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The Ethics of Birth Control: An Evangelical Analysis

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Prior to establishing either the church or state, God established the family. The basis for this institution is marriage—a man and woman bound by covenant and given the charge of progeny and dominion over the newly created earth (Gen. 1:28; cf. 9:1). As the fundamental building block of civilization, “the family contains the church in embryo,” and includes within it all the essential elements to train good citizens of the state.² Since children are the “fruit” of the marital act (Ps. 127:3) and are of critical importance to the perpetuation of civilization and the church, the church catholic has historically held that the intentional prevention of pregnancy through contraceptive measures is a sinful deviation from the design and command of God.³ However, concurrent with Western society’s broad acceptance of birth control in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many evangelicals have similarly accepted various contraceptive methods.

The development of reproductive technologies, the rise of anti-natalist sentiments, the proliferation of birth control, and the conflicting views of birth control articulated by the church require parsing by every Christian couple. Whereas evangelicals have generally rejected contraceptive measures that may result in the destruction of a child in the earliest stages of life (i.e., abortifacient drugs),⁴ questions surrounding the use of other birth control measures are a recurring issue within both premarital and marriage counseling. This study evaluates the use of birth control within the context of Christian marriage by considering how the Bible describes children, examining the meaning and relevance of the account of Onan (Gen. 38:8-10), and critical interaction with the argumentation of an evangelical proponent of birth control.

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² George C. Scipione, *The Battle for the Biblical Family*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant Pub., 2018), 22.

³ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 2.10 (ANF 2:261); John Chrysostom, *Homily XXVIII on the Gospel of Matthew*, 5 (NPNF² 10:194); Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 5 (NPNF¹ 3:401); Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 1.20 (NPNF² 6:361); Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 38-44*, Luther’s Works, Vol. 7, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter D. Hansen (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1965), 20-1. Cf. the prohibition “Do not make potions (οὐ φαρμακεύσεις)” in the *Didache*, 2.2 (ANF 7:378). This is arguably a reference to the production and consumption of contraceptives given the context of prohibitions related to illicit sex and childbearing and similar uses of the verb in relevant antiquity.

⁴ See for example Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 752-3; Mark Liederbach, “Contraception” in Andreas J. Köstenberger, David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 123-29. Cf. Paris who takes a more lenient view and suggests a lack of substantial evidence for the abortifacient effect of hormonal contraceptives. Jenell W. Paris, *Birth Control for Christians: Making Wise Choices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 142-6, 170.

Defining Birth Control and Contraception

“Birth control” refers to the broad category of interventions designed to preclude procreation despite participation in sex.⁵ “Contraception,” a subset of birth control, refers to the use of artificial means to preclude the establishment of a conceptus resulting from sexual intercourse.⁶ Contraception may take the form of the implementation of a device (e.g., a barrier), the introduction of an artificial hormone (e.g., “the pill”), or the use of a chemical such as a spermicide. Other birth control measures include *coitus interruptus*; wherein intercourse is interrupted prior to ejaculation. Sterilization is a permanent form of contraception wherein one receives a surgical procedure resulting in an inability to reproduce.

The Pro-Natalist Viewpoint of Scripture

Scripture variously describes children as a tremendous gift from God. David lamented at God’s blessing upon his enemies when he wrote, “You fill their womb with treasure; they are satisfied with children, and they leave their abundance to their infants” (Ps. 17:14).⁷ Solomon similarly identified children as a multifaceted blessing:

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one’s youth.
Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Psalm 127:3-5)

Whereas the people of Israel were the Lord’s heritage (Deut. 32:9), children are the heritage of their parents through which God gives provision and protection (cf. Prov. 17:6). Children are a reward: “The fruit of the womb, children, are a reward or recompense given by Yahweh as a token of His favour, as an inheritance to His favoured ones.”⁸ Children, therefore, are to be greatly desired by God’s covenant people.⁹

Conversely, the Bible presents barrenness as a “deep personal tragedy,” as with the account of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:2-20.¹⁰ Hannah’s barrenness is a source of shame and reproach (vv. 6-7; cf. Gen. 30:1) and profound affliction (v. 10) that is remedied by a child given by the sovereign hand of God (vv. 12-20; cf. Gen. 18:9-15; 23:26; Exod. 23:26; Judg. 13:2-3). After having conceived John the Baptist, Elizabeth proclaimed, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.” (Luke 1:25) In a few instances, Scripture presents infertility as a curse or

⁵ Darlene F. Weaver, “Birth Control” in Joel B. Green ed., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 101.

