

**A GOD-SENT MOVEMENT:  
METHODISM, CONTRACEPTION, AND THE PROTECTION OF  
THE METHODIST FAMILY, 1870-1968**

ASHLEY BOGGAN

In 1941, the Methodist Student Movement began publishing *motive Magazine*, a periodical which connected Methodist college students on campus while providing students with a forum to discuss world events and cultural change. In the May, 1941, issue, Grace Sloan Overton's article, "What's on the Students' Mind," asked: "Has the development of birth control methods removed one of the major reasons for chastity?"<sup>1</sup> Left unanswered by Overton and open for discussion by the student body, this question led me to wonder when Methodists began supporting the use of birth control.

To some, 1940 may seem like an early confrontation with what was then (and is still now) a culturally sensitive issue like birth control. Evangelicals, however, confronted birth control long before 1940, as will be shown. This paper will argue that the method of protecting the evangelical family changed over the course of time, from 1870 to 1940, from one of legally denying birth control to women for the protection of the Christian family to one of legalizing birth control methods in the 1930s for the protection of the Christian family. While the definition of family and the goal of protecting the family remained the same, the method changed. For my purposes, I am using the Methodist denominations of the 1930-1950s<sup>2</sup>, specifically how Methodists altered their language related to family life, as a case study. Methodists were part of the evangelical camp during the 1870s which worked to make birth control methods illegal, and they were one of the earliest Protestant denominations to alter their view, which makes them a perfect example of the complex relationship between evangelical Protestants and contraception. I will examine Methodists' own language drawn from the *Book of Discipline* and the Board of Education's literature concerning family life published from 1928-1956 to support my argument.

**Background: The Evangelical Christian Family, circa 1870**

Historian Alan Carlson's *Godly Seed: American Evangelicals Confront Birth Control, 1873-1973*, exposes the long, fraught relationship between evangelicals and various methods of birth control. Carlson's "evangelical"

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Sloan Overton, "What's On the Student Mind," *motive Magazine* (May, 1941): 4-7.

<sup>2</sup> In 1939, the Methodist Protestant Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South united to form The Methodist Church. Prior to 1939, in this paper, I am referring only to the Methodist Episcopal Church. After 1939, I refer to The Methodist Church.

is one who has a personal conversion experience, who disregards denominational lines in search of a larger community, for whom the Bible is the sole authority, whose religious experiences are often emotional in nature, and who stresses the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.<sup>3</sup> Defining “evangelical” in this way can encompass multiple generations, but it needs to be emphasized that the evangelicals of the 1870s, when Carlson begins his work, and the evangelicals of the 1940s, yet alone of the 1970s when Carlson’s book concludes, were quite different.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand the complex relationship of evangelical Protestants (including those within the Methodist Episcopal Church) and contraception, one has to understand what historian David Sehat has termed “the moral establishment.” Despite common belief, the separation of church and state was at best illusory in the nineteenth century. Sehat argues,

We will never understand the source, the development, or the stakes of the debate about religion in public life until we acknowledge that for much of its history the United States was controlled by Protestant Christians who sponsored a moral regime that was both coercive and exclusionary. Proponents of the moral establishment claimed that religion was necessary to reinforce the moral fabric of the people, which was, in turn, necessary for the health and preservation of the state.<sup>5</sup>

Evangelical Protestants frequently turned to the state to enforce their definition of morality—which was most simply defined as self-restraint in all areas of life, especially in the consumption of alcohol and in sexual relations—in order to have what they believed to be a better-functioning society. For Sehat, the Abolitionist movement and the fight for Prohibition were the best examples of the power of the moral establishment.<sup>6</sup> However, the fight for the illegality of contraceptive methods via anti-obscenity campaigns in the 1870s, led by Anthony Comstock and other conservative evangelical Protestants, can and should be included on this list, for nowhere else was it as evident that a particular and narrow view of religion, i.e., conservative evangelical

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Carlson, *Godly Seed: American Evangelicals Confront Birth Control, 1873-1973* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Evangelicals of post-World War II era are usually grouped into various camps: Evangelical Left, Neo-Evangelicals, and the New Christian Right. The more widely known and historically researched are the neo-fundamentalist evangelicals known as the New Christian Rights, a loose coalition of conservative evangelical Protestants who in the 1970s began to rally behind a religio-political platform in support of various “family values” legislation. To understand their emergence and how they relate to conservative evangelical Protestants of the 1870s, see David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011); Axel R. Schafer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2011); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, second edition (New York: Oxford UP, 2006); and Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Sehat, *Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Sehat, *Myth of American Religious Freedom*: 85-96 and 213-215. For more information on how Christian legislation was produced and supported, see Gaines M. Foster *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002).

Protestantism, directly influenced civil legislation. Conservative evangelical Protestants fought daily for the legislation of their view of Christian morality primarily by fighting against the production of and distribution of “obscene” materials. The problem with their campaign was the broad definition of “obscenity” as anything that conservative white evangelical Protestant women and/or men deemed “objectionable,” “offensive,” or “immoral.” For example, some women considered certain types of literature that was easily accessible to their children “offensive,” while men considered contraceptive information and devices “immoral.”<sup>7</sup> The Comstock Laws, established in 1873 through the efforts of these anti-obscenity campaigns, made it illegal to use the United States Postal Service to mail contraceptives or information on contraceptives, along with other “obscene materials” such as “erotic images,” across state lines.<sup>8</sup> White conservative evangelical Protestants supported these efforts as the best means to protect Christian families. They believed that urban vice threatened the morality of white men, especially young white men who were exposed to vice for the first time in a new urban context, and thus indirectly (or sometimes directly) threatened the morality

