Going Catholic? Evangelicals and birth control: Evangelicals and birth control

by Amy Frykholm in the May 30, 2012 issue

Amid the various responses to the White House mandate requiring insurance plans to cover birth control for employees—including those working at Catholic institutions—one statistic caught my eye. A Pew survey found that 56 percent of white evangelicals disagreed with the government mandate, but only 47 percent of white mainline Protestants and only 37 percent of Catholics did. Evangelicals, some suggested, appeared to be more in tune with Catholic teaching than Catholics are.

Though these figures may simply reflect evangelicals' long-standing defense of religious liberty against government intrusion, some observers, such as Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times,* have suggested that a shift is under way in evangelical views on birth control. Oppenheimer points to the evangelical Quiverfull movement, which opposes birth control and celebrates large families; the popular reality television show *19 Kids and Counting;* and figures like theologian Russell Moore at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who assails America's "contraceptive culture." Taken together, Oppenheimer argues, we can see evangelicals gradually adopting a more Catholic view of birth control.

There are two questions to consider here: whether or not a shift is taking place among evangelicals and, if it is, whether it is bringing evangelicals closer to Catholic thinking. On both issues, the answer appears to be no.

The arguments of evangelicals who reject birth control do not mirror Catholic arguments. Catholic objections to birth control are usually framed in terms of a natural law argument, which declares that it's wrong to detach sex from the possibility of procreation. Evangelicals are more likely to frame their argument in personal terms and emphasize the importance of an individual's trust in God. In that context, birth control is portrayed as a sign of desiring to control one's destiny rather than turning one's life over to God.

That's the approach taken by Agnieszka Tennant in a 2005 piece in *Christianity Today.* She writes of her growing concern that use of birth control was creating a "hostile uterine environment" and signaled a selfish life. A few years into her marriage, she decided to abandon birth control. It should be noted here that whatever her uneasiness with birth control, her sequence of decisions—choosing to stop using birth control a few years into marriage in order potentially to conceive a child—is utterly conventional and would be similar to that of many women from an array of religious backgrounds.

Moore's attack on a "contraceptive culture" reflects another evangelical approach to the issue: a concern that contraceptives encourage sexual permissiveness. While Moore's argument mirrors Pope Paul VI's worry about birth control causing a "general lowering of moral standards," evangelicals have a long-standing and vocal disagreement with culturally permissive trends in sexuality that is largely independent of a Catholic influence. That perspective surfaces in the way evangelicals tend to oppose sex education, abortion, premarital sex and homosexuality. Extending this concern to birth control is rarer, but it can fit into the same set of concerns.

Whatever uneasiness with birth control is voiced in some corners of evangelicalism, the issue does not appear to have much traction for most believers, male or female. A Guttmacher Institute study reports that 75 percent of evangelical women say that they use birth control, and a recent Gallup poll showed that 91 percent of evangelicals believe that hormonal and barrier methods of birth control are morally acceptable.

Jenell Paris, a cultural anthropologist at Messiah College and author of *Birth Control for Christians: Making Wise Choices,* says that arguments about “trusting God with your womb” can be persuasive for evangelical women but that most don’t see trusting God and using technology as mutually exclusive. “Evangelical women work; their families rely on their incomes. They see that birth control is good for marriages and good for families.”

To understand current evangelical thinking on birth control, it would be crucial to hear more from evangelical women themselves. It’s revealing that when Oppenheimer wanted to get a better understanding of evangelicals’ views on the topic, he called up several megachurch preachers—all of them men. Granted, evangelicalism by its nature has no official spokesperson, but on this issue it seems particularly misguided to seek the views only of prominent male preachers.