This evening we look in God’s Word at a theme which many have decided the Word does not address at all. Particularly within the Protestant Church you will often hear it claimed that the Word is silent about this matter. Those who do admit the Word has something to say in this area are often hesitant to proclaim anything with conviction. More often than not, if they discern any relevant truths in the Word what they find are merely a few vaguely positive statements rather than a negative commandment.

I am speaking this evening of birth control.

Is this an issue which the Church should address? Some say yes, others no. Does Scripture address the issue? Does it address the issue directly? Does it address it indirectly? Does it give us focused guidance? Does it give us general principles from which we must determine specific truths, in the same way we approach other matters Scripture does not directly address such as abortion?

**Three Implicit Arguments From Scripture**

1. **Children are a blessing from the Lord**

   The beginning and often the end of serious Protestant discussion of birth control is found in Scripture’s statements that children are a blessing from God. Scripture is full of such verses; it doesn’t take much scratching to dig up a host of passages which refer to children in this light.

   **Psalm 127:3-5**
   Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

   **Genesis 25:21**
   Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

   **Exodus 23:25-26**
   Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among
you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span.

Genesis 33:5 (Jacob meeting Esau)
Jacob answered, “They are the children God has graciously given your servant.”

Psalm 128:1-4 (ESV)
1 Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! 2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. 3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. 4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

These are general statements of God’s attitude toward children. And in a day which looks on children as impediments to life, as nuisances to be disposed of, such an uninhibitedly positive view of children is a challenge all in itself. But there are those who would say that we can limit blessings, that the Bible refers to many things as blessings, including wealth and belongings, and that we should definitely limit some such blessings.

Unfortunately, those who advance this argument use demonstrably faulty logic. It’s all in what you compare the blessing of children to that this argument rises or falls. Consider the full range of things that fall under the category of “divine blessing. Paul writes in Romans 4:7-8:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

Which of us would suggest we limit our blessings when it comes to forgiveness of sins? If we compare the blessing of children to the blessing of money, then, by all means, feel free to limit the blessing. But equate the gift of children with the blessing of forgiven sins, and they become a blessing to seek without number or end. By neglecting to compare God’s gift of children with other forms of blessing beyond material, those who make this argument reveal an inherently biased approach.

I have yet to hear those who advance this argument use any other form of blessing as the basis of their argument. But let’s consider several other forms of divine blessing:

Jesus says in the Book of Revelation, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb.” Is this a limitable blessing? Would we seek to limit this?

What about “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life.”? Would we wash just a portion of our clothes in this manner?
What about, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”? Should we decline any of these blessings?

Look through a concordance under the words, “bless,” or “blessing” and ask yourself whether it’s appropriate to decline the vast majority of the gifts listed in God’s Word as His blessings on His people.

Those who still argue that it is appropriate to limit the blessing of children must at least admit that most blessings are unlimitable. If we choose to include children among blessings such as possessions and wealth which may be limitable because of their negative potential, on what basis do we do so? The Bible clearly warns against the love of material items. Does the Bible ever warn that love of children is a root of any evil?

Finally, it could actually be that any failure to trust God for blessing is sin. Such seems to be the meaning of the parable of the talents. When the prophet Elisha urged King Joash to strike the ground with arrows as a sign of his defeat of the Syrians, Joash hit the ground three times whereupon Elisha rebuked him for not doing so five or six times. By hitting the ground only three times he brought Israel just three victories over the Syrians rather than five or six. When God seeks to bless, who are we to limit His blessing knowingly or even unknowingly?

2. Fill the earth and subdue it still applies

Children are a Divine blessing. They are eternal beings created in the image of God. They bear the image of God. This much is positive instruction on our topic. But there is more from a positive point of view. There is the command of Genesis 3 that man should fill the earth and subdue it. Have we finished this task? Is the world filled and subdued? If every man and woman on earth were placed in the state of Texas, the population density would be less than that of New York City. Fly over the west or over Canada or over Alaska and you will see that despite the fear-mongering prophets of Malthus spreading their messages of doom, the world is far from full. World population density today is 30 people per square mile. That’s less than half the population density of the USA where we average 75 people per square mile. And the USA is far from over-populated.

Moreover, the story of the 21st century, if you have read any recent demographic studies, (see Atlantic Monthly article from August, 1999) is going to be a story not of population explosion, but of worldwide population decline beginning in about 2040. In
fact, the increase in world population over the last century was not the product of increased fertility, but of increased life spans.