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 23-4.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

⁸ Charles A. Briggs, Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1906–1907), 458.

⁹ The Septuagintal translation of Ps. 127:5 (i.e., 126:5) makes this point even more explicit: “Blessed is the man who will fulfill his desire for them” (author’s trans.).

¹⁰ David E. Van Reken, “Barrenness,” in Walter A. Elwell ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 265.

consequence of sin. For example, when Michal despised David's exuberant worship, God punished her with infertility (2 Sam. 6:16-23; cf. Gen. 20:17-18; Hos. 9:7, v. 14).

The NT does not seek to alter the pro-natalist viewpoint presented in the pages of the OT. Indeed, the NT presupposes the ongoing validity and relevance of the OT moral law and, therefore, the burden of proof rests upon those who would seek to modify the normative position of Scripture. While Paul upholds the gift of singleness (1 Cor. 7:6-7), he recognizes the importance of marriage, including regular marital relations, and the normativity of children (1 Cor. 7:1-5; Eph. 6:1, v. 4). Whereas Paul does not explicitly mention any form of birth control, he rejected any notion of marital celibacy except for infrequent periods of focused prayer (1 Cor. 7:5).

The Relevance of Onan's Sin

The account of Onan and Tamar in Genesis 38:8-11 includes the only mention of a form of birth control within the canon. After Tamar's husband Er is put to death by Yahweh, Judah compelled Er's younger brother Onan to take Tamar in levirate marriage (cf. Deut. 25:5-10).¹¹ The levirate law required the deceased's brother to marry the childless widow and produce a son who would carry on his brother's name. This was done for the benefit of the deceased so that "his name will not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut. 25:6). Levirate marriage also had the effect of ensuring protection and provision for the widow. However, while Onan had sexual relations with Tamar, he engaged in *coitus interruptus*. That is, "whenever" (וְכָל־כִּזְיוֹן) he engaged in relations with Tamar, he "would ruin his seed on the ground" (Gen. 38:9, author's trans.).¹² Onan's rationale was self-centered as he did not want to produce a child who would legally belong to his deceased brother (Gen. 38:9) and who would thereby possess a stake in Judah's estate.¹³ Because Onan's actions were "wicked in the sight of the LORD," he put Onan to death (v. 10).

Various evangelical interpreters have suggested that the severity of Yahweh's response to Onan was not owed to his utilization of *coitus interruptus* per se but his attempt to circumvent his duty under the levirate law. For example, Dennis Hollinger appealed to the view he perceives to be that of "most biblical scholars" saying, "The sin was neither masturbation nor *coitus interruptus*, but rather the failure of Onan to practice the Levirate Law... Thus, the text has no real bearing on contraception, since in the context there is a very specific responsibility for a very specific condition."¹⁴ This conclusion, however, does not adequately take into account the levirate law, the language used to describe Onan's sin, the moral connotation of Onan's actions, or the broader sexual ethics required by God's covenant people. Further, what Hollinger referred to as "most biblical scholars" must be a reference to most contemporary biblical scholars since the reading affirmed by Hollinger is virtually unknown among pre-modern interpreters.¹⁵

¹¹ Hamilton, drawing upon the fact that Judah did not explicitly tell Onan to marry Tamar, suggests that Judah merely told Onan to engage in sexual relations with Tamar. If his reading of this passage is accurate, the entire account presents a deficient and immoral approach to carrying out the levirate laws—beginning with Judah's admonition and Onan's refusal to procreate. However, given the ubiquity of marriage within this historical context, one may safely argue that marriage was assumed. See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 435.

¹² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 436; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 367.

¹³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 362.

¹⁴ Dennis P. Hollinger, "The Ethics of Contraception: A Theological Assessment," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (2013): 686. See also Doriani who asserted "Onan's sin was that he feigned that he would fulfill his duty and then did not." While not different in substance in Hollinger, Doriani's construal still does not account for the death penalty. Daniel Doriani, "Birth Dearth or Bring on the Babies?: Biblical Perspectives on Family Planning," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12, No. 1 (1993): 33.

