

Aim of lesson

To help the young people understand the scriptural principles which relate to this subject, and to be prepared to apply them to their own lives.

Bible background

Job 10:8-12; Psalm 127:3-5, 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5; 1 Corinthians 7:14.

Preparation required

There are many things in our lives where scripture does not tell us directly what to do. Increasingly, as medical science enables 'undesirable' conditions to be treated - even predicted before they occur - we are faced with decisions which would never have occurred to our ancestors, and on which there may be little direct guidance in scripture.

That does not mean that the scriptures are irrelevant however; simply that we may have to search prayerfully for guidance by looking at underlying principles. That is the approach which this lesson seeks to take. Think for yourself about the scriptural principles it considers, and any others which you feel to be relevant.

Think too about the young people whose thoughts you will be guiding, and their level of education and maturity. It is likely that they will be well aware of methods of contraception, and the medical issues involved, though they may be a little confused about the moral and ethical questions.

Especially on the subject of abortion the young people may have encountered the essentially emotional arguments of both sides. On the one hand it is argued that a foetus is part of a woman's body, and she has the right to do with it what she will; on the other that to end the life of an unborn child, at whatever age, is an act of murder. The presentation of the lesson should be carefully pitched to take into account the familiarity or otherwise of the young people with methods of contraception and the sometimes emotive details of the subject.

Try to be aware of what other religious communities say about birth control and abortion, so that if the topic crops up, their views can be discussed dispassionately.

Suggested outline of lesson

Introduction

Explain the topic of the lesson, and discuss with the young people the education they will have received at school.

Make clear that there is little direct scriptural teaching on this subject, and that what there is is related to the context of marriage. The young people may have been taught that if they are to have sexual relations before marriage, it is better to use a contraceptive; scriptural teaching, however, is that sex should not occur at all outside marriage.

Although birth control and abortion appear to be different topics, they meet in the middle. There are methods of birth control (such as inter-uterine devices) which are not strictly speaking 'contra-conception', but which rely on preventing a fertilised egg from being implanted. Similarly the 'morning-after pill', although considered to be contraceptive, is strictly speaking a way of bring about an extremely early abortion.

Who is in control?

'Take charge of your life'; 'be in control'; 'I did it my way'. It is generally assumed that it is desirable that we should determine our own fate at every opportunity. It is held to part of the 'freedom of the individual' that we should be able to take our own decisions about what happens to us, and that we should be provided with the information that we need to take those decisions in an informed way.

There is a contrasting attitude which is taught in scripture, of submitting to the will of God - as illustrated for example by Psalm 131:1-3.

Get the young people to read Psalm 32:8-11. The contrast is between someone who is willing to accept the guidance of God, and an obstinate animal which wants its own way. Our overall attitude in life should be that we will allow God to guide our lives, and that we will accept what he brings to us.

Having said that, it is clear that God expects us to act rightly in situations with which we are confronted, and that where he has provided us with guidance he expects us to follow it. So we do not simply accept everything that happens to us: if we have toothache we go to the dentist; if poor eyesight, we get some glasses.

So the first principle is that when we are faced with decisions we should take them prayerfully and scripturally. Matthew 6:25-34 emphasises that if our priority in life is to serve God then he will take care of the future.

Contraception

Get the young people to read the extract from *Casti Connubii*, the encyclical on christian marriage dating from 1930. This may seem a long time ago, but it remains the formal position of the Roman Catholic church, and is referred to several times in the later encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.. Discuss the two passages mentioned in the extract. God's instruction to man to fill the earth cannot reasonably be regarded as placing a personal responsibility on every married couple to have children if they can, or even as defining that the purpose of marriage is the conception of children

(this was dealt with in the first topic in this series). The second quotation, from 1 Timothy 5:14, does make a general statement about the important role a woman has to play in running a home and, especially when they are young, caring for children. What it does not say, however, is that women should bear as many children as possible, or even 'the more the merrier'. As 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 would suggest, for man and wife to give honour and pleasure to one another is a quite sufficient reason for sex, although the desire to conceive children will often be present. In passing, it is worth making the point that Catholic opposition to contraception has exacerbated the grave population problems in some parts of the world.

There is no direct scriptural description of contraception. Although Onan (Genesis 38:8-10) is condemned, his sin was to avoid producing offspring for his dead brother, not birth control as such.

Some believers make a distinction between different methods of contraception - those which prevent fertilisation, and those which prevent implantation of the fertilised ovum - and view the latter as equivalent to abortion.

Today, contraception is readily available to young people (though often poorly understood), and its use advocated as a precaution in the various sexual relationships in which it is assumed that teenagers will be involved. This lesson should remind the group that extra-marital sex is wrong, with or without precautions; and that contraception belongs, like sex, within marriage.

Abortion

Like birth control, several different actions could be classed as abortion, and you should begin by discussing these with the young people.

