

The Early Church Fathers on Contraception

The Early Church Fathers were undivided in their condemnation of artificial birth control (contraception). They understood the connection between the marital act and the creation of offspring. They also understood the lessons of Genesis 38:6-10 where Onan was condemned by God for what amounted to contraception. Up until 1930 every Protestant denomination taught that contraception was a forbidden practice. In 1930 the Anglican Church held its Lambeth Conference. At that time, they decided that a couple could use contraceptives for what they called "grave reasons in a marriage." It did not take long for "grave reasons" to become any reason. Since that time most Protestant denominations have followed suit.

Letter of Barnabas

Moreover, he [Moses] has rightly detested the weasel [Lev. 11:29]. For he means, "Thou shalt not be like to those whom we hear of as committing wickedness with the mouth with the body through uncleanness [orally consummated sex]; nor shalt thou be joined to those impure women who commit iniquity with the mouth with the body through uncleanness" (10:8 [A.D. 74]).

Clement of Alexandria

Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted (*The Instructor of Children* 2:10:91:2 [A.D. 191]).

To have coitus other than to procreate children is to do injury to nature (ibid. 2:10:95:3).

Hippolytus

Whence women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility [oral contraceptives], and to gird themselves round, so to expel what was being conceived [abortion] on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth. Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by inculcating adultery and murder at the same time! (*Refutation of All Heresies* 9:7 [A.D. 225]).

Minucius Felix

There are some women who, by drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels, and thus commit a parricide before they bring forth (*Octavius* 30 [A.D. 226]).

Lactantius

[Some] complain of the scantiness of their means, and allege that they have not enough for bringing up more children, as though, in truth, their means were in [their] power . . . or God did not daily make the rich poor and the poor rich. Wherefore, if any one on any account of poverty shall be unable to bring up children, it is better to abstain from relations with his wife (*Divine Institutes* 6:20 [A.D. 307]).

God gave us eyes not to see and desire pleasure, but to see acts to be performed for the needs of life; so too, the genital ['generating'] part of the body, as the name itself teaches, has been received by us for no other purpose than the generation of offspring (ibid. 6:23:18).

Epiphanius

They [certain Egyptian heretics] exercise genital acts, yet prevent the conceiving of children. Not in order to produce offspring, but to satisfy lust, are they eager for corruption (*Medicine Chest Against Heresies* 26:5:2 [A.D. 375]).

John Chrysostom

[I]n truth, all men know that they who are under the power of this disease [the sin of covetousness] are wearied even of their father's old age [wishing him to die so they can inherit]; and that which is sweet) and universally desirable, the having of children, they esteem grievous and unwelcome. Many at least with this view have even paid money to be childless, and have mutilated nature, not only killing the newborn, but even acting to prevent their beginning to live [sterilization] (*Homilies on Matthew* 28:5 **[A.D. 391]**).

Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit, where there are medicines of sterility [oral contraceptives], where there is murder before birth? . . . Indeed, it is something worse than murder, and I do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you condemn the gift of God and Fight with his [natural] laws? (*Homilies on Romans* 24 **[A.D. 391]**).

Jerome

But I wonder why he [the heretic Jovinianus] set Judah and Tamar before us for an example, unless perchance even harlots give him pleasure; or Onan, who was slain because he grudged his brother seed. Does he imagine that we approve of any sexual intercourse except for the procreation of children? (*Against Jovinian* 1:19 **[A.D. 393]**).

You may see a number of women who are widows before they are wives. Others, indeed, will drink sterility [oral contraceptives] and murder a man not yet born, [and some commit abortion] (Letters 22:13 **[A.D. 396]**).

Augustine

This proves that you [Manicheans] approve of having a wife, not for the procreation of children, but for the gratification of passion. In marriage, as the marriage law declares, the man and woman come together for the procreation of children. Therefore, whoever makes the procreation of children a greater sin than copulation, forbids marriage and makes the woman not a wife but a mistress, who for some gifts presented to her, is joined to the man to gratify his passion (*The Morals of the Manichees* 18:65 **[A.D. 388]**).

You [Manicheans] make your auditors adulterers of their wives when they take care lest the women with whom they copulate conceive. They take wives according to the laws of matrimony by tablets announcing that the marriage is contracted to procreate children; and then, fearing because of your [religious] law [against childbearing] . . . they copulate in a shameful union only to satisfy lust for their wives. They are unwilling to have children, on whose account alone marriages are made. How is it, then, that you are not those prohibiting marriage, as the apostle predicted of you so long ago [I Tim. 4:1-4], when you try to take from marriage what marriage is? When this is taken away, husbands are shameful lovers, wives are harlots, bridal chambers are brothels, fathers-in-law are pimps (*Against Faustus* 15:7 **[A.D. 400]**).

For thus the eternal law, that is, the will of God creator of all creatures, taking counsel for the conservation of natural order, not to serve lust, but to see to the preservation of the race, permits the delight of mortal flesh to be released from the control of reason in copulation only to propagate progeny (ibid. 22:30).

Caesarius

Who is he who cannot warn that no woman may take a potion [an oral contraceptive or an abortifacient] so that she is unable to conceive or condemns in herself the nature which God willed to be fecund? As often as she could have conceived or given birth, of that many homicides she will be held guilty, and, unless she undergoes suitable penance, she will be damned by eternal death in hell. If a woman does not wish to have children, let her enter into a religious agreement with her husband; for chastity is the sole sterility of a Christian woman (Sermons 1:12 **[A.D. 522]**).