

"And God **Blessed** Them . . ."

By Rolf Preus

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It was not so long ago -- perhaps after the birth of Samuel, our eleventh child -- that my late father told me, "Rolf, you're a wealthy man." I needed to hear that. One needs a reminder once in a while of what true wealth is. Dad's words came back to me on November 4, 1995 when I was suffering from the shock of his sudden death, and one by one my boys gave to me the comfort of the gospel. They suffered with me, and they sorrowed with me, but not as those who have no hope. Dad was right: I am a wealthy man.

Twelve children! No one is more amazed about this than Dort and I. You see, we didn't plan a single one. We didn't choose to have children. We didn't "let" God give us children, as if he needs our permission. We simply got married. I remember the sermon quite well and have myself preached on that text a number of times. Dad preached on Matthew 6:25-34. Naturally, in true Lutheran fashion, he focused on verse 33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

The same God who reckons to us Christ's righteousness and who thus governs us, not by laws or threats, but by grace alone, is the God who takes care of our bodily needs and who persuades us that life is more than food, clothes, and all the other stuff we spend our time gaining. If you think that you should wait until you can "afford" to have children, you'll never be able to afford it. Dort and I discovered a couple of years ago that we couldn't afford twelve kids. Thank God we already had them! Otherwise, the things that money can buy would have taken the place of children. Our youngest son, Peter, who will be two on May 31, is more valuable than whatever money it costs us to feed him, clothe him, house him, etc.

Rome has an interesting and rather "catholic" position on birth control. That is, they teach what has been taught for a long, long time. And it makes sense. God most certainly does join sexual intimacy to procreation. This relationship surely ought to be respected. And there is some truth to the Roman Catholic concept of "natural law."

But there are serious problems with Rome's position on contraception, not the least of which is the apparent inconsistency between that and the shameful practice of forced priestly celibacy. You know what the Roman Catholic lady with 10 kids who started

using contraception said about Rome's teaching on birth control, don't you? "If you don't play the game, you don't make the rules."

Frankly, I am not persuaded that there is much moral difference between following a strict "natural family planning" regimen which includes taking one's temperature before sexual relations and a more "artificial" means of birth control, such as a barrier method to prevent the sperm from reaching the egg. What is more unnatural than to avoid the joys of the marriage bed at precisely those times when God, in his wise "family planning," makes the woman the most desirous of sexual intimacy? The Roman Catholic position on birth control is like the Roman Catholic position on every moral issue: ponderously, depressingly, predictably legalistic. "It's okay to do this if you do it this way, but it's a sin if you do it that way." Right. No wonder Roman Catholics don't believe the teaching of their own church!

Still, at least Rome is capable of a degree of moral discernment, even if it remains captive to scholastic legalism. Most Protestants (and Lutherans) don't even know how to address the subject of birth control from a moral vantage point. This deficiency makes them as legalistic as Rome. If you cannot set down a firm rule which would apply to every situation, such folks simply dismiss the moral dimensions of this issue altogether. I know this because for some strange reason people talk to me about birth control, assuming that I have an opinion on the subject.

One time, several years ago when we only had about 7 children, a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor sat down next to me at a table as I was enjoying a cigarette with a cup of coffee (a pleasure of which I have denied myself for over four months now and man would I love to have a cigarette!) The man looked at my cigarette and probably smelled my breath (I didn't ask him to sit down next to me) and said to me, "I suppose you think birth control is a sin." He was really kind of rude. Still I decided to take his question seriously. I have never believed that birth control is necessarily a sin, but I have always believed that it could be a sin. It all depended on the circumstances. This is a far cry from saying that there is no moral compass by which to judge the issue. Clearly, it is a serious matter to seek to prevent the divine creation of new life. "It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves." "I believe that God has made me." To say that birth control is not necessarily a sin is not to say that it is a morally neutral matter. So I had to think about it the man's question for a while. Then I gave him a one-word answer: "Probably." He was annoyed with that answer. He replied, "But smoking isn't a sin?"