¹⁵ Cf. Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control* (Monongahela, PA: Zimmer Printing, 1989), 61.

The levirate law prescribes a corporate shaming ritual for those who evade their responsibility to fulfill the stipulations of the law (Deut. 25:8-10). The law does not prescribe the death penalty. Scripture describes Onan as having “ruined” his seed using a verb that “signifies an act of ruthless destruction” (Gen. 38:9).¹⁶ The verb may be owed to viewing Onan’s actions as tantamount to murder since he sought to prevent conception, as Calvin explained: “For this [i.e., Onan’s actions] is to extinguish the hope of the race and to kill before he is born the hoped-for offspring.”¹⁷ Brian Harrison noted that “If simple refusal to give legal offspring to his deceased brother were, according to Genesis 38, Onan’s only offence [sic], it seems extremely unlikely that the text would have spelt out the crass physical details of his contraceptive act (cf. v. 9).”¹⁸ That is, the relevant account is unusually explicit. In referring to other narratives of a sexual nature, Scripture typically depicts events far more modestly, often through euphemism (e.g., Gen. 4:1; 6:4). Harrison noted further, “Broadly speaking, the sacred writers’ disapproval of different kinds of genital activity increases with the degree of explicitness with which they are described.”¹⁹ Moses may have intended to demonstrate the extraordinary sinfulness of Onan’s behavior through the explicit depiction of his actions.

Onan’s behavior was also a rejection of the natural order God has established in creation. Sexual intercourse naturally results in procreation, and thus, the law prohibits marital relations during a woman’s menstrual period and prescribes severe punishments for those who engage in such an act (Lev. 18:6; 20:18). The expectation of Scripture is that God’s image bearers cooperate with and obey the natural order established by God. Homosexual relations, wrote Paul, is the exchanging of “natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” (Rom. 1:26) and is thus forbidden. While God did not design marital relations solely for procreation, and although there may be natural windows of time wherein conception is not possible (e.g., intercourse while pregnant, post-menopause relations), the gift of a child is the conventional result of marital relations for couples of childbearing age. Onan’s behavior was a repudiation of the natural order, even if it was motivated by covetousness. It would seem, therefore, that God’s punishment of Onan was predicated upon several aspects of Onan’s dealings with Tamar, including how he sought to preclude procreation.

How should the account of Onan influence the attitude of God’s people toward birth control? At a minimum, given the severity with which God punished Onan and the general biblical expectation that humanity affirms the natural order, birth control should be evaluated with suspicion. Since the text indicates a selfish and corrupt motivation behind Onan’s actions, God’s people should examine their motivations for the potential use of birth control. If one desires to utilize birth control for the mere convenience of not conceiving a child, his behavior is not altogether different from Onan’s and is out of step with how the Scripture regards children.

¹⁶ J. Conrad, “זָנָה,” in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 16, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 584.

¹⁷ John Calvin, “Genesis Commentary Volume 2: Genesis 38:1-30,” Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed November 3, 2022, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.html>. It should be observed that the standard editions of Calvin’s *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* published by Baker Books omit a significant portion of Calvin’s comments on Gen. 38:9 and omit altogether his explanation of v. 10. In correspondence via social media, Calvin scholar Jon Balserak explained to the author that this omission is likely owed “To the Calvin Translation Society editors feeling the content inappropriate given its sensitive nature.”

¹⁸ Brian W. Harrison, “The Sin of Onan Revisited,” *Living Tradition* 67 (1996), http://rtforum.org/lt/lt67.html#_ftnref16.

¹⁹ Harrison, “The Sin of Onan Revisited.”

Toward a Biblical View of Birth Control

The remarkably high view of children affirmed by Scripture stands in glaring contrast to modern secular attitudes, which suggest children are an undue burden upon both parents and the environment. For example, in her volume entitled *How to Be Childless*, Rachel Chrastil argued that intentional childlessness contributes to human flourishing since it alleviates human suffering, overpopulation, dwindling natural resources, and “the unhappiness of human experience.”²⁰ Chrastil’s title divulges something about childlessness that betrays her argumentation. If childlessness were a key contributor to human flourishing, it is unlikely that a twenty-first-century author would need to write a book entitled *How to Be Childless*. Moreover, was Chrastil’s position accepted by a significant margin of society, it would lead to societal collapse and, thus, human demise.²¹ Childlessness is only suggested as a means unto human flourishing within a society that largely rejects intentional childlessness. Chrastil’s viewpoint, while seemingly gaining traction in the West, has not been received by evangelicals.

