI-BGC, Box 17, File 93.


ran a short, unsigned review of *Birth Control and the Christian*, the book carrying the Affirmation and papers from the 1968 symposium. It made no mention of the Affirmation’s support for birth control, sterilization, and liberalized abortion laws. Rather, the piece cited only the Affirmation’s view of coitus as a gift from God “that includes the purposes of companionship and fulfillment besides procreation” and—strangely—a “sideline” discussion of “why increased knowledge of contraception is likely to increase the demand for abortion.”\(^{53}\) To call this a misrepresentation of the book is a serious understatement. Indeed, the review basically inverted the volume’s themes.

**The Giftedness of Life**

Evangelicals had sought to position themselves in the middle, avoiding the supposed extreme legalism of the Catholics and the supposed libertarianism of the secularizing mainline Protestants. However, when compared to the Mansfield Report of the World Council of Churches, the Evangelical Affirmation “out-libertined” the mainline. Where the former forthrightly condemned abortion, the latter essentially urged its legalization. Where the former frowned on sterilization, the latter embraced it. Where the former laid great emphasis on the covenantal nature of marriage, the latter seemed mesmerized by “the freedom of the Gospel.” How might this be explained?

To begin with, the evangelicals’ latent anti-Catholicism seems to have got the better of them. Rome’s conundrums over birth control and the controversy over *Humanae Vitae* seemed during the 1960s to offer splendid opportunities to undermine an old foe: papal authority. Opposition to birth control—common to all Protestants for more than four centuries—was recast as an act of repression, equivalent to the Communist suppression of Eastern Europe. Evangelicals lost both their memory and their focus. When the Metropolitan Nikodim of the Russian Orthodox Church declared in 1969 that all forms of birth control were “undesirable because they are linked with sin and dull the conscience,” *Christianity Today*’s response was again short-sighted: “The Soviet Union has repeatedly

opposed family planning efforts in the United Nations.”\textsuperscript{54} When the Catholic bishops issued a pastoral letter paying “tribute” to the “parents of large families,” the magazine responded with an editorial frown.\textsuperscript{55} The evangelicals did not yet realize that the enemy that they faced was an old one in new guise: the sexual anarchy of the Gnostics.

Indeed, the 1968 symposium suggests that its participants did not recognize the nature and ambition of this foe. Retired Justice Clark even presented a paper, “The Law as It Governs Decisions Today.” He pointed to the \textit{Griswold} case, noting that some legal commentators thought it as “authoritative for striking down restrictive abortion statutes.” Clark, though, thought that the court system was the wrong place to settle the abortion question. Its complexities “could be better solved in the legislative arena” and “I rather doubt that the courts will interfere in the process.”\textsuperscript{56} Alas, the \textit{Roe v. Wade} decision doing just that would come in less than five years. For his part, Montgomery tried to establish a compromise: birth control acceptable; abortion a sin. As he explained in another book: “The Bible does not remove responsible birth control from the decision of the married couple” while “from the biblical standpoint, abortion is homicide.” On the latter point, he added: “It is a sign of increasing paganism that we callously permit the killing of unborn children—genuine people who cannot defend themselves.”\textsuperscript{57} Yet, even at a symposium packed with his friends and admirers, the acceptance of birth control led inexorably to a quasi-acceptance of abortion. Anthony Comstock may not have been completely wrong: perhaps the two were bound together.


\textsuperscript{54} “Contraception Again,” \textit{Christianity Today} 13, January 17, 1969, p. 43.


\textsuperscript{57} John Warwick Montgomery, \textit{How Do We Know There Is a God? And Other Questions Inappropriate to Polite Society} (Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1973), pp. 70–72.
Warwick Montgomery, for example, tried to defend the equality of mother and fetus in Exodus 21 from the new exegesis. Yet Bruce Waltke, speaking for the “cutting edge,” responded harshly: “He perverts truth. . . . Measured by the weight of scholarly opinion Montgomery’s view has little support.” Looking back, the reader gains the sense that Scripture was being twisted to meet the crises of the moment—“Eros has come alive again” and “the population explosion”—and also to justify new behaviors practiced by laity and clergy alike.

What could have been the alternative? Evangelicals could have resisted the mounting hysteria about the “population explosion” through a renewed trust in God’s providence, much like Pope Paul VI did in 1968 or as Eastern Orthodox leaders did throughout this period. For indeed, God did provide: He had, as Sherwood Wirt had warned earlier, “ways of confounding the statisticians.” The ”green” revolution in agriculture of the 1970s and 1980s would sweep away all the claims and warnings of the alarmists. Food and resources proved to be abundant.

Second, borrowing words from Amy Laura Hall, the evangelicals could “have emphasized a sense of divine grace, human contingency, sufficient abundance, and the radical giftedness of all life.” Instead of this Christian humanism focused on the sacredness of the human person, most evangelical leaders cast their lot in the late 1960s with the sexual modernists, the agenda of Margaret Sanger, and—unwittingly—the old Gnosticism in new disguise.

Dr. Carlson is president of the Howard Center for Family, Religion & Society and the visiting distinguished professor of political science and history at Hillsdale College in Michigan. This essay is an abridgement of the chapter, “Birth Control in the Age of Billy Graham,” in his forthcoming book from Transaction Publishers, Godly Seed: American Evangelicals Confront Birth Control, 1873–1973. A life-long Lutheran, he and his wife of nearly forty years are the parents of four children.