Now I didn't start this conversation. But it has stayed in my mind over the years because it illustrates so well the fundamental difference in moral reasoning between the traditional Lutheran and the modern Lutheran. I asked the man if he believed in birth

control and if he practiced birth control and he answered yes to both questions. I then explained to him that, while I did not smoke with the intent or desire to kill myself (that being only a possible and very unfortunate side effect of my smoking), he did practice birth control with the desire of thwarting God's creative act in bringing a new life into this world, did he not? Why else do it? Now consider how the standards have changed! We used to believe that a certain course of action was wrong because it would be against our neighbor. "Love does no harm to the neighbor." Now we seem to believe that an action is wrong because it hurts us, that is, the one doing it. So we should love ourselves so much that we don't do harmful things to our bodies! (Like fasting for forty days and forty nights? Is that good for your body? Do you think that perhaps Jesus didn't love himself enough?)

Please, spare me lectures on smoking. It's a filthy habit, it stinks, it's expensive, it causes lung cancer, emphysema, heart problems, etc. But I have never met anyone who smoked **for the purpose of** killing himself. I have never met anyone who practiced birth control who did not do so **for the purpose of** preventing the divine creation of a human being.

So what do we say about the morality of birth control? We confess that God is the Author of life (Psalm 95:6; 100:3), that he chooses who will be born (Genesis 30:1-2), that children are, objectively, a blessing from God (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:3ff; 128:3), that God closes the womb (1 Samuel 1:5) but that he also graciously answers prayers for children (1 Samuel 1:17-20). My wife, Dort, prayed as a little girl that God would bless her with many children. She was moved by the story about Hannah, and how God answered her prayer. God answered Dort's prayer, too. For those Christian women who have prayed that prayer and haven't seen their prayers answered, I can only say that God is faithful and true and that he will, some day, in his own way (not ours) show you that every prayer you prayed was answered.

So what do we say about the morality of birth control? We say such arguments in favor of birth control as those which compare it to insurance against car accidents are offensive on the face of it, for a child is never an accident, and no child ever born was not redeemed by the blood of Christ and a fit object of God's mercy and love. We say that our culture is rotten to the core as it values things that can bring no real happiness while it discards as refuse the broken and dead bodies of millions of unborn children. And we say that it takes a bit of moralistic fine tuning (to say the least) to claim that it is a mortal sin to destroy the fertilized egg but that it is a morally indifferent matter to do everything under our power to keep that egg from ever being fertilized, as if man and woman are in control up until the life begins and then we let God take over. And we say

that our Lord Jesus is faithful to his words recorded in Matthew 6. My dad preached the truth -- and he never even mentioned birth control!

Children are a blessing from God. This is the truth. God says so. This is how we know so. It pains me to see folks who, for whatever reason, stay away from the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, as if it gives them no blessing at all. They just don't want it. What is a pastor to do? To say, But you must go! I don't think so. Certainly not until they regard the sacrament as a blessing! Surely we wouldn't want to turn gospel into law, would we? Let the law be the law and let the gospel be the gospel. Can we do that? It's very difficult.

When it comes to birth control, let us apply God's law. Are we selfish, are we greedy, do we simply want a life centered on things, conveniences, and useless stuff that cannot compare in value to the children God gives? Are our values the same distorted values as those of our godless society that hates God the Father and rejects his only begotten Son? Do we view the "planning" of children as something we as human beings have the right to do, as if we, not God, are the authors of life? Is this not idolatry? If the shoe fits put it on.

On the other hand, should a woman face a threat to her health if she should bear a child, should we not care for that woman's health? Should we impose a conscience burden on her? Should we call sin what could rather be the very opposite? "Love does no harm to the neighbor." Shall we interpret God's law in such a way that it satisfies whatever legalistic system we have devised? Is that not also idolatry?

Does all this mean that birth control is not a moral issue? Not at all! Precisely the opposite. It means that God doesn't give us a rulebook. He gives us his commands and his promises. And he calls on us to apply them to life. And he calls on us to use more moral discernment than that required by a simple "yes" or "no" on the question of the morality of birth control. And above all, he calls us to lay all of our sins on Jesus who bore them for us. He tells us not to look to moral reasoning as that which justifies anyone, but, when we have done all that which was in us to do, to confess before him our utter unworthiness and total dependence on that righteousness which is ours by faith alone.

To have the righteousness of faith, and to teach that to the children God gives to us, that, my friends, is the greatest joy in life, and the most fervent prayer of every Christian parent, whether with one child or a dozen, is that God will keep our children trusting in the merits of Jesus until they die in peace.

Postscript: With respect to the matter of smoking cigarettes that I mentioned in this article, I wrote the article in early 1997 and I smoked my last cigarette in May of 1998.