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Object, Purpose, and Vocation in Christian Ethics: A Consideration of the Marital Act

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Corrine Burmeister's recent article, "'Be Fruitful and Multiply': The Ethics of Nonabortifacient Contraceptive Use within Fruitful Christian Marriages,"[1] approaches the issue of contraception in two important ways: first, by exploring the question of the *purposes* of marriage, and, second, by considering if the *circumstances* of a conflict among these purposes justifies the use of contraception. While the consideration of purposes and circumstances is important for moral evaluation, it is also insufficient according to methods of moral theology and biblical evaluation. Besides purposes and circumstances, we should consider the *object* of the act—the quality of the act itself. Furthermore, in Christian ethics, circumstances are structured fundamentally according to biblical spheres of life: marriage and family, the church, and civil society, traditionally referred to as the three estates or hierarchies.[2] By filling out our consideration of the issue according to the object of the act and the three estates, we will find both greater clarity with respect to the nature and purposes of marriage, and thereby also a more comprehensive understanding for making circumstantial judgments regarding the avoidance of conception. This article also will briefly address the circumstances of poverty and endangerment of the mother's life as examples.

I. Object and Purpose in Christian Ethics

The article approaches the question of the use of nonabortifacient contraception first by considering the purposes of marriage and then the manner in which circumstances may affect the purposes of marriage. The purposes, or ends, of moral acts, along with the circumstances in which they occur, are certainly important, but

[1] Corrine Burmeister, "'Be Fruitful and Multiply': The Ethics of Nonabortifacient Contraceptive Use within Fruitful Christian Marriages," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 89, nos. 2–3 (April/July 2025): 209–227.

[2] See Martin Luther, *Circular Disputation on the Right of Resistance against the Emperor: On the Three Hierarchies [Matthew 19:21]* (May 9, 1539), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 72:567–628; Knut Alfsvåg, "Christians in Society: Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms and the Three Estates Today," *Logia* 14, no. 4 (2005): 15–20; and Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders," trans. Luís H. Dreher, *Lutheran Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (December 31, 1998): 125–159.

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they are not the only consideration. People are conventionally familiar with the need to consider also the means to an end. In ethics, the "means" to an end refers to the act in itself, or what is technically sometimes called the *object* of the act. For example, murder as an act in itself is wrong, no matter one's purpose or end in doing it. Traditional Lutheran theologians are aware of this distinction and affirm it, in accordance with the biblical witness. For example, Johann Gerhard teaches that works must be good both according to means—the object or action itself—and according to purpose.[3] Thus not only the purposes and circumstances of an act but also the means or object of an act need to be considered.

Burmeister briefly acknowledges this distinction between the *object* of a moral action and its *end* or purpose, but dismisses it as a "distinction without a difference."[4] On the contrary, this distinction is standard in Christian ethics. When we recognize that the ends do not justify the means, we are recognizing the connection between the action itself and its goal or purpose. Good purposes cannot truly be achieved apart from right action. Right action seeks after and achieves good purposes. But evil action undermines good purposes, even if the result appears good in the moment. Good purposes will not stand when built upon corrupt action.

Indeed, in biblical ethics, great emphasis is put on consideration of the action itself. The conventional distinction between means and ends, while not incorrect, can be misleading if we think that means have no correspondence to ends other than as utilitarian or pragmatic functions. Actions should not be viewed in a merely instrumental way, as though so long as my purpose or goal is good, then I can choose whatsoever means I want to achieve that goal. If my goal is to acquire food, clothing, and shelter to support the nourishment and protection of my family, I am not justified in stealing or defrauding to get these things, but I ought to labor in some way to produce them or pay for them. The former means is wicked but the latter good, not because of the purpose, which is the same in both cases, but because the actions themselves differ in love and justice toward others. Actions themselves have a nature and quality that uphold and further righteousness, or undermine and detract from it. So while considerations of purpose are relevant to Christian living, they follow upon consideration of the conformity of an action to God's will.

It should be noted that while God's will is revealed in the commandments of Scripture, Scripture itself also teaches that we know his will through natural law (Rom 2:14–15; 1 Cor 11:14).[5] While the natural, unrighteous man suppresses this

[3] Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, vol. 20, *On Good Works*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes and Aaron Jensen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), § 17, pp. 19–20.

[4] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 215 n. 29.