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<sup>7</sup> The “obscene” literature which many women, especially women of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union via their Department for the Suppression of Impure Literature, fought to ban was literature of an unexpected sort. Historian Leigh Ann Wheeler compares the methodologies of female and male anti-vice societies in the 1870s and 1880s in her book *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935*. She argues that Comstock was not concerned with protecting children; instead he was concerned with controlling the sexuality of adult women and men. This argument is based on the fact that Comstock did not confiscate materials that would have made it into the hands of children, but focused his attention on adult sex education and sex manuals, on abortifacients, and on contraception. According to Wheeler, women were better campaigners of anti-vice because they confiscated materials which children could actually access—dime novels and crime stories—and censored burlesque shows and movies. Thus female organized anti-vice societies attacked a lower, popular culture which children could access; while male organized anti-vice societies focused their efforts on high culture which was limited to adults.

<sup>8</sup> In 1873, Anthony Comstock lobbied for the passage of what is colloquially called the “Comstock Laws.” They are as follows: “Be it enacted . . . That whoever, within the District of Columbia or any of the Territories of the United States . . . shall sell . . . or shall offer to sell, or to lend, or to give away, or in any manner to exhibit, or shall otherwise publish or offer to publish in any manner, or shall have in his possession, for any such purpose or purposes, an obscene book, pamphlet, paper, writing, advertisement, circular, print, picture, drawing or other representation, figure, or image on or of paper or other material, or any cast instrument, or other article of an immoral nature, or any drug or medicine, or any article whatever, for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or shall advertise the same for sale, or shall write or print, or cause to be written or printed, any card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind, stating when, where, how, or of whom, or by what means, any of the articles in this section . . . can be purchased or obtained, or shall manufacture, draw, or print, or in any wise make any of such articles, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof in any court of the United States . . . he shall be imprisoned at hard labor in the penitentiary for not less than six months nor more than five years for each offense, or fined not less than one hundred dollars nor more than two thousand dollars, with costs of court.” For more information on Anthony Comstock and his anti-obscenity campaigns, see Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997); and Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002).

of white women. In order to protect white women and young white men, older white men banned “obscene” materials and institutions which promoted sexual laxity and experimentation. White women were thus protected from these materials invading their homes, from the gaze of men, and from the physical dangers of male promiscuity (both in terms of pregnancy and disease).<sup>9</sup>

The anti-obscenity campaigns of 1870s were a response to a number of social changes during this decade.<sup>10</sup> First and foremost, urbanization and the industrial revolution moved children out of their parents’ homes and into the city at an earlier age than previous generations.<sup>11</sup> This meant that single men and women, both African American and white, commingled in an urban context and experimented with new forms of socializing, dating, and courting. Second, urbanization and the industrial revolution provided both white and African-American women with more opportunities for work outside of the home and more higher-education opportunities overall, which meant that many women delayed marriage and childbearing longer than in previous generations. Third, an economic depression in the 1870s and a prevalence of smaller urban dwellings meant that men and women tended to have fewer children—and were thus practicing some form of procreative control. Finally, going back to 1839, Charles Goodyear invented vulcanized rubber, which provided a safer, more reliable, and more affordable material for the production of diaphragms and condoms which, by the 1870s, were heavily advertised and readily available in local pharmacies for use by new,

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<sup>9</sup> Non-conservative evangelical Protestants supported the ideals behind these efforts, but they generally thought that the methods behind protecting the family (i.e. legally banning the sale and distribution of birth control and the broad definition of “obscenity”) were too strict. Non-conservative evangelical Protestants promoted monogamous Christian marriages but believed that sexual intimacy could help a marriage, not hinder it. They should be considered early progenitors of the redefined marriage of the 1920s, albeit a minority group in the 1870s. It would not be until the 1920s—when women gained the right to vote and when the economic situation of the United States declined—that their view of Christian marriage and family would be widely accepted. For more information on this see, Christian Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009); Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies and Diverse Realities* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the changes in society during the Progressive Era (1870-WWI) see Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Charles W. Calhoun, editor, *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007); Gaines M. Foster *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> These changes affected the urban North more than the South and were limited to middle-class whites and African Americans. For more information on the lifestyle changes of African American women during this time see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993). For changes in African American families after 1920, see Anastasia C. Curwood, *Stormy Weather: Middle-Class African American Marriages between the Two World Wars* (Chapel Hill: U of Chapel Hill P, 2010).

“modern” couples.<sup>12</sup> These four changes created a relaxed and “modern” sexual environment which allowed for one to prioritize dating over marriage and protected sex over childbearing. This new environment frightened conservative evangelical Protestants, who sought to control sexual laxity by restricting access to contraceptive devices and contraceptive information and who sought to preserve the traditional form of Christian marriage, one of procreative purpose.

### The Methodist Family, circa 1920s to 1950s

Starting in the late 1920s, Methodists reconsidered the relationship between birth control and family life.<sup>13</sup> In the 1870s, as supporters of the ideology behind anti-obscenity campaigns, Methodists worked to ban birth control as a means to suppress sexual laxity and improve Christian family life. Fifty years later, Methodists started to view birth control as an effective means to improve family life and marital satisfaction; therefore, what was once prohibitory of a good family life was now seen as a means to good family life. As will be shown, this new rhetoric made it morally acceptable and socially responsible to prevent conception in the Methodist view. This paper will now switch gears towards examining Protestant Christian language (the Federal Council of Churches), Methodist language (largely the *Book of Discipline*) and Methodist publications (*motive* Magazine and pamphlets produced by the Methodist Board of Education) that sought to promote family well-being and family values as the basis for denomination wide support of birth control by 1940.