Among evangelicals, several views on birth control are represented. Some reject the use of birth control in favor of so-called “Natural Family Planning” (i.e., NFP). NFP involves engaging in selective abstinence during a woman’s ovulation period (i.e., the “rhythm method”). Others reject birth control altogether and leave the matter of procreation entirely up to the providence of God, and still, others choose to utilize some form of birth control.²² Even then, the motivations for using birth control by evangelicals vary. One may conceive of myriad health conditions that render childbearing perilous for a woman (e.g., a congenital heart defect).²³ The biblical emphasis on the preservation of human life renders birth control in this situation effectively uncontroversial.²⁴ However, given the exceptional nature of a life-threatening condition, for most evangelicals who use some form of birth control, the preservation of life is not the motivating factor.²⁵ Instead, these evangelicals seek the preclusion of life while enjoying marital intimacy.

Does implementing non-abortifacient birth control constitute a repudiation of the Bible’s pro-natalist view of children? That is, how can one affirm that children are a God-given “treasure,” “heritage,” and “reward” while seeking to intentionally avoid the same? Daniel Doriani has provided three lines of argumentation in this regard. First, he observed that significant health considerations might render pregnancy dangerous.²⁶ This is hardly an argument for birth control since, statistically, the vast majority of women who utilize contraception are not doing so due to reasons pertaining to illness and disease.²⁷

²⁰ Rachel Chrastil, *How to Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 136. See also the anti-natalism that has become a key policy of some environmentalists. E.g., David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).

²¹ See for example the problems introduced in Japanese society owing to a collapsing birthrate. Noriko O. Tsuya, “Below-Replacement Fertility in Japan: Patterns, Factors, and Policy Implications” in Ronald R. Rindfuss, Minja K. Choe eds., *Low and Lower Fertility: Variations across Developed Countries* (New York: Springer, 2015), 87-106.

²² See Mary Pride, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality*, 25th Anniv. ed. (Fenton, MO: Home Life Books, 2010).

²³ R. M. Wald et al., “Pregnancy and contraception in young women with congenital heart disease: General considerations,” *Pediatrics & Child Health* 16, no. 4 (April 2011): 25-9, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3076183/>.

²⁴ The Roman Catholic Church, which has affirmed what is arguably the staunchest anti-contraception position, has afforded its members the ability to take the “lesser evil” when life is at stake. See Paul VI, “Humanae Vitae,” Libreria Editrice Vaticana, accessed October 30, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

²⁵ Kimberly Daniels et al., “Contraceptive Methods Women Have Ever Used: United States, 1982–2010,” National Health Statistics Reports, last modified February 14, 2013, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr062.pdf>.

²⁶ Doriani, “Birth Dearth or Bring on the Babies?,” 34.

²⁷ Daniels et al., “Contraceptive Methods.”

Life in a post-fall world introduces difficult and complex situations wherein a dogmatic and unrelenting approach to birth control becomes unhelpful or even harmful. The Christian ethical approach known as graded absolutism (i.e., hierarchism) recognizes the reality of unavoidable moral conflict in the post-fall world as well as the necessity of appealing to the hierarchy of moral principles taught in Scripture. It is an approach that affirms the responsibility of one to act upon a higher moral principle when two moral principles conflict.²⁸ For example, the ninth commandment precludes deceit (Exod. 20:16). However, when the Hebrew midwives refused the directive of Pharaoh to murder Israel's unborn males, the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh and lied about the nature of their actions (Exod. 1:15-20). Yahweh excused the deceit of the midwives owing to the higher moral principle of the preservation of life and he rewarded them with families (v. 21). Therefore, it is ethically consistent to reject the normative use of birth control while allowing for exceptional circumstances where life is at stake.