[5] Thus Gerhard says that the criteria for the moral law is not only that which is commanded in Scripture, but also the law of nature, "the ideas grafted into the minds of men at creation and still partly left after the fall." Johann Gerhard, *On the Ceremonial and Forensic Laws,* in *Theological*

natural law and often willfully ignores it (Rom 1:18–21, 1:32), the justified man is called to fear God, to believe and keep his word, and to return to the nature of things in order to live according to wisdom (Prov 6:6, 30:21–33; Job 12:7–12; Matt 6:26–30; Jas 3:3–12). A Christian, no longer working to suppress the truth but rather to discern it, can learn from the natural law informed by Scripture.[6] The natural law corresponds to the nature and quality of something created; it commands the action fitting for the creature to pursue according to its nature. Actions in concord with God's will, then, are appropriate to the nature of a creature, and support and strengthen the nature and qualities of a creature.

This understanding helps us recognize the importance of the morality of individual acts and their relation to virtue. Virtues are good habits that incline people to what is good for them according to God's will. Virtues are strengthened by good actions, but weakened by evil action. Human actions are not isolated, materialistic operations, but they always express or manifest the mind and will. When I act, even in the simplest routines in which I do not consciously consider the cause, object, circumstances, or purposes of an act, the concord between the act and my soul reveals my habitual acceptance and approval of such action. As an animated creature, with soul and body integrated, what I do with my body is the fruit of my animated self, of my soul. Action done without reflection indicates not a detachment from the soul but such a harmony of the soul with the action that there is no need to deliberate. The soul is not detached from the action, but is oriented in such a way that some actions become second nature. Actions, then, always engage the soul, even if simply as commensurate with the understanding and desire of the soul so as not to require conscious deliberation. Such commensurate actions reinforce and strengthen the understanding and will of the soul.

On the other hand, when a person actively reflects on which course of action should be taken, and has to exercise some kind of "willpower" to act according to this deliberation, such deliberation and choice introduces new understanding and inclination to the soul. It brings about a shift in inclinations and habits. To be sure, the effect of one action may be minimal, but it cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, it is often the first deliberative or willful action that goes against the established inclinations of the soul, which opens up the possibility of acceptance of new actions,

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Commonplaces, vol. 15–16, *On the Law of God, on the Ceremonial and Forensic Laws,* trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and Joshua J. Hayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), § 6, p. 238.

[6] See, significantly, Ap XXIII 8–17 for an example of how Christians learn from the natural law informed by Scripture. For further study, see Gifford Grobien, "What Is the Natural Law? Medieval Foundations and Luther's Appropriation," in *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. Roland Cap Ehlke (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 17–38; and Gifford Grobien, "The Natural Law and Christian Ethics," *Logia* 29, no. 1 (Epiphany 2020): 7–12.

which opens the door to new habits. Thus, the importance of even a single action in moving a person toward or away from virtue should not be dismissed.

II. Union as Characteristic of Marriage

In Burmeister's article, the problem with neglecting the distinction between an act and its purpose is most apparent in her handling of a quotation articulating this difference. She quotes Martin Rhonheimer saying the supposition is false "that 'loving union' must be considered the primary end of marriage (and of sexuality in general), whereas in reality 'loving union' is the fundamental aspect of the *object of the conjugal act*."[7] Burmeister, however, dismisses this distinction Rhonheimer makes between the object and the purpose and simply persists in referring to union as a purpose of marriage and sex.[8]

Yet not distinguishing between the act and purpose leads to confusion when treating the purposes of marriage. Burmeister's article refers to three purposes of marriage but never explains what is meant by the "unitive purpose" of marriage.[9] It is clear enough from Scripture that a husband and a wife are united in marriage (Gen 2:24). But what does Burmeister mean by "unitive purpose"? Part of the ambiguity may be resolved by clarifying how the word "marriage" is being used: either as the ongoing relationship and state of a man and woman in matrimony, or as just the wedding ceremony. "Marriage" primarily refers to relationship and state and then secondarily to the ceremony.[10] If referring to marriage as a ceremony, there is a way that union can be considered a purpose of marriage, in that a man and woman marry in order to be united. We can also readily recognize that certain actions and experiences of husbands and wives support and strengthen marital unity on various levels, such as with respect to commitment, agreement, long-suffering, and the like, and certain actions and experiences test and strain similar aspects of marital unity.

But in considering "marriage" as the ongoing relationship itself, marriage *is* the union of a man and woman. Union occurs already at the beginning of marriage. A husband and a wife are one; they are not proceeding on a path where they will eventually become one after a certain amount of time has passed, or when they have grown in their agreement, understanding, and sympathy for each other. A marriage in its primary sense is not seeking unity, but marriage itself is unity. The unity of

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[7] Martin Rhonheimer, "Toward an Adequate Argument in Support of *Humanae Vitae*," in *Ethics of Procreation and the Defense of Human Life: Contraception, Artificial Fertilization, and Abortion*, ed. William F. Murphy (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2010), 86, quoted in Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 215.