The language surrounding pre-marital counseling and sex education is one of the main sources of information on the Methodist view of contraceptive practices. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Methodist Episcopal churches requested, recommended, and published “practical” materials which gave “rational” advice on parenthood. Language is important for understanding the reasons why the church supported contraception. The

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<sup>12</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). Tone’s book exposes the underground culture of contraception production and use after the Comstock laws were passed. She argues that women found ways to buy and use contraception despite the ban and created an underground network to support each other.

<sup>13</sup> White women continuously fought for the legalization of contraceptive methods and for the dissemination of contraceptive information since its prohibition in 1873. The official “Birth Control Movement in America” as it is typically known began around 1814 when Margaret Sanger coined the phrase “birth control.” For women like Sanger, birth control was not a family issue, but a women’s rights issue. She began what would later be the Planned Parenthood Federation of America began in 1921 under its original name, the American Birth Control League. It changed its name to PPFA in 1940 in order to advance family rights over women’s rights and thus gain more support from men and from religious communities. Sanger initially began this campaign after her stint as a nurse in WWI where she saw men coming home with sexual transmitted infections and women dying during labor due to too many unwanted and unnecessary pregnancies. Her efforts sought to protect these women from “diseases” associated with unprotected sex, diseases which included pregnancy. For more information on Sanger and her movement, see Peter C. Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Praeger, 2011).

Methodist Church's repetition of the words "practical" and "rational" when discussing sex education and pre-marital counseling stands in contrast to the information available to the average congregant, which was deemed as being essentially impractical and irrational. For example, in 1928, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church requested the Methodist Board of Education to "prepare Courses of Study setting forth the practical and spiritual values of marriage" to be taught to young children and young couples. "Practical," a word that continuously surrounds clergy support of the birth control movement, suggests that certain ideals surrounding marriage—perhaps the idea that sex was only for procreative purposes—were impractical and needed to be adjusted to better suit changing conceptions of marriage and family life.<sup>14</sup>

After World War I, the social understanding of marriage in the United States underwent a major shift, as it had done in the late nineteenth century. First and foremost affecting marriage was the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, which provided women with the right to vote (1920). The emergence of the redefined woman who chose education, career, and personal rights over the desire to have a family threatened the institution of marriage. In order to bring the institution back to the forefront of culture, marriage revisionists sought to redefine marriage. Historian Christina Simmons writes about this redefined marriage in *Making Marriage Modern*:

The marriage revisionists, both African American and white, drew on the heritage of both the sexual radicals<sup>15</sup> and the social hygienists<sup>16</sup> to redefine marriage comprehensively for a twentieth-century urban industrial society and to reconfigure perspectives on sex, privacy, and women. Their proposals represented what sex was coming to mean for a prosperous middle class, how the regulatory function of marriage was shifting, and how women's less domestically defined lives pressed increasingly against the confines of the traditional model of marriage.<sup>17</sup>

Marriage had to respond to cultural change. In an almost complete reversal of the conservative evangelical Protestant ideology of sexual intimacy, by the late 1920s, sex was viewed by an increasing majority of Protestants as a good act which should be practiced monogamously and strictly within the marital bond, but one that should be enjoyed without the worry of conception. In order to encourage newly liberated women who were coming to

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<sup>14</sup> *Journal of the Thirtieth Delegated General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Raymond J. Wade and John M. Arters, eds. (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1928), 623.

<sup>15</sup> Sex radicals of the late nineteenth century were those who went against the anti-obscenity laws. These men and women were sometimes classified as "free lovers" who argued for the true and free expression of all types of love. They openly supported and used contraception and frequently challenged the traditional model of marriage (as patriarchal) and purpose of marriage (procreative).

<sup>16</sup> Social hygienists of the late nineteenth century were members of the anti-obscenity campaigns who chose to clean up society by restricting sexual expression. Their efforts included banning contraception, erotica, pornography, abortifacients, and promoting heterosexual, monogamous marriage in which sex was for procreative purposes only.

<sup>17</sup> Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009): 106.



understand their gender and sexuality on new levels, sexual intimacy within marriage had to adjust to emphasize the pleasure experienced and the bond created during the act. Thus, by the end of the 1920s, sexual intimacy and sexual pleasure were directly linked to marital happiness. Furthermore, motherhood, while still valued, was no longer the sole goal of married women, who now found themselves equal to men in the eyes of the law. Thus, for marriage (and the family) to remain the foundation of society, it had to evolve to a more companionate model, one that valued sexual intimacy without the worry of conception and one that equally valued men's and women's role in the institution.<sup>18</sup>

Responding to such changes, in 1927 the Federal Council of Churches created the Committee on Marriage and the Home, which was dedicated to the improvement of the American (i.e., Protestant Christian) family. It was comprised of twenty-eight members, three of whom were ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Dr. John W. Langdale, Dr. William S. Mitchell, and Dr. Worth M. Tippy.<sup>19</sup> In 1929, the committee published a tract, "The Ideals of Love and Marriage," which defined marriage foremost as a "vision of devoted loyalty and life-long companionship" not as an institution with solely procreative purposes.<sup>20</sup> The committee recognized that husband and wife should experience different types of emotional and physical intimacy without the worry of conception. While intimacy was important, they further asserted that a marriage was expected to progress over time to the creation of a family by the introduction of children. While the main purpose of a marriage remained the production of a family via offspring, having too many children was deemed a problem. The Committee recognized that the current "overstrain of the family income" was a result of having "too many children."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the purpose of marriage remained the creation of a family—with family defined as a married man and woman and their children—but financial strain was associated with having too many children.

