

Finding God in natural fertility control

Introduction

Of all Australian women 18-24 using any means of fertility control, 43% choose the oral contraceptive pill (Office For Women, 2004: n.p.). Yet despite many women's dissatisfaction with the Pill's side-effects and health risks, we rarely discuss Natural Family Planning methods as legitimate and effective alternatives, let alone reflect on God's desire and design on the matter. This paper will examine how embracing our capacity for natural fertility control (namely The Billings Method) is an act of worship, promotes stewardship, spiritual development, and brings greater fulfilment and joy in sexual intimacy with our partners.

Oral contraceptives and fertility control

In 1959, the Searle company in the U.S. marketed the first oral contraceptive pill ('the Pill'), a medical breakthrough which allowed women for the first time to control ovulation by hormonal means and thereby very simply and effectively avoid pregnancy (Potts & Campbell, 2002: n.p.). Within a few years, millions of American women were using the new drugs and by the year 2000, 100 million women around the world were taking the Pill (Potts & Campbell, 2002: n.p.). In Australia, the Pill is the method of choice for women wanting to control fertility - in 2001 of all Australian women 18-49 who were sexually active, 27% chose the Pill (Office For Women, 2004: n.p.).

The Pill undoubtedly liberates couples to enjoy sexual intercourse at any time without fear of pregnancy. Yet despite this, many women are dissatisfied with this option, for the Pill is not benign when it comes to effects on the body and relationships. Firstly, there are health risks: for some women it has been associated with an increased risk of some cancers, thrombosis, organ

damage, heart attack and a range of other medical disorders (Billings & Westmore, 2003: 172-82). Weight gain is one of the more commonly experienced side-effects, affecting up to 40% of women who use the Pill (Billings & Westmore, 2003: 181).

From a sociological perspective, the use of oral contraceptives puts the responsibility of family planning squarely on the shoulders of the woman. It abdicates the man from his responsibility (and right) to mutual family planning. 'One persons delight need not be purchased at the expense of another's' (Jung, 2000: 26-7).

Finally, taking the Pill may destroy female libido. A very recent study reported that even taking the Pill for as little as 6 months can permanently depress a woman's sex drive (Wheldon, 2005: n.p.). Synthetic hormones in the oral contraceptive appear to lower the woman's natural production of testosterone - vital for female libido.

Ironically, the Pill 'while it protects women from the consequences of sexual relations, all too often stops them wanting any. They are afforded protection from something they no longer desire. No wonder so many women feel cheated, feel that this so-called liberator of women is just one more agent of oppression' (Summers, cited in Billings & Westmore, 2003: 182). In fact, contemporary commentators are sometimes critical of the way the Pill was introduced. The original approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had been given in 1960 based on a trial of just 132 women, and there is no doubt that current FDA regulations would not have permitted the use of the Pill with the evidence they had at the time (Potts & Campbell, 2002: n.p.).

So considering the many problems and concerns with the oral contraceptive pill, what are the alternatives when it comes to fertility control? Billings (Billings & Westmore, 2003: 167) outlines four approaches:

- Sterilising methods, where the Fallopian tubes are 'tied', uterus removed, or in the case of the Pill, egg production is prevented.
- Contraceptive or barrier methods, where fertilisation is avoided by preventing contact between the sperm and egg (such as the condom, diaphragm, or spermicidal cream).
- Abortive methods, where the embryo is prevented from continuing normal development after fertilisation (as in most types of IUDs).
- Natural methods, where a couple observes the phases of the menstrual cycle and avoids intercourse during the fertile phase.

Despite the various concerns and problems with most of the 'non-natural' fertility options we have at our disposal today, natural methods are rarely discussed as legitimate and effective alternatives, especially to the Pill. In my experience, Natural Family Planning (NFP) options are often dismissed altogether. At best, NFP is considered ineffective and unreliable (as revealed in the colloquial term 'Vatican roulette' used to describe Catholic fertility control), detrimental to sexual fulfillment (abstinence is almost considered a denial of basic human rights) and a result of archaic and ascetic religious dogma (which in secular Australian society has little or no relevance).

Influenced by the above attitudes of the wider community, I would suggest most couples remain ignorant about the biological basis for natural fertility control and fail to consider what God's design and desire might be on the matter. Before looking at natural fertility control itself however, it is worth understanding how Christian thinking on God's intention for fertility has developed.