3. The Law specifies times of impurity that coincide with maximal fertility

We learn still more about God’s attitude toward birth-control from other passages. The Levitical laws of purity address the proper time for sexual union. From the onset of menstruation, we are told in Leviticus 15:19-24, a woman is unclean. She remains unclean throughout the issue of blood, and for seven days after the issue has stopped. Thus, for an average of 12 to 14 days from the onset the woman is impure. The net result of the seven-day post-menstruation unclean period is this: according to an obstetrician/gynecologist in our congregation...

The “normal” menstrual cycle is supposed to occur every 28 days. Day 1 marks the first day of the cycle. 7 days of bleeding. Ovulation occurs only once a cycle and in the normal cycle will occur on day 14. If conception occurs then no more periods for 9 months. If conception does not occur then two weeks go by and the lining of the uterus is “shed” or expelled and the process begins again.

It is interesting that with the Levitical laws, God has insured that sexual relations are timed to occur at the best time for ovulation and conception. Andrew Folley M.D.

These are passages from which we begin to extrapolate God’s attitude toward birth control, and there are many more like these. But is there a passage which actually addresses the issue directly? We see God’s “yes” to children in Scripture, and on that basis alone we can say a great deal. We see God’s desire for children, His positive approach to pregnancy and childbirth, his proscribing sex during menstruation, and during the least fertile period immediately after menstruation. But is there more in God’s Word? Specifically, is there a Divine “no” to birth control?

Scripture’s Explicitly Negative Statement

Genesis 38:1-11 (ESV) 1 It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, 3 and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. 5 Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.
And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother’s wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your father’s house, till Shelah my son grows up—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father’s house.

This passage is often presented in Protestant churches as addressing something other than the issue we are considering. In many conservative churches, it is taken as a passage condemning auto-eroticism.

But is this the key to this passage? Well, no. Ultimately, the deed of Onan in this passage is distinctly different from “Onanism,” as masturbation is technically referred to today.

To grasp the purpose of this passage it’s vital we understand correctly the sin Onan commits. We are told in verse 10,

10 And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.

What did Onan do that was wicked in the sight of the Lord? This is the vital question we are left to answer at the end of these verses. Two theories have come to dominate thinking about this passage today: one a modern explanation and one the explanation of the Church universal for 1900 years up till the mid-20th century. In recent years, many have suggested that the sin of Onan was his failure to provide offspring for his dead brother. This is not the classic view of this passage, but if you have spent your life within evangelical Protestant circles, it’s likely that this is the only explanation you have ever heard for the wickedness Onan committed in the sight of the Lord.

The second explanation is the one which has dominated church history, yet on which is almost unheard-of in Protestant circles today. By this explanation, what Onan did which was wicked in the sight of the Lord was his specific method of denying Tamar a child. This explanation says that it was Onan’s practice of coitus interruptus, the only common and universally available form of birth control in ancient times, which lies at the
root of his sin. By this view, God punishes Onan with death not for denying his brother
offspring but for spilling his seed upon the ground.

Some people mention a third theory about the sin of Onan, but it’s narrowly held
and seems to have arisen largely as a result of people rejecting the first explanation
without being willing to embrace the second. This theory says that Onan is punished
because, in effect, he commits adultery. Had he done his duty in regard to his brother in
good faith, he would not have been guilty of adultery, but because he does not do his
duty, he is guilty of adultery. I don’t intend to spend much time on this third theory this
evening for reasons I’ll explain in a moment.

Whatever Onan’s sin may be, it is certainly a grave offense in the eyes of God. God
puts him to death for it, causing him to join the select ranks of Nadab and Abihu,
Ananias and Sapphira, Uzzah, the sons of Korah and just a few other individuals whom
we are specifically told in Scripture God punished with death for their sins. We need to
understand this about this sin of Onan at the outset: it is not one of those sins worthy of
“few stripes” in the judgment of God. This sin is deeply offensive to God, so offensive
that God does not permit Onan to live after committing it.

Would God treat adultery in this fashion? Yes. After all, the penalty for adultery
in the Mosaic Law is death by stoning. But it diminishes the likelihood that this is the sin
for which God puts Onan to death when we read on in Genesis 15 and find that after
these things take place, passing his daughter-in-law, Tamar, on the road and thinking her
a prostitute because of the way she had disguised herself, Judah has relations with her
without being put to death by God. If Onan’s sin was adultery, then certainly Judah
should die by the hand of God when he commits the same sin with the same woman—a
sin, compounded in the Law of Moses by the fact that intercourse between father and
daughter-in-law is condemned as incest. But Judah lives.