This observation about financial strain was not limited to the Committee on Family and the Home. With the Depression, Methodist clergy witnessed the increasing impoverishment of large families. The Reverend Joseph F. Michael of Texas saw "the plight of hundreds of homes" and became convinced that Margaret Sanger's birth control movement was a "God-sent movement," for it was a movement which concerned the family. Michael supported the legalization of contraception and its use within a monogamous marriage "[f]or the sake of the wife's health, the congeniality of the home, the social and religious adjustment in the community life, a fair and impartial opportunity for each child . . . and to help lift . . . part of the burden from the shoulders of father and husband." He believed that "every baby" should

<sup>18</sup> Simmons. *Making Marriage Modern*, 105-137.

<sup>19</sup> "The Federal Council on Birth Control," *The Christian Advocate* (New York, April 2, 1931): 4.

<sup>20</sup> Worth M. Tippy. "The Protestant View of Sex, Love, and Marriage," *Current History* 29.5 (February, 1929): 1, 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Tippy, "The Protestant View": 6-7, 8.

come into this world as a “welcome guest.”<sup>22</sup> Birth control improved the livelihood and health of each member of the family, and since it improved the family, Michael believed it improved society which was built upon the family. In line with Michael’s claims, Margaret Sanger believed that birth control would allow “each child to have proper food, warmth, sunlight and fresh air, devotion and love.”<sup>23</sup> Sanger and Michael witnessed the birth of children into broken homes, homes that could not afford them, and homes that did not want them. They concluded that these children were not given certain opportunities and that the proper use of contraception could alleviate this problem by allowing parents to plan for the most opportune time to conceive a child and preventing them from having unwanted children or children that could not be cared for properly.

Individual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church agreed with Michael’s views. In April of 1930, the New York East Conference became the first Methodist conference to support the birth control movement. They believed it was the “clear duty of the churches to offer to their young people an opportunity to consult some qualified advisor” on the “fundamental principles of sex morality” and to receive “rational advice” on the subject. “Rational advice” echoes the earlier request for “practical courses” and designates the current advice being provided to young people as irrational. These types of changes in the language surrounding the discussion of pre-marital counseling and sex education are vital to understanding Methodism’s early support of contraception, for they recognized an error in the way sex was approached and sought to correct that error. In case their support for the birth control movement was unclear, the New York East Conference continued by advocating for “such changes of the law . . . as will remove the existing restrictions upon the communication by physicians to their patients of important medical information on Birth Control.”<sup>24</sup> It was no longer solely the duty of the churches to inform young couples of the technology available to them. It was also the duty of the state. The New York East Conference called for legislative action to be taken so that their youth could legally receive rational advice, practical courses, and information on birth control from their physicians.

Other Methodist conferences followed the example set by New York East. By November of 1930, the Rock River Conference (Chicago, Illinois) went on record as recognizing certain “economic difficulties” in marriage. They recommended “education for marriage” and “endorse[d] the principle of voluntary parenthood.”<sup>25</sup> Once again, a need for “education for marriage” echoes the prior calls for change via “practical courses” and “rational ad-

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<sup>22</sup> Stella Hanau, ed., “The Churches and BC, A Symposium,” *Birth Control Review* 14.5 (May, 1930): 140.

<sup>23</sup> Peter C. Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Denver, CO: Praeger, 2011), 147. Quote taken from Margaret Sanger’s radio broadcast in 1924.

<sup>24</sup> Journal of the New York East Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1930, 82<sup>nd</sup> Session, 250. Reprinted in *Birth Control Review* 14.5: 149.

<sup>25</sup> “Home. Birth Control,” *The Social Service Bulletin* 20.18 (Nov. 15, 1930): 2.



vice.” Pastors realized that young couples needed information on how to use contraception safely, and that they as pastors were not fully qualified to provide this information.<sup>26</sup> To clarify, pastors realized that they, too, needed to be educated about contraception, so that they could properly offer “rational” and “practical” advice to their congregants. To support this claim, the Northeast Ohio Conference and the Pittsburgh Conference requested that the MEC “make a study of the question of birth control” so that a “frank discussion” could occur.<sup>27</sup> Such frank discussion was necessary, ideally leading to an educated clergy who could offer rational advice and practical courses to their congregants.

Despite the efforts of individual conferences, the Methodist Episcopal Church refused to take an official public stance on the issue. In March of 1931, the Federal Council of Churches’ Committee on Marriage and the Home, which included three Methodist pastors and recognized an economic disadvantage to having large families, gave a “guarded approval of birth control” to married couples. They believed that “some form of effective control of the size of the family and spacing of children” was necessary in order to prevent poverty.<sup>28</sup> Approval was limited to married couples because the Federal Council of Churches feared that an overall approval would increase pre-marital sex and, therefore, encourage the current sexual laxity of youth. Within a marriage, however, they recognized that birth control was necessary, because sex had two purposes: procreation, and “an expression of mutual affection.” Until 1931, while most Protestant denominations supported companionate marriage, no Protestant denomination had publicly recognized that sex could be for enjoyment alone. While the Federal Council of Churches did not speak for individual denominations, every mainline Protestant denomination was represented and had a voice about such issues. Their “guarded approval” arguably changed the way Protestant churches viewed sex and birth control, by forcing them to stand alongside the Federal Council of Churches, or else to find a reason to stand against them.