A brief summary of Christian thought on fertility control

Perhaps most significant to Christian thought on fertility control is the interpretation of Genesis 1:28a, where God said to Adam and Eve 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it.'

The meaning of this verse is contested, but for some commentators, this verse represents God's command to all people to procreate to their greatest ability. With this interpretation, every sex act must be open to 'fruitfulness' and any attempt to control fertility (whether by hormonal or natural means) is to reject divine authority and commit sin (Ellison & Goodson, 1997: 514). Proponents of this interpretation tend to be firmly opposed to any form of fertility control, whether natural or otherwise.

Others would argue that the above interpretation of Genesis 1:28 fails on scriptural and exegetical grounds. Firstly, it is inconsistent with other passages of scripture. For if this verse is a command for everyone to reproduce, then both Paul and Jesus potentially sinned by failing to marry and procreate (Ellison & Goodson, 1997: 514). Paul also endorsed the single life in 1 Corinthians 7:8, which would appear to directly contradict Genesis 1:28 if it was a command for every individual. Secondly, it is argued that the structure of the verse and form of the Hebrew verb 'bless' indicates a statement of God's blessing, more than command (Ellison & Goodson, 1997: 515). According to Wenham (1987: 33) the verse carries with it an implicit

promise that God will enable man to fulfil it. Ellison & Goodson (1997: 514) suggest that 'be fruitful' would be better translated as 'may you be fruitful'. Those who interpret the verse in this light, would tend towards seeing children as a blessing to be desired, but accept that some use of birth control is required to limit their number and meet other biblical principles for responsible parenting, such as ensuring parents can provide for their children's basic needs (1 Tim 5:8) (Ellison & Goodson, 1997: 515).

A third interpretation of Genesis 1:28 is that it is one of a series of creation or general mandates, that God gave before the Fall. These mandates are not for the individual, but rather the community or society at large. Those who take this position, would suggest that as we now live with the consequences of sin (which was not the case when God spoke them) and that this mandate is being fulfilled at a global level, individuals have the freedom to use fertility control to whatever extent they so desire. They would also justify limiting the possibility for children in light of other biblical principles such as stewardship (Ellison & Goodson, 1997: 515). The result of this interpretation is a favourable attitude toward fertility control and family planning.

Another important discussion that has influenced modern Christian thinking on fertility, is the debate on the appropriate place for pleasure within sexual relations, not just procreation. For hundreds of years, procreation was considered by the Church the only acceptable reason for sexual intercourse. To engage in sexual activity for any other purpose was considered sin. In fact, Augustine taught that sexual intercourse even transmitted original sin, thereby 'entangling sin and sex for centuries to follow' (Thomas, 2000: 203). This attitude slowly changed and by the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas argued that there should be no venial sin attached to the pleasure produced by marital coitus Jung (2000: 26).

Over time, both Catholic and Orthodox theology developed to accept the unitive purpose of sexual relations within the marital relationship, in addition to procreation. Orthodox theology tends to argue that sexual activity reaffirms and strengthens the marriage covenant and 'oneness' which God created in the couple's union, and therefore does not have to be justified by the fertility of each act (O'Callaghan, 1998: 83-99).

In today's society, Christian thought predominantly accepts that God created sexual relations within the marital relationship for the enjoyment of the couple, as just a valid purpose as strengthening the marital union and enabling procreation. Undoubtedly, the understanding of female biology has contributed to this thinking: with the discovery of the clitoris 'an organ that functions for no other purpose than to provide the woman with sexual ecstasy' we are able to accept that by design (which God declared is good) our sexuality is a gift from our loving Creator to be enjoyed (Thomas, 2000: 199).

Where modern secular thinking on fertility leaves the Christian world-view dramatically is in the separation of the pleasure and procreative purposes of sex. It could be argued that today's society pursues sexual pleasure exclusively to an unbiblical extent. For some people, the procreative purpose of sex has become irrelevant. The widespread use of the Pill has contributed to this separation between pleasure and procreation, and the development of IVF technology has even further extended the divide, so much so that sex is no longer even necessary for reproduction!