[8] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 215 n. 29.

[9] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 210.

[10] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "marriage," accessed August 28, 2025, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marriage.

marriage is fundamentally a quality of marriage, not a purpose, end, or goal toward which one is moving and trying to attain.

Therefore, if we take purpose according to its proper meaning, that is, as an aim, goal, or end to be attained, it is not perfectly accurate to say that the purpose of marriage as the marital relationship is union. Purpose in this sense suggests not that unity is attained at the beginning of marriage with the vows and sexual intercourse, but that unity is something that is attained only after some extent of activity and experience in marriage, perhaps even at the end of a marriage.[11]

It is not pedantic to insist on this distinction; it is significant when making an ethical analysis of actions, such as the use of contraceptives. Because Burmeister sees union as a purpose of marriage, she categorizes union along with procreation and remediation of lust. But if union is a quality of marriage and not only a purpose of it, union should be seen as fundamental to marriage, foundational to the purposes that come out of it.[12]

To consider the ethics of contraceptive use, then, requires that we consider not only the purposes of marriage (or of contraceptive use) and not only the circumstances experienced within a particular marriage, but also the acts pertaining to marriage itself. To be sure, many acts pertain to the strength of a marriage. We expect, under usual circumstances, that the friendship and companionship between a husband and a wife is greater than that between two other people. Yet acts of friendship can also be performed between people who are not husband and wife: sharing the same interests, appreciating similar goods, encouraging one another in various virtues, making plans together, and joining together in practices of faith. Rather, the act fundamentally unique to marriage is sexual intercourse. According to divine law and institution, sexual intercourse is for a married husband and wife with each other, exclusive of all others.

Scripture makes it clear that unity occurs with sexual intercourse. Indeed, the language "cleave," "cling," or "hold fast" (Gen 2:24) refers directly to the intimate embrace of sexual intercourse, in which a husband and a wife become one flesh. In the act of intercourse they act as one flesh, one body—very literally since in this act their bodies do not function except by being one flesh together. Furthermore, the unity of marriage is constituted by the mutual, public promises of husband and wife to give oneself to the other in marriage (Ezek 16:8; Mal 2:14; Deut 7:3; see also Tr 78; LC I 218). Sexual intercourse, then, is a privilege and obligation of marriage (1 Cor 7:3), an act that makes the two people into one flesh (1 Cor 7:4; cf. 1 Cor 6:15–

[11] Contra Matt 22:30; Rom 7:2–3; and 1 Cor 7:39, which indicate that at the end of marriage, marital unity is actually dissolved.

[12] This also explains why Burmeister does not see the "unitive purpose" treated by theologians historically. Union was not considered a *purpose*, but was considered the reality of the marital relationship, from which other purposes resulted. See her treatment of Luther in "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 211–213.

16) giving full expression to their state of marital union, a state that is not to be separated, according to God's command and institution (Matt 19:6). Having been joined as husband and wife, the two remain so joined, even when not engaged in sexual intercourse. Divorce rends this one body into two and is therefore forbidden.[13] As the act unique to marriage, and as an act that unites a husband and a wife as one flesh, sexual intercourse indicates that, in marriage, a husband and a wife live, plan, and act together not just as any other two companions, but uniquely as one body. This intimate unity continues to be exercised in subsequent acts of sexual intercourse, such that each act of intercourse properly expresses the unity of the flesh.

Furthermore, sexual intercourse itself is a complex act, with various aspects, suggesting the purposes at which marriage aims. Intercourse is an acted expression of unity that aims at mutual support and companionship (Gen 2:18, 2:22–24), at the procreation of children (Gen 1:27–28), and at the healing or remediation of lust (1 Cor 7:2). This is expressed in the rite of Holy Matrimony. First, marriage is described as a "union of this man and this woman" that is a "picture of the communion between Christ and . . . the Church." Then, the purposes of this union are described: "The union of husband and wife . . . is intended by God for . . . mutual companionship," for mutual delight rather than passion and lust, and for the procreation of children.[14] Here we see union as the quality of marriage, out of which the purposes of marriage are pursued. Unity, and its exercise thereof, supports and strengthens the purposes of marriage: mutual support, the procreation of children, and remediation of lust.

As we consider these purposes briefly, we will see the interrelationship of these purposes as expressed in the unity of the marital act itself. Rather than seeing these purposes as being in conflict, the marital act itself is a wonderful gift in which the harmony of these purposes is sought and enacted. As the exercise of mutual companionship, the remediation of lust, and the hope for the procreation of children, the marital act integrates these purposes for the husband and wife.