The Federal Council of Churches’ guarded approval of contraception created a religious uproar with Baptists, Presbyterians, and certain Congregationalist denominations, which did not approve of birth control. The Methodist Episcopal Church, however, did not denounce the decision, and it is unknown how the three Methodist ministers on the committee voted. “The Moral Aspects of Birth Control,” the Federal Council of Churches’ tract which granted approval of contraception, was reprinted in the New York *Christian Advocate*, one of the primary periodicals of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in early April of 1931. The *Advocate* concluded, “The entire report should be read and thought over, with reference to one’s own personal experience and observation of the sex-life of others, and the spirit and

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<sup>26</sup> Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005), 57.

<sup>27</sup> “Home. Birth Control”: 2.

<sup>28</sup> “The Churches and Birth Control,” *Federal Council Bulletin* 14.4 (April, 1931): 19.

letter of the Scriptures.” Here, one is encouraged to think about contraception in reference to one’s own beliefs and lifestyle while referring to Scripture for specific answers. The article emphasizes that the Methodist Episcopal Church had not faced the birth control issue at its General Conference but expected that when it finally did, the opinion would be “divided, not so much as to the basic morality of birth control, as to the dangers flowing from the general dissemination of information regarding the use of contraceptives.”<sup>29</sup> This statement suggests that the current stance of the denomination was not morally against birth control because it prevented conception within marriage, but was afraid that its approval would lead to an increase in the sexual laxity of unmarried couples. This was a common fear. The Federal Council of Churches circumvented this fear by approving the use of birth control by married couples only; however, they concluded that the benefits of birth control used within a marriage outweighed the dangers of birth control use outside of marriage. By 1931, a few individual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church had joined the Federal Council of Churches in approving the use of birth control within marriage. How was the use of birth control perceived outside of Protestant denominations, in what one could call the “secular” (i.e., non-religious) realm?

From 1929 to 1937, three specific events served to overturn parts of the prohibitive Comstock Laws and subsequently led to an increased use and acceptance of birth control. The first involved a police raid at the Clinical Research Bureau (CRB), Margaret Sanger’s main birth control clinic and research lab in New York City. In 1929, officers arrested doctors and nurses at the CRB for providing birth control to married patients for non-disease preventative measures.<sup>30</sup> To clarify, in 1918, Judge Crane of the New York Appeals Court legalized the distribution of contraception to married couples for the prevention of disease—specifically venereal disease, as many infected World War I veterans returned home. Doctors of the Clinical Research Bureau argued that “disease” included any threat to a woman’s health and listed pregnancy as a major threat. In other words, the Crane decision argued for the prevention of what was believed to be a male disease, but the Clinical Research Bureau extended Crane’s decision to include pregnancy. In 1929, after a two day trial, charges against the doctors were dismissed, and it was ruled that doctors were “absolved . . . if they act in good faith in instructing a married woman in the use of contraceptives.” Here, “good faith” was “the belief by the physician that the prevention of conception is necessary for the patient’s health and physical welfare.”<sup>31</sup> This decision was monumental because it extended the legal prescription of contraception to women and broadened the term “disease” to include any threat to anyone’s health or physical welfare. Since the improper spacing of children was proven to

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<sup>29</sup> “The Federal Council on Birth Control,” *The Christian Advocate* (New York, April 2, 1931): 4.

<sup>30</sup> Engelman, *History of the Birth Control*, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Engelman, *History of the Birth Control*, 158.

threaten a family's lifestyle and health, it was now legal to prescribe contraception to married couples for the proper spacing of children.

The second change occurred in 1930 with *Youngs v. C. I. Lee*, a trademark suit between two condom manufacturers, in the U.S. Court of Appeals, which determined that condom manufacturing was "a legal enterprise and therefore entitled to trademark protection."<sup>32</sup> Prior to this decision, it was illegal to manufacture condoms in the United States. If one wanted to use condoms, they had to be smuggled into the country. The *Youngs* decision also legalized the advertisement of contraception via the United States Postal Service, newspapers, and magazines—thus overturning another portion of the Comstock Laws. After these two court decisions, everyone had access to information on contraception, and married couples could legally use contraception for family planning.

Finally, in June, 1937, the American Medical Association deemed birth control to be a part of "proper medical practice." Physicians across the nation could once again legally write and publish information on birth control and would now know how to use, prescribe, and inform the public on issues of contraception. By 1938, contraceptive sales were estimated to be over \$2.5 million per year with over 600 brands of female contraceptives available at over 300 nonprofit birth control clinics across the nation. Perhaps Margaret Sanger's reaction to the changes of the 1930s is best: "The birth control movement is *free*."<sup>33</sup> By the end of the 1930s, birth control was readily accepted and used by a large proportion of couples, and it was now socially acceptable for the Methodist Church to show its support.

In 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant church merged to form "The Methodist Church." The merger brought about many changes. Among these was, according to historian Tom Davis, that "by the end of the 1930s, the Methodist Church had officially endorsed birth control."<sup>34</sup> The Methodist endorsement was found in the 1940 *Book of Discipline*, specifically in the Social Creed and in a new resolution on the Christian home. The revised Social Creed called for "the protection of both the individual and the family by the single standard of purity; for education for marriage, parenthood, and home-building."<sup>35</sup> First of all, the family was to be protected by the church. Secondly, the church was to take responsibility for educating young couples on issues involving marriage and parenthood, reflecting earlier statements by the Methodist Episcopal Church about offering practical courses which offered rational advice. As previously noted, these courses reflected a need for the distribution of contraceptive information to clergy and congregants. This language was now found in the Social Creed, a belief statement historically devoted to the betterment of society, and emphasized marriage preparation

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<sup>32</sup> Engelman, *History of the Birth Control*, 166.

