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R. Albert Mohler Jr.**

The effective separation of sex from procreation may be one of the most important defining marks of our age – and one of the most ominous. This awareness is spreading among American evangelicals, and it threatens to set loose a firestorm. Most evangelical Protestants greeted the advent of modern birth control technologies with applause and relief. Lacking any substantial theology of marriages, sex or the family, evangelicals welcomed the development of "The Pill" much as the world celebrated the discovery of penicillin-as one more milestone in the inevitable march of human progress and the conquest of nature.

At the same time, evangelicals overcame their traditional reticence in matters of sexuality, and produced a growth industry in books, seminars, and even sermon series celebrating sexual ecstasy as one of God's blessings to married Christians. Once reluctant to admit the very existence of sexuality, evangelicals emerged from the 1960s ready to dish out the latest sexual advice without blushing. As one of the best-selling evangelical sex manuals proclaims, marital sex in *Intended for Pleasure*. Many evangelicals seem to have forgotten that it was intended for something else as well. Thus, the evangelical reaction to *Humanae Vitae* was, generally speaking, dismissal and disregard. Pope Paul VI apparently caught many Catholics by surprise with his total rejection of "artificial" methods of birth control, but most Protestants seemed to expect this reaffirmation of Rome's historic tradition. Indeed, birth control became fixated in the Protestant mind as a "Catholic" issue. That is, until recently.

A growing number of evangelicals are rethinking the issue – and facing the hard questions posed by reproductive technologies. Several developments contributed to this reconsideration, but the most important of these is the abortion revolution. The early evangelical response to legalized abortion was woefully inadequate. Major evangelical bodies and denominations – including even the Southern Baptist Convention- accepted at least some version of abortion on demand. The evangelical conscience was awakened in the late 1970s, when the murderous reality of abortion could not be denied. A massive realignment of evangelical conviction was evident by the 1980 presidential election, when abortion functioned as the fuse for a political explosion. Conservative Protestants emerged as major players in the pro-life movement, standing side-by-side with Catholics in the defense of the unborn.

The reality of abortion forced a reconsideration of other issues in turn. Affirming that human life must be recognized and protected from the moment of conception, evangelicals increasingly recognized Intrauterine Devices (IUDs) as abortifacients, and rejected any birth control with any abortifacient design or result. This conviction is now casting a cloud over The Pill as well.

Thus, in an ironic turn, American evangelicals are rethinking birth control even as a majority of the nation's Roman Catholics indicate a rejection of their Church's teaching. In this light, a new evangelical assessment of *Humanae Vitae* is in order, and its thirtieth anniversary is an opportune moment. At this first level, a theologically grounded understanding of sex would require that evangelicals agree with the encyclical's opening statement that "God has entrusted spouses with the extremely important mission [munus] of transmitting human life." This mission of the stewardship and transmission of life runs counter to the secular mind, but is central to the biblical vision. Such a view stands in sharp contrast to our culture's prevailing treatment of children as inconveniences or as accessories for the extension of the ego. We must also recognize the prophetic character of the encyclical's warning about the inevitable result of the contraceptive mentality. As Pope Paul VI warned, widespread use of birth control would lead to "serious

consequences," including marital infidelity and a general erosion of morality. In reality, The Pill allowed a near-total abandonment of Christian sexual morality in the larger culture. Once the sex act was severed from the likelihood of childbearing, the traditional structure of sexual morality collapsed. Against this tide, a biblical vision of human sexuality must include what the encyclical identifies as the integrity of conjugal love within the marriage bond. This marital union is indeed intended for the procreation and parenting of children, and conjugal love is to be "both faithful and exclusive to the end of life." In the context of that bond, the unitive and procreative meanings of conjugal love are to be connected. So far, so good.

For most evangelicals, the major break with the encyclical's teaching comes at the insistence that "it is necessary that each conjugal act remain ordained in itself to the procreating of human life." This claims too much, and places inordinate importance on individual acts of sexual intercourse, rather than the larger integrity of the conjugal bond.

Thus, I believe that the encyclical would be strengthened by an affirmation of the very "principle of totality" it rejects. The focus on "each and every act" of sexual intercourse within a faithful marriage that is open to the gift of children goes beyond the biblical demand. Since the encyclical does not reject all family planning, this focus requires the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" methods of birth control. To the evangelical mind, this is a rather strange and fabricated distinction.

Nevertheless, thirty years of sad experience demonstrate that *Humanae Vitae* sounded the alarm, warning of a contraceptive mentality that would set loose methods allowed seemingly risk-free sex outside the integrity of the marital bond. At the same time, it allowed married couples to completely sever the sex act from procreation, and God's design for the marital bond. In joining arms against the Culture of Death, evangelicals will find much common ground with conservative Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, whereas Catholics distinguish between "natural" and "artificial" methods of birth control, evangelicals will focus on the critical distinction between abortifacient and nonabortifacient forms of control.

Standing against the spirit of the age, evangelicals and Roman Catholics must affirm that children are God's good gifts and blessings to the marital bond. Further, we must affirm that marriage falls short of God's design when husband and wife are not open to the gift and stewardship of children. For evangelicals, much work remains to be done. We must build and nurture a new tradition of moral theology, drawn from Holy Scripture and enriched by the theological heritage of the Church. Until we do, Catholics are not likely to be impressed by our arguments. For now, *Humanae Vitae* remains an unanswered challenge. It is high time evangelicals answered the call.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. is President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.