However, ignoring for a moment the risk of making pleasure an idol, the widely accepted idea that God intended sexual intercourse within the marital covenant for both pleasure and procreation logically raises the following question: what is God's intention for fertility control? It is evident that God has given us the ability to conceive as His blessing and a fulfilling purpose in life. But if every act of intercourse resulted in a pregnancy, the ability to enjoy God's intention for sexual pleasure as an end in itself would be somewhat diminished! Is it possible that God designed us with natural cycles of fertility and infertility so that we could enjoy sexual relations for both purposes? I believe the answer is YES!

God's plan for natural fertility control

To understand God's plan for fertility control, it is necessary to understand the fertility cycle. The possibility of conceiving a child is limited to a short sequence of fertile days within the woman's menstrual cycle - typically, only about 5 days each cycle. At the end of those fertile days, an egg is released in anticipation of fertilisation. The egg itself has a life-span of only 12 hours and fertilisation would need to occur in less than a day following ovulation to produce a pregnancy (Billings & Westmore, 2003: 23). Outside of these limited number of fertile days conception cannot occur, no matter how much sexual activity takes place. By design, it is evident that God did not intend for couples to become pregnant as a result of every act of intercourse.

Not only is fertility limited in each cycle, but God also designed the female body so that we could know our fertility status. For years we have known that physical changes occur in the woman's body during stages of the menstrual cycle, the most obvious change being menstruation itself. What many people do not know, is that there are equally physical signs that occur that indicate the change from the infertile to fertile state. The work of Dr John Billings over 40 years ago made a substantial discovery in this area. By observing a particular biological sign

that is only present for the fertile days of the cycle, women can learn to accurately recognise whether they are fertile or infertile. The presence of this sign is considered the most superior indicator of female fertility, and far more reliable than any other known method (Billings & Westmore, 2003: 13). Therefore, by design, to avoid pregnancy God's way is simple: abstain from sexual intercourse during the fertile days (as indicated by the sign) and during infertile times be liberated to express your love generously!¹

This discovery of this highly effective and reliable way of detecting fertility (commonly known as the Billings Method) means that other methods of contraception, which may compromise a couple's health, are not only unnecessary, but as the paper will now show, has enormous benefits for our relationship with God and our partners.

By embracing His design, we worship the Creator

As Genesis 1:31 says 'God saw all that he had made and it was very good'. The implication of this is that God also considers His design of fertility as very good. Our biological design includes the capacity to know our fertility status and then 'family plan' accordingly. By acknowledging and celebrating His handiwork, we worship and bring glory to the Creator. To believe that we need interventions such as the Pill, suggests that His design of the body with its natural rhythms of fertility and infertility is somewhat flawed. On the contrary, I believe by gratefully accepting and embracing this gift for natural fertility control we worship God.

We develop open communication and mutual responsibility

In order for NFP methods to work effectively, open communication between husband and wife is required. As there are times when abstinence is required to avoid pregnancy, this method encourages a couple to be open about their needs and desires and become comfortable in discussing their bodies. In this way, mutual trust and love is built, which can have great benefits for their relationship. This method also requires an active participation in family planning decisions, from both parties. Unlike the use of the Pill, husbands need to take mutual responsibility and cooperate fully for natural fertility control to be effective. This also reinforces God's intention for equality and mutual submission (Eph 5:21).

¹It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the Billings method in more detail, except to note that in World Health Organisation trials it was reported to have 97% effectiveness when followed correctly. This is a failure rate at least as good as the Mini Pill. More information on the Billings method can be found in Billings & Westmore (2003).

We are liberated to enjoy and celebrate sexual pleasure

The fact that there are a significant number of days of infertility in any cycle indicates that God intended sexual intimacy for pleasure and unitive purposes, independent of procreation. Using our capacity for natural fertility control liberates us to enjoy freedom of sexual expression and fulfilment within the marital covenant, free from synthetic hormones or other interferences.

The Bible encourages us to seek sexual delight with and for our lovers (Eccles 9:9; Prov 5:18-19; Song of Songs) and during the fertile times, we can explore creative ways to do this outside of intercourse. '... the more playful, the more uninhibited...the more surprising...is a sexual relationship between a husband and a wife the more authentically sacramental it is' (cited in Keats & Sheehan, 1997: 32-7).

Abstinence during the fertile times can also be beneficial. There is something to be said for longing itself, increasing our desire for our lover and the 'sense of incompleteness followed by joy and fulfilment, made all the sweeter after finally giving of ourselves to one another. If there were no great need, the fulfilment would be less sweet' (Thomas, 2000: 211).