<sup>33</sup> Engelman, *History of the Birth Control*, 169.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Sacred Work*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> "Our Social Creed," *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church* (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1940): paragraph 1712, 766-770.

and sex education as vital issues for The Methodist Church.<sup>36</sup> With these changes to the Social Creed, it is evident that The Methodist Church supported the use of birth control within married couples by 1940.<sup>37</sup>

The 1940 *Book of Discipline* contained a new resolution, “The Christian Home,” which defined the Methodist ideal of the American Christian family. Some of its more interesting claims concerned children, giving them the “birthright” to an emotionally stable home with two parents who provide the child with the opportunity to develop emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually—echoing earlier claims by the Rev. Joseph F. Michael of Texas and Margaret Sanger in 1930. The resolution leads to the conclusion that children should not be born into homes where they are not wanted, for these homes stunt them emotionally and prevent their proper development. Therefore, the proper planning and spacing of children is necessary for proper development and the success of the family.

The resolution also addressed sex education and pre-marital counseling. Children had “the right to know before adolescence the facts regarding the origin of life and the nature of their personality as it relates to sex.” Children should not be scared of sex. Sex was natural and should be taught from a young age so that a child became an adult who is comfortable with sex. Youth needed to be educated on the “Christian ideal of love, courtship, and marriage.” To clarify, youth and engaged couples should be taught to wait for marriage to engage in intercourse, but they should not be ashamed of sexual desires. The resolution recommended certain “scientific” literature and information for engaged couples. “Scientific” implies “medical,” and with the American Medical Association’s approval of birth control, medical publications discussed contraception as a legitimate medical practice. Furthermore, “courses of instruction for young married couples on home building, income budgeting, child training, [and] life adjustments” were recommended along with “pre-marital and post-marital counseling.”<sup>38</sup> The stress on “home-building” and “income budgeting” hearkens back to concerns raised by the Rev. Joseph Michael and the Federal Council of Churches about the financial strain of large families. To build a home properly, couples must understand the cost of having children. The adjustments to the Social Creed, along with statements concerning pre-marital education, support an endorsement of contraception in 1940. Birth control was still new and still

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<sup>36</sup> The Social Creed was first written in 1908. It focused on economic reform and social legislation which would improve working conditions of all and the living conditions of the poor. Amendments to the Social Creed were reserved for important social issues. The fact that it was amended in 1940 to include statements on marriage and contraception shows the importance of these social issues. For more information on the Social Creed, see Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt’s *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 321-326.

<sup>37</sup> The alleviation of poverty is found in the “Social Creed” as follows: “We therefore stand for the abatement and prevention of poverty and the right of all men to live,” *Discipline*, 1940, paragraph 1712, 767.

<sup>38</sup> “The Christian Home,” *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church* (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1940): paragraph 1713, 770-772.

growing in acceptance. The Methodist Church wanted it to be clear to young married Methodist couples that if they wanted to space children for economic reasons, the statements in the *Discipline* would not prohibit such actions.

Acceptance of family planning and birth control is further substantiated by the involvement of Methodist clergy in Planned Parenthood Federation of America and by the increased discussion of birth control within Methodist publications after 1940. In March, 1941, Margaret Sanger, seven clergy, and five members of the Birth Control Federation of America (the predecessor to Planned Parenthood) created the National Clergymen's Advisory Council, a group that was "to be the spokesman for the Federation on the moral and religious values of planned parenthood."<sup>39</sup> In other words, instead of stressing a woman's right to control her reproductive system, the National Clergymen's Advisory Council reflected the Methodist stance on contraception. They stressed contraception as a relief measure, a solution to certain health issues, and a benefit to the institution of the family. An example of their work was the creation of National Family Week, an annual event which focused on family education, planning, and celebration. By 1948, the Methodist *Book of Discipline* encouraged all churches to observe National Family Week, a direct connection between congregations and the programming efforts of the PPA.<sup>40</sup>

This was not the only connection between The Methodist Church and Planned Parenthood. Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam became a member of the NCAC in 1941 and is remembered as "one of the boldest and most controversial Protestant leaders of the post-World War II period," more for his socialist leaning than his support of Planned Parenthood.<sup>41</sup> Bishop Oxnam was one of two speakers at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of Planned Parenthood in 1946. In his speech, Oxnam declared that: "The love between a husband and wife is sacred. Those who insist there shall be no expression of that love except for the purpose of procreation are not defenders of the family."<sup>42</sup> Oxnam's speech was mostly a direct attack on the Catholic Church's belief that the prevention of conception during sex was sinful. However, his speech also showed that as a Methodist Bishop he supported Planned Parenthood, the right to enjoy sex without procreation, and the idea that birth control enhanced, or to put it more strongly, *defended* family life.

