

A PRONOUNCEMENT *A Policy Statement of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America*

RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD

Adopted by the General Board

February 23, 1961

PREAMBLE

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. exists in part "to do for the churches such cooperative work as they authorize the Council to carry on in their behalf," while at the same time recognizing that any member church may disassociate itself from an action of the Council.

In the present instance many member churches have already given formal expression to the same basic conviction as is contained in this statement. But differences of conviction exist which make it necessary for representatives of the Orthodox churches to abstain from voting on this pronouncement.¹ The Council provides a meeting place for continuing study, in Christian freedom, of the implications of the Christian faith for responsible marriage and parenthood.

With these facts in mind, the General Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. adopts and issues the following pronouncement on Responsible Parenthood.

THE CONTEMPORARY NEED

In recent decades, advances in medical science have affected marriage and family life in at least two important ways. Because of dramatic reductions in death rates, children generally have a far brighter chance to live to maturity; indeed, the persistence of large family patterns in many societies causes new and dangerous pressures upon presently inadequate means of subsistence. On the other hand, new medical knowledge of human reproduction increases the means available or potentially available to parents for regulating their fertility. In the altered circumstances of today, how is the Christian doctrine of parenthood to be made relevant to the needs of husbands and wives? Without attempting to restate the full range of parental

duties, we advance certain considerations bearing on the control of procreation within the marriage bond. The concept of responsible parenthood is considered in relation to the ends of marriage, the reasons for family planning, the methods of family planning, and the task of society.

The Ends of Marriage

Genuine marriage, in the Biblical view, is a union whereby husband and wife become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24, Mark 10:8, Eph. 5:31). Such a union embodies a covenant, a commitment to a dedicated common life. True marriage, however, is more than a human achievement. It has a "given" quality, expressed in the words of Jesus: "what . . . God has joined together . . ." (Mark 10:9). Hence it is a mystery according to St. Paul which symbolizes the union of Christ and His Church (Eph. 5:32) and is, in turn, illumined by this perfect union.

Since holy matrimony involves an occasion of God's grace, it is clear that the first duty of husband and wife is to nourish and care for the gift which God has given. This task is described in Christian traditions in terms of sanctification and mutual perfection. These emphasize the fundamentally spiritual character of the basic purpose of marriage, which can be served through parenthood, companionship, and vocation:

- (1) Parenthood is a divinely ordained purpose of marriage for the embodiment and completion of the "one flesh" union, for the care and nurture of children, for building the home as a true community of persons, and for the peopling of the earth (Gen. 1:28). It is participation in God's continuing creation, which calls for awe, gratitude, and a sense of high responsibility.
- (2) Mutual love and companionship, rooted in the need of husband and wife for each other (Gen. 2:18), have also been ordained of God for the welfare and perfection of the "one flesh" union

¹ An expression of Orthodox views may be found in *Parents and Priests as Servants of Redemption*, by Athenagoras Kokkinakis, Bishop of Elaia (Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1958).

and for broader aspects of the sharing of life. Christians differ in regard to sanctions for the sexual expression of marital companionship, though most of our churches hold such expression right and necessary within the marriage bond, independently of procreation. All agree that Christian marriage should be free from sensuality and selfish indulgence, and that mutually accepted periods of continence can be of value in a common life of Christian discipline.

- (3) Vocation, or the service of the couple in society, is another high purpose through which "the two become one." It normally includes parenthood and family life as major elements, but can assert a separate or even conflicting claim on conscience. Just as vocation may enjoin celibacy upon those to whom the gift is given (Matt. 19:11), so the calling of the couple may in certain circumstances enjoin family limitation.

Responsible parenthood, in the first instance, means to weigh the claims of procreation in relation to the total purposes of the marriage and the situation of the family in society. For most couples, the new knowledge of human reproduction and of means to avert conception affects ethical decisions regarding parenthood. But the responsibility, to be exercised in prayer and trust, has deeper roots.