III. The Purposes of Marriage

God institutes marriage after observing that it is not good for man to be alone. He makes a helper fitting for the man, his wife (Gen 2:18, 2:22–24). Undoubtedly, the companionship of this helpmeet goes a long way to resolving the problem of being alone.[15] At the same time, the Genesis account does not say that the creation

[13] On the exceptions to the Lord's general prohibition of divorce (Matt 19:9; 1 Cor 7:12–15), see Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, ed. David W. Loy, trans. Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 280–300.

[14] The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, ed., *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 275, hereafter *LSB*.

[15] Modern research has even provided a scientific explanation for the unique emotional bond of a husband and a wife. See Gifford Grobien, "From Taboo to Delight: The Body, Sex, and Love

of woman and the subsequent marriage itself fully or finally resolve the issue of being alone. As fitting as the woman is for the man, and as intimate as marriage makes them—to be one flesh—the man and woman are charged not to let the matter stand with just the two of them. Indeed, they are to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and to subdue it, and to have dominion over all animals (Gen 1:28). Such subduing of the earth includes tending the flora of the world so that it is fruitful and productive (Gen 2:15). In order to subdue the earth and exercise dominion, mankind needs to fill the earth, that is, to establish human rule through society. Although, subsequently, the fall corrupted man's power over creation, he nevertheless continues to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth in order to rule over it and to establish mutual support for humanity to the best of his capacity (Gen 3:19, 5:29, 9:1–7).

Therefore, while mutual support and companionship occur already in the marriage relationship itself, and are most intimate in this husband-wife relationship, marriage extends mutual support and companionship more broadly in the establishment of households, the procreation and raising of children in these households, and the building up of society and dominion. There are no future generations, there is no ongoing society, without the procreation and raising of children. More basically, there are no husbands and wives for the future without procreation. With this, we recognize the centrality of households for society and economy, as is taught in Scripture and summarized in the Table of Duties (Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Tim 5:1–16).[16] For the sake of human society, the purpose of procreation is integrated with the purpose of mutual support and companionship.

Therefore, the goods of mutual companionship and support extend far beyond the immediate benefits to the husband and wife, and even beyond the household. Rather, marriage, family, and the household, as the primary estate, are foundational for all goods in this life, both the production of these goods and the distribution of these goods. This is also why marriages ought to be characterized by permanency and a domestic and economic quality not attained in other friendships, although, on occasion, nonmarital friendships may attain to this level. But in marriage this permanency, domesticity, and economic character are divinely mandated and have their basis in the marital act, the uniting of two into one flesh, and the command to carry out the filling and subduing of the earth. The mutual companionship, help, and support of marriage is a building block of human society and the duty to exercise dominion over creation.

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in View of Creation and Eschatology," in *Ethics of Sex: From Taboo to Delight*, ed. Gifford Grobien (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 211.

[16] [F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau, eds. and trans.], *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 561–563; and Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 365–367.

Finally, of course, this need not mean that a couple ought to have a merely productive view of procreation, as though their work is simply to have as many children as possible. As Burmeister points out, quoting Luther, "procreation is the work of God!"[17] On the other hand, precisely because procreation is the work of God, neither should a husband and a wife view procreation as a purpose ordinarily to be managed by themselves. As the creation of human life, procreation is not subject to God's command to men to subdue the earth and to have dominion. To be fruitful and multiply precedes the granting of dominion, so that to rule and subdue all other aspects of creation belongs to man, but "procreation is the work of God!" Therefore, we are misguided if we think that "changing how the natural process of sexual reproduction proceeds . . . is analogous to overseeing and guiding natural processes in other contexts."[18] Instead, we recall that the purposes of marriage are in fact integrated in the marital act. With the choice of a husband or wife, with the choice to be married, comes the choice to engage in the marital act. The marital act is established by God and given to a husband and a wife as the union in one flesh, for the purposes of support and companionship, procreation, and remediation of lust. In the context of the marital act, then, procreation is the work of God. He carries it out providentially through the marital act. Normally, then, a husband and a wife ought to submit to this providence and rejoice in the gifts God gives in their marital union.