Further reducing the likelihood that adultery is the sin of Onan... By the Levitical
law of levirate marriage, Tamar becomes Onan’s wife when he goes into her—the
surviving brother takes the widow as his wife and then goes in to her according to
Deuteronomy 25:5-6,

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no
son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the
family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her
and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s
brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall
succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may
not be blotted out of Israel.
By the levirate code, marriage precedes the sexual act. It’s not the lack of a legal relationship between Tamar and Onan that’s the problem in our passage, it’s something done within that relationship.

I will spend no more time on this third explanation. It has never gained traction for the simple reason that it’s illogical—forged, I believe, from the need to explain Onan’s sin as something other than birth control by those who admit the difficulty of explaining God’s wrath descending upon Onan as a result of his failure to do his duty to his brother.

Judah lives after committing adultery and incest with his daughter-in-law. Onan dies. Either God is simply treating them differently despite their committing the same offense, or the offense is different.

Is there a clear distinction between the offense of father and son in Scripture? In fact there is. One spills his seed, the other does not. Perez—an ancestor of Christ—issues from the illicit union of Judah with Tamar for the simple reason that Judah, unlike his son, does not spill his seed when he goes in to his daughter-in-law.

This leads us back to our original choices. Either the sin Onan commits is his failure to give his brother an heir, or it is his spilling of his seed, intentionally committing a sexual act without permitting a child to be born of it. Let’s assess these two possibilities individually beginning with the first, the failure to give his brother an heir.

**Is Onan’s sin his failure to provide an heir for his brother?**

Is Onan’s sin his failure to provide an heir for his brother? Think about this for a moment. On what basis would we say that it was Onan’s duty to do this? The Levirate law of marriage? The law we find in Deuteronomy 25?

**Deuteronomy 25:5-6 (ESV)**

> 5 If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. 6 And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

It’s all right there the evangelical world says today. He has a duty. He failed his duty. He dies for his disobedience.

But there are problems with this approach. First we have the problem of an anachronistic reading of Scripture: what is the Biblical timeframe of the story of Onan? The days of the patriarchs, right? When is the law of Levirate marriage given to Israel?
Over four hundred years later when God gives His law to Moses. The Mosaic Levirate laws simply do not exist at this point. There is no written command from God demanding that Onan fulfill such a duty.

Of course, it doesn’t have to be written to be true. There was no written law against murder either at this time, yet God still held men guilty of it and punished men for it. God’s law existed before He gave the written law to Moses. How did man know God’s commands before He gave His written law? They knew it, because in the words of Paul,

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\text{Romans 2:12-15 (ESV)}\quad 12 \text{For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.}
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Before the law was given, man had the witness of God in his heart, upon which God had written His precepts. This is the testimony of Romans 1 and 2. But here’s the problem. All law prior to the giving of the written law to Moses was moral law. None of it was ceremonial or civil. If God held a man guilty of lawbreaking prior to giving His written law to Moses, it was not for violating ceremonial law or civil law, but for violating the moral law which He had written upon the human heart.

And that law has not passed away. It remains written on human hearts to this day. Nothing written on human hearts at the time of Onan is left unwritten on the hearts of lawless men today. Those without God’s law today are still punished by God for breaking the precepts and commandments written upon their heart—the same precepts and commandments that existed before the Mosaic law. The law written on the human heart is the foundational moral law of God. It is universal, unchanged and undiminished.

But if it’s true, as Evangelical preachers of the last century have routinely suggested, that Onan’s failure to provide an heir for his brother was the sin for which God put him to death, why do they fail to press this law on us today? Why do they fail to stress that living brothers must provide heirs for dead brothers? Whatever the reason God put Onan to death, it is clear that the law Onan violated constituted a timeless command for all mankind. So why such silence on brothers’ duties to brothers?
We must understand that the ceremonial and civil portions of the Mosaic law neither precede Moses nor linger after Christ. Whatever law Onan broke, it was certainly the timeless moral law of God written on the human heart. If the law he violated was a pre-Mosaic requirement that brothers provide heirs for their brothers, then it remains binding in our own day. It has not lapsed. It has not been rescinded. If it was written on the hearts of men before the law of Moses, then it is written on the hearts of men today. It is non-civil, non-ceremonial, timeless moral law, preceding both the nation of Israel and the written law of Moses.

