

Al Mohler Responds: The Evangelical Unease Over Contraception

Is **evangelical** unease about contraception really just a cover for conservative white male evangelical leaders to keep women out of pulpits? Evidently some think so, or fear so, or perhaps even hope so.

That was made clear in a recent Religion News Service op-ed by Jacob Lupfer, raising a key question about the controversy over the Obama administration's **contraception mandate**: Are **evangelical** protests rooted in concern about **religious liberty** or about birth control? The answer is yes.

Lupfer argues that while the concerns are ostensibly about religious liberty, **evangelical** leaders are actually "attempting to sow seeds of doubt about the morality of birth control itself." On that count, he understates his own case.

A good many **evangelicals** hope to do far more than sow seeds of doubt about the morality of birth control. Our concern is to raise an alarm about the entire edifice of modern **sexual morality** and to acknowledge that millions of evangelicals have unwittingly aided and abetted that moral revolution by an unreflective and unfaithful embrace of the contraceptive revolution.

Lupfer observes that the embrace of contraception "has become a fact of life in America." Thus, those who push back against the contraceptive revolution are the standouts in this cultural moment, and Lupfer clearly asserts that something other than concern about birth control must really lie behind the evangelical urgency.

What would that be? According to Lupfer, "the intended effect

of bemoaning contraception is to idealize pre-feminist conceptions of marriage and family.” Furthermore, he says, the concerns about contraception are “a mere skirmish in a larger theological and ideological battle.”

According to Lupfer, those larger theological and ideological battles include an evangelical ambition to increase “market share” by out-breeding those with other worldviews. He also suggests that male evangelical leaders operate out of a logic that comes down to simple arithmetic—the more children a woman has, the less likely she is to work outside of the home or to follow the modern feminist dream. But Lupfer does not stop there. He goes on to argue that keeping women out of the pulpit is the real issue, part of maintaining male control over women and their ambitions.

Wow. That is a lot to handle. **Evangelical** (white, male) leaders are accused of launching a moral, cultural, theological and ideological revolt against women, using the Affordable Care Act’s contraception mandate as pretext.

The problem with that accusation, however, is embedded in Lupfer’s own essay.

The references he cites all predate the current debate over the contraception mandate, and most long predate the election of President Obama. This is not a recent development, but a long-term evangelical reconsideration of birth control and the place of contraception within larger understandings of marriage, the family and human sexuality.

Is the current **evangelical** concern about the contraception mandate about religious liberty or birth control? Unavoidably, the answer is *both*. The issues are inextricable, and religious liberty is at stake because explicitly Christian concerns about contraception are at stake. This is not a concern about an antibiotic mandate, after all.

Is the **evangelical** concern about birth control part of a

larger worldview? Of course it is. As a matter of fact, evangelicals did not come to the conversation about birth control until a host of other moral issues forced the question. Lupfer states that evangelical leaders “will tell you that the **Protestant** embrace of birth control lacked adequate theological reflection.” We will tell you that because it is true—demonstrably true. In the words of historian Kathleen Tobin, “all major denominations in the Judeo-Christian world condemned contraception” until the 20th century. As she points out, it was the liberal and mainline **Protestant** groups driving the acceptance of birth control, with conservative Protestants solidly against it at least until World War II. As for theology—it hardly played a part in the debates among liberal Protestants.

For **evangelicals**, everything changed with the advent of The Pill. And evangelical acceptance of the oral contraceptives (and, beyond that, other forms of birth control) also happened without any adequate theological reflection. Today’s generation of evangelicals is indeed reconsidering birth control, and theological concerns are driving that reconsideration.

So Lupfer is absolutely right when he asserts that far more than birth control is at stake in this debate. He is also quite right that evangelical leaders hope for a far more comprehensive embrace of human sexuality, marriage and family that is fully accountable to Scripture and the Christian worldview. As a matter of fact, he greatly underestimates this ambition.

But what about his accusation that male **evangelical** leaders are really just using all this as a pretext for patriarchy? “As with most debates in evangelical life,” he writes, “women themselves are largely excluded from the discussion.” Well, whose fault is that? Where does he cite the evangelical women who are rejecting the contraceptive revolution?

A few of those conversations might be quite enough to convince even Mr. Lupfer that the shift of the evangelical conscience on birth control—and the rise of a new urgency to recover a more biblical understanding of sex, gender roles, marriage and reproduction—represents a far more formidable challenge to modernity than his column warns his readers to fear.

The Rev. R. Albert Mohler Jr. *is president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.*