Mutual companionship is also supported by the healing purpose of marriage. Here again Burmeister's article is misleading, referring to intercourse as an "outlet" for sexual desire.[19] But to refer to the healing purpose of marriage merely as an outlet inadequately articulates this purpose. The rite of Holy Matrimony does not refer to this as an "outlet" for desire, but rather reminds husbands and wives that marital delight should not have the character of the "passion of lust."[20] That is to say, we should seek the true healing of lust, not merely the outlet or exercise of lust, in the marital act. Saint Paul does commend marriage for those who cannot control themselves (1 Cor 7:9) and commands that couples should come together that Satan not tempt them due to their lack of self-control (1 Cor 7:5). Yet Scripture also exhorts people generally to learn self-control (Gal 5:23; 2 Pet 1:6), and Paul explicitly commands people not to approach sexual relations in the "passion of desire" (1 Thess 4:4–5, the source for the language in the marriage rite).

Passion fundamentally refers to suffering, to being given over to something of which one is not the agent, but is rather acted upon in some way. We are not to suffer evil because of our desire. While desire is human, desire also should be trained and controlled toward what is good, rather than being allowed to control and rule

[17] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21–25* (1539–1540), in AE 4:304; and Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 213.

[18] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 222.

[19] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 210, 211.

[20] The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, ed., *LSB*, 275.

over us. To the extent that a desire is for something good, it moves us to act rightly and for the sake of that good. Yet "pleasure" itself is never presented in Scripture as a good itself; the goodness of pleasure depends on what it seeks. The pleasure of good food and drink may lead me to seek healthy nourishment for my body and symposium with friends, or I may succumb to gluttony. The pleasure of material goods may lead me to labor appropriately and to give thanks for the fruit of my labor, or I may give in to the shortcut of thievery, robbery, and violence for gain. The value of desire in Scripture always depends on what I desire or how I act to fulfill this desire (some things for good, e.g., Gen 31:30; Prov 10:24 [LXX]; Luke 22:15; Phil 1:23; 1 Thess 2:17; some for evil, e.g., Titus 2:12; Jude 18). Indeed, in Scripture, unless a desire is specifically qualified as seeking something good (as in, e.g., Luke 22:15 and Phil 1:23), desire as such is always warned against. This is because, in our fallen nature, apart from the Holy Spirit, desire is abased and seeks after the flesh and the world (e.g., Rom 6:12; Eph 2:3; Jas 1:14; 1 Pet 4:3; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 John 2:16). Again, this is not to say that every desire is sinful, but the regular warning of the New Testament is that desire needs to be subordinated to the will of God and that the goodness of desire depends on what it seeks.

There is no scriptural basis, therefore, for saying that a purpose of marriage is an outlet for pleasure, as such. Marriage is, rather, a remedy for lust. Saint Paul directs the unmarried to take a spouse if they cannot control themselves, not simply as an outlet for this lack of self-control, but in order that one act on sexual desire *not* in the passion of lust (1 Thess 4:4–5). Indeed, sexual desire ought to be exercised in marriage in true delight for one another, that is, delight not simply in the outlet of sexual activity, but in the intimate, exclusive bond of body, will, and mind, which overcomes the shame of nakedness, establishes the basis for uninhibited trust, and seeks the well-being of the spouse, as the husband's and the wife's well-being are interdependent (Eph 5:28–29; 1 Cor 7:2–5).[21] In this way, the marital act is the proper expression of sexual desire, by which the act exercises the virtue of chastity.

This virtue is further exercised when husband and wife recognize in faith the complex, integrated nature of the marital act. Along with mutual companionship and delight, along with the remediation of lust, comes also the appreciation and hope for the procreation of children. Acts of sexual intercourse characterized in all these ways properly order pleasure for the sake of marital companionship and for the hope for children and a household with the abounding blessings, trials, and accompanying spiritual growth they bring, and properly subordinate sexual desire so that it does not become all-encompassing and self-directed. Sexual relations in marriage are a practice in chastity, and thereby a remedy for lust, because sexual relations teach us to direct, order, and subordinate pure sexual desire to the marriage relationship itself. If marriage served not as a remedy but as merely an outlet, then

[21] Grobien, "From Taboo to Delight," 202–212.

all kinds of sexual deviancies could be permissible within marriage, simply because they would serve as an outlet for desire. These would lead not to the remediation of lust, but to the giving over of oneself to the passion of lust. Instead, sexual intercourse fittingly practiced is the union of male and female in the manner instituted by God's creative command—in service of the one-flesh union and the hoped-for fruit of that action, the procreation of children. It is to this integrated marital act that sexual desire is rightly ordered according to chastity.

In summary, we see that the marital act integrates the purposes of marriage in the exercise of marital unity. By not acknowledging or considering this integrating role, one might not be attentive to the manner and degree that elevating one purpose over another attenuates the virtue exercised in the marital act and thereby undermines the character of the marital union and its purposes.