Second, Doriani argued that “1 Timothy 5:8 requires parents to provide for children”; therefore, potential parents must “see to it that the family is able to afford a child.”²⁹ He also observed that the provision Paul references in 1 Timothy 5:8 is not limited to the material realm and likely includes care and spiritual nurture. Indeed, the verb *προνοέω* translated as “provide” in 1 Timothy 5:8 in the English Standard Version, connotes provision that is broader than supplying mere material things.³⁰ Doriani's argument, however, is circular since it assumes that pragmatic considerations should determine the use of birth control. It also neglects the well-established fact that men who have children statistically earn significantly higher salaries than those who do not (i.e., the so-called “fatherhood bonus”).³¹

Suppose a couple conceives despite using some form of birth control. In that case, whether they believe they can provide for the child is irrelevant—they must provide, nonetheless. Despite their efforts to prevent such a gift, God has given a reward, and now the parents must amend their lives to account for the care of a child. Whereas such provision may require great sacrifice, as most parents can attest, God ordained the situation (Eph. 1:11) and has promised to provide for the necessities of life (Matt. 6:25-34). By implication, Doriani's perspective does not consistently view children as a gift but as a liability to potentially mitigate.

The final argument Doriani presented is from “Paul's discussion of celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7” in which Doriani asserts “Children limit one's freedom to serve the Lord much as marriage does. Married couples might limit the number of children they have in order to preserve some freedom for service. Just as the decision to marry entails the loss of certain freedoms, so does the decision to have children.”³² Herein Doriani has introduced a principle foreign to the pericope he cited. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:5 that married couples should not deprive one another of marital relations except on the condition of mutual agreement for an appointed time. Paul's use of a conditional conjunction (*εἰ μήτι*) in addition to the conditional particle (*ὅτι*) reflects his reluctance to make this exception.³³ Paul grants permission not for birth control but for temporary sexual abstinence so that a couple might focus on prayer. Again, Doriani has engaged in question-begging as he has assumed that Paul's allowance for temporary abstinence includes birth control. Paul has not suggested that couples limit the number of children they have through

²⁸ Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 18-19; 97-106.

²⁹ Doriani, “Birth Dearth or Bring on the Babies?” 34. Cf. Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 751-2.

³⁰ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 872. Cf. Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21.

³¹ Rebecca Glauber, “Race and Gender in Families and at Work: The Fatherhood Wage Premium,” *Gender & Society* 22, no. 1 (2008): 8-30; Alexandra Killewald, “Reconsideration of the Fatherhood Premium,” *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 1 (2012), 96-116.

³² Doriani, “Birth Dearth or Bring on the Babies?” 34.

³³ Paul Gardener, *1 Corinthians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 301.

birth control so that they may focus on important matters of ministry. Moreover, rearing children is a ministry that takes primacy over other responsibilities (1 Tim. 5:8).

The fundamental question is how does one harmonize the Bible's view that children are a gift, reward, heritage, and treasure with the use of birth control? Could it be that the evangelical acceptance of birth control is owed more to the influence of secular culture than to the Bible's teaching? Wayne Grudem suggested that merely because something is a gift, it is neither wise nor necessary to seek to maximize it.³⁴ However, there is a considerable distinction between maximizing a gift and openness to receive one as God wisely provides. Therefore, the position that is the most consistent with the way the text of Scripture presents children is that of the couple who treats the possibility of conceiving a child with an open hand, allowing the Lord to provide at his discretion. This open-handed approach maximizes the freedom of a couple to enjoy each other as God has ordained while placing trust in the God who has promised that his decisions are good (Rom. 8:28).

Because many evangelicals take a permissive view on birth control, significant caution must be used in addressing the issue within the context of marriage counseling. If, for example, a local church understands birth control to be a matter of adiaphora, care should be exercised to respect the decision of the elder board to maintain the unity of the church (Eph. 4:3). Just as with many contentious theological issues, matters of a secondary or tertiary nature may be important but are nonetheless to be treated with care so as not to provoke disunity.

Conclusion

This study has shown that while the use of birth control is increasingly common among evangelicals, birth control is generally contrary to the pro-natalist viewpoint espoused in Scripture. Scripture describes children as a blessing, heritage, reward, and treasure (e.g., Pss. 17:14; 127:3-5); therefore, God's covenant people should greatly desire children. The lone biblical account dealing with birth control (i.e., the account of Onan in Gen. 38:8-11) casts it in a negative light and implies that it is contrary to the will of God and the natural order. Subsequently, an open-handed approach permits God to provide children at his discretion and accounts for the biblical depiction of children as a blessing.

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³⁴ Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 754-5.

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