We develop stewardship over our bodies

Stewardship is about obedience and faithfulness in a relationship to someone (Rieke, 2002: 31). The steward is the care-taker of God's creation, not the owner. The bible indicates we have a responsibility to be a care-taker of our bodies (1 Cor 6:19-20), to love our partners as ourselves (Mk 12: 31) and to look after their bodies (Eph 5: 28-29). By using this natural method of fertility control, neither partner need expect the other to ingest potentially harmful drugs or synthetic hormones (Keats & Sheehan, 1997: 32-7). Ransom (2002: 3), in reflecting on the Catholic theology of NFP, says 'periodic abstinence encourages virtues such as temperance, patience and fortitude, and allows the couple to have stewardship over their fertility.'

Submitting to natural rhythms of fertility helps us to remember the one true God

As already mentioned, following a natural method of fertility control requires abstinence, or 'rest', from sexual intercourse during the fertile period to avoid pregnancy. I believe this period

of rest has also been created by God for an important purpose: helping us to remember the one true God.

In many aspects of the God ordered life, there are periods of 'work' and 'rest'. The most commonly understood mandate for rest is the Sabbath - resting for one day a week from work - as God commanded the Israelites in Exodus 20:8. This verse comes after a series of commandments God gave to Moses, beginning with the first: 'I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:2-3). I believe God intended for the Sabbath to remind us of that key commandment: to keep the Lord our God above any other god. Thus, a regular period of rest from work helps us to remember that although work is good, it is not God.

There are other cycles of 'work' and 'rest' throughout life, as exemplified in scripture, that I believe are related to God's intention to ensure we shall have no other gods before Him. Take, for example, fasting. There are examples in the Bible where abstinence from food helps to develop spiritual discipline and a dependence on God for sustenance (Mt 4:1-4). One of the purposes of 'rest' from food is to remind us that although food is good, it is not God. There is also the 'rest' of solitude. Periodically, characters in scripture demonstrate that at times they withdraw from community in order to seek God (Lk 4:42). One of the benefits of this time of solitude is that it helps to remind them that although relationships with other people are good, they are not God.

The body is not meant for sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:13) but in today's permissive and sexually explicit culture it would be easy to make sexual pleasure the idol of our existence. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that God also ordered female cycles of fertility to encourage regular times of 'rest' from sexual intercourse. These limited periods of abstinence, as is required by NFP, helps to remind us that although sex is good, it is not God.

Conclusion

The fact that so many couples today are using methods of fertility control that carry significant health risks is a worrying trend. But more disturbing is that fact that natural methods are rarely considered legitimate alternatives. As this paper has outlined, it need not be the case. God's plan for fertility control naturally, as revealed in his design of the female fertility cycle, is not only effective, it has enormous benefits. By embracing our God given ability for fertility control, we are not only liberated to enjoy sexual delight with our lover, we find a way to meaningfully connect with and glorify a loving, generous and sovereign Creator.

References

- Billings, E. & Westmore, A. (2003). *The Billings method*. Melbourne: Anne O'Donovan.
- Ellison, C. & Goodson, P. (1997). Conservative protestantism and attitudes toward family planning in a sample of seminarians. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(4): 512–29.
- Jung, P. (2000). Sexual pleasure: a Roman Catholic perspective on woman's delight. *Theology & Sexuality*, 12: 26–7.
- Keats, C. & Sheehan, M. (1997). Does abstinence make the heart grow fonder? *US Catholic*, June: 32–7.
- O'Callaghan, P. (1998). Pseudosex in pseudotheology. *Christian Bioethics*, 4(1): 83–99.
- Office For Women (2004). Women in Australia 2004. Available Internet: (<http://ofw.facs.gov.au/publications/wia/chapter3.html>) (17 June 2005).
- Potts, M. & Campbell, M. (2002). History of Contraception. *Gynecology and Obstetrics*, 6: 8.
- Ransom, H. (2002). Life giving love: the church's theology behind NFP. *The Natural News*, Autumn: 3.
- Rieke, T. (2002). The Many Faces of Stewardship. *The Clergy Journal*, (pp.31).
- Thomas, G. (2000). *Sacred marriage: what if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Wenham, G. (1987). *Genesis 1-15*. Dallas, TX: Word.
- Wheldon, J. (2005). Contraceptive may kill libido. *The Daily Telegraph*, May 27th.