IV. Circumstances

With this discussion of act and purpose in view, we can address more concretely the "specific, limited circumstances" in which avoidance of conception would be considered.[22] Burmeister indicates that this would be "when the purposes of marriage are in active conflict."[23] Yet the "specific, limited" language becomes much more general and encompassing later in the article, referring to situations "when a couple feels able to accept a child"[24] and "while they are unable to support new children."[25] This is given some elaboration in Burmeister's citation of Baer, who says contraception is acceptable when "'further children would conflict with the overall well-being of the family,' which depends on a 'complicated interaction of multiple factors, both objective, like financial resources, and subjective, like individual capacities and limitations.'"[26] From these passages it appears that Burmeister considers some financial circumstances and some capacity limitations of parents or the family could justify the use of contraception when the "purposes" of marriage are in "conflict." Let us take these in turn.

1. Financial Considerations

First, on its face, difficult and even dire financial circumstances do not present a conflict in the purposes of marriage. In a fallen world, poverty may tempt husbands and wives away from the mutual support they give each other in marriage.

[22] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 210.

[23] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 224. See also her discussion of "conflicts" in the purposes of marriage on pages 217 through 220.

[24] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 219.

[25] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 220.

[26] Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 224, quoting Helmut David Baer, "The Exception to the Rule: A Protestant Thinks about Contraception," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 11, no. 4 (2002): 427.

However, poverty, as such, is not a conflict between the supportive, procreative, and healing aspects of marriage. Poverty is not opposed to mutual support; indeed, righteous and loving companionship provides support in times of poverty (Prov 15:16–17; Ps 37:16). Poverty is not opposed to chastity, but chastity can serve related virtues such as frugality, patience, and industry, all of which serve steadfastness in times of poverty. Poverty is not opposed to procreation, but the temptations related to poverty—fundamentally, the temptation that God will not provide daily bread—could be followed wrongly into fear, distrust of one's husband or wife, and the lie that a child is simply a burden, what some might call "another mouth to feed." I am not claiming that the temptations surrounding substantive poverty are not real or serious and can lead to division between husbands and wives. But if poverty is not actually in conflict with the unitive, procreative, and healing aspects of marriage, then excluding one or more of these aspects, even for a time, is not the good solution to the temptation of poverty, but only follows the temptation and allows it to conceive into sin. God calls us rather to resist and overcome temptation for the sake of perseverance in faith and the learning of repentance, obedience, and righteousness (1 Cor 10:12–14; Gal 5:16–25; Heb 4:15–16; Jas 4:7–10).

On the contrary, the qualities and purposes of marriage can fortify a person against the temptations related to poverty. Husbands and wives find encouragement in the marriage relationship itself. Indeed, the mutual support of marriage is a gift and relationship established by God to work against economic weakness. A wife is given to Adam as a helper fit for his commission to fill the earth and subdue it. She, and the children given to them, labor for the productivity of creation and against the corruptions of the fall.

In this regard, the comprehensive and unqualified character of the blessedness of children must be noted (Ps 127–128). Blessedness is not just of a spiritual or emotional nature, but it is concrete and tangible in domestic and economic life (Deut 7:12–14). The man who is blessed will eat the labor of his hands, which includes the labor produced by his children, which the faithful household enjoys together as it is given at the table (Ps 128:2–3). The material care of parents by children is commanded and assumed by the Scriptures (Mark 7:9–13; 1 Tim 5:16). Scripture's language of the blessedness of children should not be dismissed as an abstraction. On the contrary, children are, in a very concrete, material way, an inheritance from the Lord, a wage (Ps 127:3): they are literally of the material gifts God gives to parents. Therefore, not only are children not in conflict with other purposes of marriage, but also children support the material well-being of parents and families.

We recognize that there have been situations of such extreme poverty that feeding another person might seem impossible (e.g., Gen 41:57–42:2; 1 Kgs 17:10–12; 2 Kgs 6:24–31; Lam 4:8–10). However, such situations accompany economic or social breakdown, such as widespread famine, natural disaster, or war. Under normal

socioeconomic conditions, especially in modern, developed countries, such cases of extreme poverty are almost nonexistent, or they are remediable through the support of extended family, church, friends, or community or government services. In such situations, Saint Paul regularly exerted himself to facilitate mutual support across the congregations (Acts 11:28–30; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Gal 2:10). We should also recognize that it is precisely through extended networks of support—sufficient numbers of people—that such poverty is relieved. Christians should be cautioned against conflating usual experiences of poverty with rare types of destitution.[27]

2. Other Circumstances

What limitations on individual capacities might be seen as creating a conflict between the supportive, procreative, and healing aspects of marriage? This is a much more amorphous question. Burmeister cites Thielicke to suggest that the goods of marriage could be in conflict when "the procreation of children does not perfect the marital fellowship . . . but rather threatens it."[28] But, again, what could this mean? How would the procreation of children itself threaten marital fellowship? Threats to marital fellowship might come from a condition in creation that has been corrupted or destroyed by sin, or from the desires of the sinful nature that, following temptation, conceive in sin. But how can a good itself according to creation, the procreation of children, threaten marital fellowship?