One of the goals of the National Clergymen's Advisory Council was to remediate ministers' ignorance and misinformation concerning contraception. In 1944, two of its members, Rev. L. Foster Wood and Dr. Abraham Stone, published a pamphlet entitled, "Marriage Counsel in Relation to Planned Parenthood: an Outline for Clergymen." The pamphlet is written

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<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Sacred Work*, 55

<sup>40</sup> "The Local Church," *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church* (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1948): paragraph 198, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Davis, *Sacred Work*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Sacred Work*, 60.

in question-and-answer format and is meant to reflect the conversation between a pastor and an engaged couple enrolled in pre-marital counseling. Remember, the 1940 *Book of Discipline* emphasized the need for pre-marital counseling, and this pamphlet provides a glimpse of what was discussed, and most likely what had been discussed for years during such counseling. The goal of this pamphlet was to provide ministers with “practical and specific” information on family planning and types of contraception, for these were “a normal part of married life.”<sup>43</sup> Married couples were not the only ones in need of practical and rational advice. Pastors needed it, too, for they could act as intermediaries between doctors and congregants. In order to provide their congregants with reliable advice on a medical topic, they needed practical information. What this pamphlet presented as “abnormal” was relying on a supposed “safe period,” which was a “risk,” and on continence, which “cannot be advocated or advised as a general practice.”<sup>44</sup> Not enough was known about female menstruation to rely fully on the “safe period.” Continence was “not feasible” and could actually damage a marriage.<sup>45</sup> It was healthy for married people to engage in sex for pleasure’s sake. The act increased intimacy, and a more intimate family was a healthier family. In the end, this pamphlet argued that most couples will want to have children, for children fulfill a marriage, but it emphasized the need to plan for marriage and for parenthood.<sup>46</sup>

These types of pamphlets were now necessary. As birth control increased in popularity, Methodist congregants, especially students, discussed and asked questions about contraception. *motive Magazine*, the periodical of the Methodist Student Movement, began in 1941. The entire issue of December, 1941, discussed sex education at the college level. Small advertisements for lectures on marriage, including “The Cost of a Child through the First Six Years,” and “Birth Control,” were found throughout the issue. These courses became more popular among the student body.<sup>47</sup> In 1934, there were three students enrolled in a home-building course, while in 1940, there were 304 students, a clear increase in concern on part of young couples to learn about how to plan a home and family.<sup>48</sup> A reason for this increase was provided in “Love, the New Security.” Marjorie, a college senior, believed that “Sex is no longer a problem to youth. It is a fact.” She discussed the increase in monogamous relationships along with a delay in marriage because “our economic system itself demands college.”<sup>49</sup> College students were willing to put off marriage until they finished their degrees, but they were becoming less willing to put off sex until marriage. In 1944, *motive Magazine*

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<sup>43</sup> L. Foster Wood and Abraham Stone, *Marriage Counsel in Relation to Planned Parenthood: An Outline for Clergymen* (New York: Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 1944), 7.

<sup>44</sup> L. Foster Wood and Abraham Stone, *Marriage Counsel*, 12, 30.

<sup>45</sup> L. Foster Wood and Abraham Stone, *Marriage Counsel*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> L. Foster Wood and Abraham Stone, *Marriage Counsel*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> “Source,” *motive Magazine* (December, 1941): 13.

<sup>48</sup> C. W. Hall, “Rears Its Ugly Head!” *motive Magazine* (December, 1941): 20-22.

<sup>49</sup> Marjorie Charles, “Love, the New Security,” *motive Magazine* (December, 1941): 25, 28.



published an article, "The A.B.C.'s of Getting Married," written by a twenty-two-year-old woman who was recently married. She responded to an inquiry which asked, "What do you wish you had before getting married?" She replied, "I wish I might have had more satisfactory education in the area of sex."<sup>50</sup> She admitted writing to the "Birth Control Clinic requesting information with regards to their services in marriage counseling and medical advice,"<sup>51</sup> a statement which shows that it was common to go to birth control clinics prior to marriage. She also repeated the type of language surrounding birth control. While willing to admit that she wrote to a "Birth Control Clinic," she was not willing to admit that she wanted information on birth control. Instead, she used language similar to that of the 1940 *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church*, "marriage counseling and medical advice." Thus, as early as 1941, lectures on birth control and family planning were taught at the university level and were frequently advertised and discussed by Methodist students.

These types of conversations were heightened by an arguably new frankness surrounding sex in the 1950s, after Alfred C. Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). People had talked openly and had written about sex since the 1920s, as this paper has shown, but Kinsey shook society with his alarming statistics about unmarried couples. Previously, discussion of sex was acceptable in the context of married couples, but the situation was different where unmarried couples were concerned. Pre-marital sex was indeed occurring, but public acknowledgment of this fact was problematic. Historian R. Marie Griffith argued that Kinsey sought support and information from clergy.<sup>52</sup> According to Griffith, Methodist ministers were open and willing to support Kinsey's studies. In 1953, the Rev. Lawrence K. Whitefield thanked Kinsey for forcing Christians to realize "the imperativeness of rethinking our whole philosophy of sex relations" in a Sunday sermon.<sup>53</sup>

In the mid-1950s, The Methodist Church claimed to be rethinking its philosophy regarding sex. Even though The Methodist Church began publishing extensively on the subject, the language concerning sex education, family planning, and parenthood had not changed. Rather than reformulating its stance, The Methodist Church began advertising its pro-contraception stance more openly. One pamphlet entitled, "Now You Are Engaged," encouraged young couples to think about children prior to marriage, for "the spacing of children will involve some method of timing conception." Couples should also visit the local "Planned Parenthood Clinic" and "take advantage of the opportunity it provides."<sup>54</sup> This pamphlet recommended "scientific litera-

<sup>50</sup> "The A, B, C's of Getting Married," *motive Magazine* (November, 1944): 17.

<sup>51</sup> "Now that We are Married," *motive Magazine* (November, 1944): 15-18.