The question of timeframe is a serious blow to the position that Onan’s sin was failing to provide an heir for his brother. Most Evangelical interpreters of this passage never seem to recognize the anachronism implicit in applying the levirate code of marriage to Onan. So here’s the question—and for the typical Protestant it’s a question which forces a choice between the Scylla of anachronism in interpretation of Scripture and the Charybdis of ignoring God’s eternal moral code: is the levirate law of marriage (found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6), that a brother must marry his brother’s widow to provide for his brother an heir, moral or civil law? If it’s civil law it didn’t exist before the Mosaic law was given. If it’s timeless moral law, written on men’s hearts, then we are as guilty as Onan if we fail to heed it today.

Things get still harder to explain for those who hold to the position that Onan died for failing to do his duty to his brother… What punishment does the Law of Moses specify for the man who fails to do this duty?

7 And if the man does not wish to take his brother’s wife, then his brother’s wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, “My husband’s brother refuses to perpetuate his brother’s name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.” 8 Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, “I do not wish to take her,” 9 then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, “So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.” 10 And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, “The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.”

The punishment for such sin in the law of Moses is an act of public humiliation. Yet Onan is put to death for his sin.
The more we examine the question of whether Onan was put to death for refusing to give offspring to his brother, the more untenable the position appears. At the very least we must say that if it was sin before the written law was given, it remains the requirement of God today. Yet we don’t hear proponents of this view arguing for a return to the Levirate law of marriage.

**Onan’s sin: the spilling of his seed**

It would seem that this leaves only one possible explanation for the sin of Onan, yet shoot one bird and a dozen more appear. As I’ve discussed this with people, I’ve found that once they discard the theory that Onan’s sin was his failure to provide an heir for his brother due to the anachronisms and faulty assumptions required to hold such a view, they don’t necessarily automatically embrace the classic view of the Church. Instead they say, “Well, all right, if it wasn’t his failure to provide an heir, it was his disobedience to his father… it was his unkindness to Tamar… The list goes on and on. And of course, the problem of this one deed being pulled out for such negative note in the Word remains with any of these other arguments. If this is failure to respect his father’s wishes, why does Onan die for it when Ham, who uncovers his father’s nakedness—showing greater disdain for his father than Onan—does not?

Some suggest that it’s not a one-time refusal to give seed to his brother’s line that dooms Onan, but a permanent, lifelong rejection of his duty. Yet, if Onan dies as a result of such refusal, why does his father Judah live? After the death of Onan, Judah promises his youngest son to Tamar. Years go by. The age of potency arrives for his youngest, yet Judah has no intention of fulfilling his promise. Judah has the same duty as Onan by this logic—the duty to provide for his eldest son’s line through his youngest son—but he keeps his youngest from fulfilling this duty. He should die for such sin by the logic of those who make this objection.

We could go on and on listing similar attempts to escape the logical force of this passage. But we don’t need to. And the reason we don’t is that there is one explanation for the intensity of God’s wrath at the sin of Onan that coheres logically and Scripturally, that fits all the conditions of our passage and that flows perfectly from the historical setting of these early chapters of Genesis. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the one explanation we are left with is the universal understanding of the Church of the sin of Onan prior to the 20th century. This position understands the sin of Onan—his wickedness in the sight of the Lord—as his deliberate engagement in sexual union
without permitting the procreation of a child from that union: his spilling his seed upon
the ground.

Now, I know that this view comes as a serious challenge to many of our lives. Yet
this is not a unique interpretation. It’s not an idiosyncratic personal insight into this
passage. This interpretation of this passage was the nearly-unanimous interpretation of all
Christianity for over 1900 years of church history prior to the 20th century.

We simply don’t understand just how novel and unprecedented the 20th century
Protestant view of birth control is in terms of historic Christianity. Do we even realize
that the method of birth control utilized by Onan was the primary method of birth control
for thousands of years of human existence? According to histories of birth control, it
wasn’t until the invention of vulcanized rubber in the 1800s that birth control technique
advanced beyond the method of Onan.

For century after century prior to the invention of vulcanization, and for
generation after generation of Christians, this was clearly a passage about coitus
interruptus, the only common, classically and universally available method of birth
control throughout the world for several millennia of human existence.