Abortions are permitted under law for the well-being of either the mother or the child. This could be in one of several situations, and although medically they all have something in common, morally they are completely different:

- The mother and child may face certain death, as in the case of an ectopic pregnancy (a fertilised egg lodged in a fallopian tube; this would not medically be classed as an abortion, but - in theory at least - one is still ending the life of a living foetus).
- There may be a severe risk to her mental or physical health.
- She may not want the inconvenience of looking after a child when she just wants have fun.
- The parents may have wanted a boy, but conceived a girl (or vice versa). This is not a legal justification for abortion, but may, in some cases, be the motivation.
- The child may be known to suffer from a severe handicap, or a disease which would shorten its life, or it may have inherited a genetic abnormality.
- The mother may feel unable to look after it properly.

An unborn child

Describe the high view the Bible takes of human life - made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The human being is described as being formed by God in the womb (Job 10:8-12; Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5), a marvellous act of creation. Not surprisingly, murder is treated very gravely and was a capital offence in the Law. The fact that the child is known to God before birth is important, and refutes the argument that a foetus is simply part of its mother's body, for her to do with as she will.

Children are a valued gift from God (Psalm 127:3-5, 128:3-4). The responsibility of Christian parents is outlined in Ephesians 6:4, and believers should think carefully whether they are able to bring up children 'in the training and instruction of the Lord' before they try to conceive a child. It follows that parenthood is not something to be undertaken lightly, and many see birth control methods as a helpful way of planning parenthood and avoiding unexpected pregnancy. The fact that contraception is also used to escape the possible consequences of illicit sex does not negate its value within marriage.

Get the young people to look at Exodus 21:22, using a variety of translations. It must be faced that it is not certain whether the passage is talking about a miscarriage or a premature, but otherwise healthy, birth. The relevant words, translated (for example) 'her fruit depart' (AV) or 'gives birth prematurely' (NIV) also both appear in Exodus 21:4 and refer to 'children' and a man 'going out' or 'going free'. The key word is the one translated in the AV as 'depart'; it is a word meaning 'to go or come out', and it refers to a normal birth in several places (for example Genesis 25:26; 38:28 and Job 3:11); in Numbers 12:12 it refers to a stillbirth. If it is a miscarriage that is being discussed, then a man who by violence causes a woman to miscarry was to be fined, but not subjected to capital punishment as a murderer - so the loss of the foetus is not murder - but we cannot be dogmatic about this interpretation.

Another passage which may be relevant is Deuteronomy 22:5-6, where a distinction is made between the death of an un-hatched chick and its mother, presumably because if an egg is taken the mother can have more, whereas if the mother is killed the eggs will die anyway. It is doubtful whether the lesson can be transferred to human life, but bear in mind that 1 Corinthians 9:9 applies to humans a verse that was written about oxen.

Nonetheless, abortion can be seen as rejection of a gift from God, and as preventing the birth of a person who in God's mercy may have had an opportunity to respond to the Gospel. While for the world at large this may be treated as a medical matter, for us it is a deeply spiritual one: we are thinking about the miraculous process by which God brings new life into the world. Moreover, the motivation for many abortions - social convenience, selfishness, 'a woman's right to choose', will rightly

be seen as unacceptable to Bible believers. Women who have undergone abortions may experience terrible feelings of guilt afterwards.

In practice, most of those who seek to follow scripture will be unwilling to countenance abortion except in extreme circumstances such as a real danger to the mother's life, pregnancy as the result of rape, or certain and severe handicap. Some would view late abortions with particular abhorrence: modern medical technology means that babies can occasionally survive even when born so prematurely as to fall within the normal legal abortion limit.

The issue of whether to abort severely handicapped foetuses, and the question of screening or testing to detect handicap, should be discussed sensitively. There are genuine differences among believers, and where scripture is silent, our responsibility is to respect those differences and to offer support, prayer and practical help to those who may need it, within or outside the brotherhood.

Relevance to our lives

The young people will be familiar with an environment where pre-marital sex is the norm, contraception treated as a routine precaution in sexual encounters, and abortion a legitimate choice where it does not suit the woman to bear a child. This lesson should provide an opportunity to discuss difficult issues from a Christian viewpoint, and to apply scriptural principles even where there is no 'chapter and verse' to give a definitive answer. As such it should form a model for how to approach other subjects.

Prayer

Ask that God, through the scriptures, will help us to understand and deal with difficult issues such as these, and to act wisely and faithfully in our relationships with others. Where loyalty to the Lord requires us to make choices that our contemporaries may ridicule or find objectionable, may we receive the strength to stand firm.

Other suggestions for activities

If it is possible to do so without breaching confidence, it might be a useful exercise to consider a specific example where parents have faced one of these decisions: how they decided what to do, and what were the results of their actions. If the people concerned are willing to join you there may be benefit in them talking to the young people about their experience, and what they have learned from it.