<sup>52</sup> R. Marie Griffith, "The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey," *The Journal of American History* (September, 2008): 349-377.

<sup>53</sup> Griffith, "The Religious Encounters," 368.

<sup>54</sup> Oliver M. Butterfield, "Now You are Engaged," (Nashville, TN: The Methodist Publishing House, 1955): 5, 7.

ture” such as Dr. Hannah Stone’s *A Marriage Manual* which “emphasized . . . the problems of birth control,” because “reliable contraceptive information is essential for a well-adjusted and satisfactory marital union.”<sup>55</sup> The Methodists were not trying to hide their approval of birth control. They encouraged young couples to visit Planned Parenthood for advice on child spacing, and they recommended materials which openly discussed different types of contraception. Another pamphlet thanked Kinsey for alerting the church to the “extent that sex was a concern” and to how “sexual practices were changing.”<sup>56</sup> It declared that the church was “pushing ahead in a re-study of the Judaeo-Christian tradition regarding sex, love, and marriage” and believed that “the church must provide realistic guidance, direction, and counsel.”<sup>57</sup> The Methodist Church was reconsidering certain traditions to make room for increased sexuality, and in order to confront realistically this increased sexuality, it had to provide practical and realistic advice and counsel.

However, The Methodist Church had been rethinking the status of marriage and parenthood since 1928, when the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church requested courses on education for marriage and parenthood. They knew that the church needed to provide guidance in the areas of sex, love, and marriage, ever since the New York East Conference made that claim in 1930. Furthermore, since 1940, The Methodist Church as a denomination had consistently supported birth control through resolutions in *Doctrines and Discipline*, clergy involvement in Planned Parenthood, and the distribution of accurate information regarding birth control. After Kinsey’s revelations, The Methodist Church did not necessarily change its stance on birth control; it simply made its pro-contraception stance more explicit by the publication of the 1956 *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church*.

For the first time since 1940, despite minor changes to support uniform adoption laws, the 1956 *Book of Discipline* amended the resolution on The Christian Home. It still advocated preparation for marriage via educational courses and pre-martial counseling, but it also included a statement on *planned parenthood*, a phrase which emphasized family more than reproductive rights. It stated, “We believe that planned parenthood, practiced in Christian conscience, may fulfill rather than violate the will of God.”<sup>58</sup> Instead of supporting the use of birth control, which implies a women’s rights issue, *Doctrines and Discipline* supported “planned parenthood,” which centered the issue on concerns for the family. Such parenthood must

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<sup>55</sup> Hannah Stone, “Foreword to the first edition,” *A Marriage Manual* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935), x. Dr. Stone was the head physician and researcher of the CRB in the late 1920s and early 1930s and was one of the doctors arrested in the April, 1929, raid on the CRB.

<sup>56</sup> *The Christian Family and Rapid Social Change* (Nashville, TN: The Methodist Publishing House, 1962).

<sup>57</sup> *The Christian Family and Rapid Social Change*.

<sup>58</sup> “The Christian Home,” *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church* (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1956), paragraph 2021, 707-712.

be practiced in a “Christian conscience.” In other words, it must be between one man and one woman who have united in Christian marriage. This practice fulfils the will of God by welcoming children into the world who will be loved and given ample opportunities to social, spiritual, and intellectual growth.

After 1956, the church continued to increase its support of birth control. In 1964, a pamphlet entitled “Responsible Parenthood from a Christian Perspective” claimed that “married couples are free, within rather broad limits, to use the gifts of science, whether to foster conception or avert it.”<sup>59</sup> The Food and Drug Administration approved the use of an oral contraceptive pill in 1960 and which can and should be classified as one of these “gifts of science” supported by The Methodist Church. By 1968, The (now) United Methodist Church issued a resolution on the Christian Family which echoed the stance of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1940 and The Methodist Church in 1956 by calling for responsible family planning as a Christian means of raising a family.<sup>60</sup> The current *Book of Discipline* calls for the marital use of all forms of contraception as part of “responsible parenthood.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, even in the twenty-first century, for The United Methodist Church fully to support the use of contraception, it must maintain the connection between birth control and the improvement of the family.

This paper has traced the evolution of the Methodist stance on contraception and its relationship to the protection of the Christian family. From 1870, when some Methodists, along with other conservative evangelical Protestants, rallied support behind Anthony Comstock and his anti-obscenity campaigns, forcing the legal ban of contraceptive devices as an “obscene material,” to the 1930 call for “practical courses” and “rational advice” which could help strained families survive an economic depression by teaching them methods of procreative control, to the current call of the use of contraception as a means of “responsible parenthood,” birth control has consistently been a topic of concern for Methodists of various generations and has always been linked to the health of the family. In order to understand how United Methodists today understand the use of birth control, especially in light of the Hobby Lobby Controversy,<sup>62</sup> we need to understand how Methodists historically linked its use (or not) with the protection of the Christian family.

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<sup>59</sup> Richard M. Fagley, *Responsible Parenthood from a Christian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964).

<sup>60</sup> *The Church and the Family* (Nashville, TN: The Methodist Publishing House, 1968).

<sup>61</sup> “Social Principles: Responsible Parenthood,” *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), paragraph 161.

<sup>62</sup> *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* is a 2014 decision by the United States Supreme Court which allowed Hobby Lobby, a for-profit corporation, to restrict certain employee rights, in this case the right to use birth control, based upon the religious inclinations of the corporate owners, in this case their disapproval of the use of birth control. Thus it expanded the right of religious freedom to corporations.