Hear our Church fathers on this passage:

**Martin Luther:** Onan must have been a malicious and
incorrigible scoundrel. This is a most disgraceful sin. It is far
more atrocious than incest or adultery. We call it unchastity, yes,
a Sodomic sin. For Onan goes into her; that is, he lies with her
and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination,
spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time
the order of nature established by God in procreation should be
followed.

Notice Luther’s equation of the sin of Onan with the sin of Sodom. The sin of
Sodom has recently occurred. God’s wrath on Sodom is still fresh in the minds of Isaac
and Jacob and the sons of Jacob at this point. They know the story of their father
Abraham seeking to save Lot. They know the sorry history of Lot subsequently. There is
recent precedent for God putting to death those who abuse sexual union for illicit
purposes.

Luther calls Onan’s sin “sodomitc” because his understanding of the sin of
Sodom (not just his, the entire Church’s for many centuries) is so much deeper than our
own current understanding. If we use the term “sodomy” at all any more, we use it
exclusively of homosexual intercourse. Yet our country once had sodomy laws against
many forms of unnatural intercourse. (A former military man recently showed me that the current Universal Code of Military Justice still condemns certain male-to-female forms of intercourse as sodomy.)

Sodomy laws, of course, banned male-on-male intercourse. But not just male-on-male intercourse, male-female anal intercourse, fellatio and many other forms of non-reproductive sexual practice were forbidden under the rubric of sodomy. This was public law, not a closeted, fundamentalist Christian interpretation of these early passages in Genesis.

An understanding of the immorality of sex lacking in procreative intent was so widely understood (so clearly written on the human heart) that even secular government once banned it. Intercourse—whether homosexual or heterosexual—which denied the possibility of procreation was forbidden by secular government as sodomitic. Birth control was banned for centuries by governments, including those of almost every U.S. state, not the Church.

Luther and the rest of the Church for centuries prior to our own went far beyond man-on-man sex in their understanding of God’s wrath upon Sodom. According to the historic position of the Church, the lesson God began at Sodom is repeated with Onan. Sodom and Onan teach jointly that God views any act of intercourse for the sole and exclusive purpose of carnal pleasure—preclusive of procreation—as deeply wicked.

This logic is woven throughout Scripture’s teaching on intercourse. It is wrong for man to have sex with an animal. It is wrong for man to have sex with a man. It is wrong for a man to spill his seed on the ground. Any form of intercourse in which implicit in the sexual act is a rejection of procreation is sinful. This is Luther’s view, not my own. I’m simply saying what Luther said. The amazing thing is that what our fathers taught about this passage makes sense while our own teaching falls apart at the first hint of examination. Luther’s view fits the facts. It fits the flow of Genesis. It fits the timeframe of the Old Testament. There’s suddenly no question why Onan’s sin is so serious in the eyes of God: it’s a repeat of the sin of Sodom. That’s why God puts him to death.

John Calvin: And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was yet in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him. The voluntary spilling of semen outside of intercourse between man and woman is a monstrous thing. Deliberately to withdraw from coitus in order that semen may fall on the ground is doubly monstrous. For this is to extinguish the hope of the race and to kill before he is born the hoped-for offspring. This impiety is especially condemned,
now by the Spirit through Moses’ mouth, that Onan, as it were, by a violent abortion, no less cruelly than filthy cast upon the ground the offspring of his brother, torn from the maternal womb. Besides, in this way he tried, as far as he was able, to wipe out a part of the human race. If any woman, ejects a foetus from her womb by drugs, it is reckoned a crime incapable of expiation and deservedly. Onan incurred upon himself the same kind of punishment, infecting the earth by his semen, in order that Tamar might not conceive a future human being as an inhabitant of the earth. John Calvin, Commentary on Genesis

An astounding quote: Calvin views *coitus interruptus* as the male equivalent of abortion.

**Augustine:** And why has Paul said: “If he cannot control himself, let him marry”? Surely, to prevent incontinence from constraining him to adultery. If, then, he practices continence, neither let him marry nor beget children. However, if he does not control himself, let him enter into lawful wedlock, so that he may not beget children in disgrace or avoid having offspring by a more degraded form of intercourse. There are some lawfully wedded couples who resort to this last, for intercourse, even with one’s lawfully wedded spouse, can take place in an unlawful and shameful manner whenever the conception of offspring is avoided. Onan, the son of Juda, did this very thing, and the Lord slew him on that account. Therefore, the procreation of the children is itself the primary, natural, legitimate purpose of marriage. Whence it follows that those who marry because of their inability to remain continent ought not to so temper their vice that they preclude the good of marriage, which is the procreation of children. Quoted by Junius Franciscus (1545-1602); editor of the Belgic Confession; opponent of Arminius.