Rather, people may suffer fallen circumstances that attack the qualities or purposes of marriage, or temptations from the devil, the world, and our flesh that would stir up in us the temptation to divide these qualities and purposes from one another. While many cases could be put forth, let us consider the most dire of such circumstances: when the life of a mother would be endangered by pregnancy.

Right away, however, when considering if a potential pregnancy would endanger a mother's life, we proceed with due care and consideration. Every pregnancy threatens the life of a mother to some degree (Gen 3:16), and God promises that faithful women will receive salvation even through the dangers of childbearing, even death (1 Tim 2:15). The general risk of pregnancy is no reason itself to try to prevent pregnancy. When making considerations about the future, we must subdue the easy

[27] This is not to deny that we could encounter economic breakdown in developed countries at some time but is only to say that material resources in developed countries provide the capacity to feed and shelter children. The extent to which these resources may seem to be unavailable or inaccessible due to societal gatekeeping, marginalization, or stigma is another question, yet one that is not, strictly speaking, a question of the existence of resources. Thankfully, Christians, in the estates of the family and church, have the awareness and social resources to relieve the unavailability of material resources. Indeed, the appreciation of and openness to new life in families and society arouses our love and concern for those who have need.

[28] Helmut Thielicke, "Birth Control: The Problem of Optional Sterility," in *Theological Ethics*, vol. 3, *Sex*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 205, quoted in Burmeister, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," 217.

temptation to make a quick, certain conclusion about what the future holds. Instead, we should discern according to wisdom, while prayerfully thanking God for his providence. "If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (Jas 4:15 KJV). We are dealing with what, to our perception, are probabilities and, according to the natural order, are subject to wisdom. Yet, fundamentally, such probabilities are directed and sustained by God's providence.

Humble wisdom, then, seeks signs or indicators according to natural life. Does a mother have seven children yet continue to experience pregnancy, labor, and delivery without complication? Thanks be to God, and may such a mother and her husband thankfully rejoice in their children and eagerly hope for more. Has a woman suffered several caesarean sections, with increased complications from scarring, abnormal placentation, or bleeding, suggesting to humbly discerning parties that a subsequent pregnancy will likely, not just possibly, lead to uterine rupture or unmanageable hemorrhaging? Such a wife with her husband may prayerfully consider in an ongoing manner how faithfully to act to protect the mother's life. Similar considerations of wisdom could be made with respect to any given woman's risk for other truly life-endangering conditions, such as preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, ectopic pregnancy, placenta previa or accreta, and perinatal or postpartum psychosis. Yet in every case, we must think concretely, not theoretically. It is inadequate to decide merely on the basis of broad risk factors that generally suggest the possibility of a higher risk pregnancy. Rather, a husband and a wife consider the condition of that particular woman, of her person, not only of her risk factors but also of her experiences, of her personal, real-time health and constitution, and of her faith. Such decisions are according to concrete, personal consideration, and according to wisdom and in full appreciation of providence, with faith and hope in God's good gifts. Here we can distinguish considerations based on true endangerment from those grounded in convenience or materialism, even if the latter are framed as addressing conflicts in marital goods.

V. The Giftedness of Life

Scripture calls us to see the goodness in life, that life is a gift, a divine gift. Although human life comes into being through the marital act, such life is according to the will of our Father through this means. Apart from his will, apart from his providence, apart from his determination to create new life in the marital act, it would not be so. Our Father graciously, lovingly, joyfully creates each of us to be alive, and every day that we live, that we experience, that we receive is what makes up, according to his gift, providence, and care, a good and joyous life. We may in our fallenness interpret or receive a gift of God as a burden, as something to be avoided or overcome. Yet Scripture is clear that all good gifts are from God (Jas 1:17), and that children themselves are unqualifiedly good gifts (Ps 127:3–5; Ps

128:3–6). Whatever our temptations, whatever our brokenness, we must hold to and restore, if needed, the blessedness of God's gift of children.

While God's authority is exercised through earthly authorities, including civil government and ecclesiastical ministers, this authority finds its earthly origin in the command to honor father and mother (LC I 141–150, 158–163).