Reasons for Family Planning

Within the purposes of marriage ordained by God, there are a number of considerations concerning parenthood which need to be taken into account in trying to determine the number and frequency of pregnancies. These include:

- (1) The right of the child to be wanted, loved, cared for, educated, and trained in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). The rights of existing children to parental care have a proper claim.
- (2) The prospects for health of a future child, if medical and eugenic evidence seem negatively conclusive.
- (3) The health and welfare of the mother-wife, and the need for the spacing of children to safeguard them.
- (4) The social situation, when rapid population growth places dangerous pressures on the means of livelihood and endangers the social order.

Reasons such as these enter into the calculations of responsible parenthood. At the same time, parents need to remember that having children is a venture in faith, requiring a measure of courage and confidence in God's goodness. Too cautious a reckoning of the costs may be as great an error as failure to lift the

God-given power of procreation to the level of ethical decision.

Methods of Family Planning

Christians are agreed that the limitation of procreation may be right and proper for parents under certain conditions, but differences arise in regard to circumstances and methods. The Orthodox Church follows the traditional teaching which sanctions marital abstinence as the means of family planning. Most of the Protestant churches hold contraception and periodic continence to be morally right when the motives are right. They believe that couples are free to use the gifts of science for conscientious family limitation, provided the means are mutually acceptable, non-injurious to health, and appropriate to the degree of effectiveness required in the specific situation. Periodic continence (the rhythm method) is suitable for some couples, but is not inherently superior from a moral point of view. The general Protestant conviction is that motives, rather than methods, form the primary moral issue, provided the methods are limited to the prevention of conception.

Protestant Christians are agreed in condemning abortion or any method which destroys human life except when the health or life of the mother is at stake. The destruction of life already begun cannot be condoned as a method of family limitation. The ethical complexities involved in the practice of abortion related to abnormal circumstances need additional study by Christian scholars.

Another approach to family limitation is voluntary sterilization. Because medical science cannot guarantee that the procedure is reversible it presents the Christian conscience with special problems. Responsible parenthood is seen by many as a day to day process of decision-making which sterilization may negate. On the other hand, where reasons of health or the obligations of parenthood argue for the use of the most effective means of family limitation, sterilization represents one sure method now available. Recognizing the dilemmas confronting Christian doctors and parents, particularly in some of the poorer societies where realistic alternatives seem to be lacking, we are constrained to point out the hazards in sterilization, and to stress the possibility of its use only after the most thoughtful consideration of all the factors involved. Additional study of these factors and of the moral issues entailed needs to be undertaken by Christian scholars.

The Task of Society

While responsible parenthood is the moral obligation of husband and wife, the concept has implications for society also, to assist parents in the exercise of their duty. In addition to the educational and social serv-

ices called for to help equip children for their fullest development and contribution to society, there are services due married couples. For most couples, family planning requires access to appropriate medical information and counsel. Legal prohibitions against impartation of such information and counsel violate the civil and religious liberties of all citizens including Protestants. Their right to means they approve in conscience does not infringe the right of others to refrain from using such means. Legislation or institutional practices that impair the exercise of moral and professional responsibilities of family-serving professions should be opposed.

As Christians and citizens in a world society, we also have the responsibility to help our fellow men overseas. Public health programs in economically less developed

countries, often with substantial assistance from our government, have helped to create new population pressures. Therefore, at the request of people in other countries, we believe our government and voluntary agencies have a duty to assist with various measures to alleviate population pressures and to extend family planning. Private agencies have an important role to play, but the scope of the population problem internationally vastly exceeds their resources. Christian responsibility indicates that, when requested by other governments, governmental and intergovernmental aid for family planning should be given favorable consideration as part of a wise and dedicated effort to advance in the underprivileged regions of the earth the essential material conditions conducive to human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace.

83 FOR, 0 AGAINST, 4 ABSTENTIONS