Why has this understanding of Onan’s sin fallen on such hard times in our day?

In 1908 the Bishops of the Anglican Communion meeting at the Lambeth Conference declared, “The Conference records with alarm the growing practice of the artificial restriction of the family and earnestly calls upon all Christian people to discountenance the use of all artificial means of restriction as demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare.”

The Lambeth Conference of 1930 produced a new resolution, “Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, complete abstinence is the primary and obvious method,” but if there was morally sound reasoning for avoiding
abstinence, “the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of Christian principles.”

At the 1958 Lambeth Conference, a resolution was passed declaring responsibility for deciding the number and frequency of children to be laid by God upon the consciences of parents “in such ways as are acceptable to husband and wife.”

The irony is that the Church’s view of birth control directly shadows the world’s during these years. In 1938 a federal appellate court undid the Comstock Laws forbidding sale of birth control devices across state lines. In 1965 the Supreme Court determined in Griswold vs. Connecticut that a state could not forbid the distribution of birth control devices.

Could it be that the march of the Church towards a now-common acceptance of this sexual sin began with a willingness to remove procreation from its declaration of God’s primary purpose for marriage? Sex by itself, for its own pleasures, in any form which willfully excludes procreation, violates God’s purpose for marriage and sex.

(Need I say that I’m not speaking here about cases within marriage where fertility is lacking and where the desire for children is present, but the possibility is not there physically? In such cases the act is not willful rejection.)

Is it any wonder that those churches which have manifestly failed to uphold the linkage in God’s law between procreation and sex are the same churches that are today struggling to find any reason to oppose homosexual relationships?

The Word of God is clear on this linkage between man and woman coming together in love and God’s desire for children as the fruit of such union:

Malachi 2:13-15 (ESV) 13 And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14 But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

Is birth control permitted? I am increasingly persuaded by God’s Word that it is not, that, as Luther suggests, it is a sodomitic sin.
Now, I know there are situations in our lives which are unique. There are medical difficulties. There is post partum depression. There are personal reasons why you may find this historic treatment of the sin of Onan objectionable.

But may I say to you that our sensitivities cannot become our hermeneutic: we cannot let our personal situations and reasons for feeling a certain way about any passage be the decisive filter through which we view that passage. This is not faithfulness to the Word of God. These thoughts may offend you. To some they are entirely new. But I trust we realize that the authority in this realm, as in all realms, is the Word and not the messenger. I am under the Word as you are under the Word. I am required to be faithful in my preaching as well as in my obedience, and in my preaching I am called to be a watchman. I sound the alarm of God. It may be that I blow the trumpet with insensitivity. It may be that I am overeager to alert to danger, and that I blow in areas where no harm threatens. If this is so, I will answer to God for it.

But I urge you to realize that this question of Onan and birth control is more than merely a matter of personal taste and personal desire. You must agree that it is a Biblical issue, even if you decide that the teaching of the Church in this area over the centuries has been totally wrong.

Let me add in conclusion that I sympathize with those who fear the implications of this teaching for their own lives. You can probably surmise that as a child of Evangelicalism I have not always practiced what I now preach in this area. However, we have been increasingly convinced of the truth of this teaching in our own home for a number of years, and it has been God’s will that has kept us from advancing beyond our current five in recent years rather than the will of man. I must add that the positive joy of children is what initially sparked my thinking in this area. I find children such joy that I can’t see how I could do with less. They’re our greatest worldly treasure.

Let me say finally that as a church we recognize the danger of going beyond what is written and judging others where God would have us be silent. Most of us are heirs of a Christian tradition which for the last century has almost unhesitatingly accepted birth control. We are not seeking to make this a matter of examination in our lives with you. Nor are we seeking to force you to subscribe to this position—a position which is relatively new even to me. Yet we ask, will you allow your thinking in this area to be denominated by the Word of God rather than the thought of man? I do not know what your practice is in this area, but I urge you to submit your practices to God and to seek His will for your life in this area.