Furthermore, the gift of life is not merely physiological existence and activity, but the world into which we are placed, the society around us, and our mutual relation to others. We call these relations "vocations," most significantly husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, minister, layperson, political magistrate, and citizen. These vocations pervade accounts of human life in Scripture and are iterated in the church's teaching such as the Table of Duties.[29] Significant to the consideration of vocation are the relations of authority that God establishes in our spheres of life, traditionally called "estates," "orders," or even "hierarchies."[30] It is important to recognize that at the heart of vocational relationships are relations of authority. Vocations are callings within certain orders as spheres of life wherein God exercises authority, and he exercises this authority through certain callings. Reminded that vocation has to do with these orderly relations in various spheres of life—marriage and family, church, and civil society—we are guarded against temptations to understand vocation merely as a proxy for pursuing whatever one's imagination allows, as though God's calling were limited by nothing but one's own speculation and self-motivation. Rather, the scriptural conception of vocation includes a binding character—a bond between husband and wife, between father, mother, and children, between pastor and congregation, and so on. There is a life together into which we have been placed by our heavenly Father, relational bonds that are gifts to us, not only by which we exert ourselves in loving action, but also in which we receive the love of others and submit to the providential direction of the life according to these relational bonds. Here we learn to receive with submission and thanksgiving this life and our roles and relationships. We learn also that these gifts of relationship and vocation lead us into new experiences of both joy and sorrow, of difficulty and challenges, of perseverance and reward. In all these ways our Father is providing also for us the way of sanctification unto maturity. Vocation is the place in life where we deliberate, choose, and act in love for others, but it is also the place in life where we are ordered by the love of others and submit to our Father's providential direction, by which he carries us on unto sanctification and salvation.

We experience some of God's gifts as crosses. We need not shrink from this truth. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23 KJV). This call to follow Christ daily is a call daily to suffer and to die. If suffering was the shape of our Lord's life, we should expect

[29] See above, n. 16.
[30] See above, n. 2.

that it will be the shape of our life also. As he suffered temptations, so we also suffer temptations that are "common to man" (1 Cor 10:13 KJV). If they are common to man, then they are regular, widespread, and not unusual, and we should not be surprised that we suffer them.

The difference for Christians is that through faith and hope we persevere against temptation, according to the call and promises of God. Against earthly hope, Christians cling to eternal hope in Christ, assured that the current sufferings are momentary and light in contrast to eternal glory (2 Cor 4:17). God has promised a "way to escape" from temptation (1 Cor 10:13 KJV), that is, the promises of the hope of salvation that sustain us through temptation (Rom 3:3–5). Therewith, Christ's call to die also opens up to us a new way of living: Although we are baptized into his death, we will nevertheless walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3–4). In this newness of life shaped by Scripture and God's providence, we not only endure suffering, but also find many ongoing and new gifts, contrary to the expectations of the secular mind. In this newness of life we discover blessings we were not expecting, blessings that appeared as trials but, through faith, hope, and perseverance, result in the fruit of blessing. By persisting in the newness of life God has set before us in our vocations, we experience the richness of God's love and provision in a way that we did not previously perceive or understand. In all this, we find that God's command and institution in spheres of life is not restrictive or constraining, but moves us into a way that is good, desirable, and rewarding beyond what we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20).

Christian ethics or the Christian life, then, always consider how to act in view of life not simply as animation but also as vocation and order. Not only do we love according to God's commands and our vocations, but also we receive the commands, ordering, and love of God in the spheres of life in which God has placed us. Although we experience crosses, these are only for a time, and they serve to keep our minds on Jesus Christ, who suffered for us and who continues to uphold and sanctify us through the course of this life.

VI. Conclusion

Questions regarding Christian ethics or the Christian life are fruitfully addressed by accepted methods of moral theology, such as the consideration not only of the circumstances and purposes of an act, but also of the object or quality of the act itself. God's commands give understanding and judgment regarding both the object and end of actions, and help us to recognize the value of actions in exercising virtue. In view of this, marriage is the union of one man and one woman, whose expression of the marital act comprehensively serves the purposes of marriage of mutual support and companionship, the procreation of children, and the remediation of lust. Any consideration of these purposes needs to keep in mind their

integration in the marital act, and the way that altering the marital act can also influence our appreciation of these purposes. Finally, our actions within marriage should take into account God's ordering of life according to vocation and the spheres of life, of which marriage is fundamental. Vocation binds people in relation to one another with certain responsibilities of love. Although these bonds and responsibilities may in some cases be experienced as temptation and suffering, through our continuous submission to the word of God, in our repentance and joyful faith, God keeps us and works out our sanctification in these spheres of life by his providential care and grace.