

# Bodies, Babies, and Birth Control

*Melissa Proctor*

When I grow up I want to be a mother and have a family,  
One little, two little, three little babies of my own.  
Of all the jobs for me I'll choose no other, I'll have family,  
Four little, five little, six little babies of my own.

Janeen Brady<sup>1</sup>

FOR OVER A CENTURY little girls in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have grown up hearing messages like those taught in this song that was popular when I was in Primary: babies are wonderful, have as many babies as you can—at least six—and motherhood is the only work you should choose. Following the same theme, lessons with titles like “Motherhood, a Divine Calling,” which stress childbearing as a woman’s first duty, are taught to sixteen and seventeen year old girls in their Sunday classes.<sup>2</sup> Until the late nineties Relief Society manuals included regular lessons on women’s sacred responsibilities as mothers, often with a reminder that women are accountable to God for how well they fulfill this important calling. Such messages are ubiquitous in the programs, lessons and talks for women in the LDS church.

In this paper I will explore official and unofficial messages that the LDS church has sent to girls and women about childbearing during the twentieth century and the effect those messages have had on women’s reproductive choices. First, I will examine the theological framework of these messages, which appears in all commentary and which grounds the issue as a basic principle of LDS belief. Next, I will chronicle some of

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1. Janeen Brady, “I Want to be a Mother,” *Beloved Songs* (Salt Lake City: Brite Music Inc., 1987), 10-13.

2. Lesson 6, MIA Laurel Manual 2 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984).

the most influential statements made by leaders of the church regarding family planning, noting the widely divergent pronouncements over time and the various interpretations of the principle those pronouncements represent. Third, I will investigate actual family planning practices among 200 active women in the church during the twentieth century. My analysis will be based on women's real decisions and lived experiences as expressed in their own voices. Finally, I will assess how closely these women's practices correspond to the pronouncements made by church leaders. It will be important, as part of this assessment, to discuss the ways in which these women have negotiated their relationship with the institutional church regarding their reproductive choices.

#### THE PRINCIPLE

On the most fundamental level any position taken by LDS church leaders on the issues of motherhood and childbearing has its source in LDS theology. Such theological warrants come from canonized scripture and LDS beliefs about pre-mortal and post-mortal life.<sup>3</sup> All theological justification behind statements on the family is rooted in the first chapter of Genesis. "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth."<sup>4</sup> Latter-day Saints see Adam and Eve not only as their literal historical ancestors, but also as prototypes of each man and woman on earth. What was commanded by God for the primal couple "is still in force"<sup>5</sup> for their descendants since "that commandment has never been altered, modified, or canceled."<sup>6</sup> In fact, as the commandment to multiply and replenish is understood to have been temporally first of all commandments to Adam and Eve, so it has taken on the meaning of being the first, or primary, commandment to all married couples.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond interpretations of Genesis, commentary about family planning is also based on uniquely LDS belief. According to LDS theology

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3. In the Temple endowment ceremony, there are also strong positive injunctions to have children, which indicate that multiplying and replenishing the earth enables one to have joy in this life. Since these statements are relevant to LDS interpretations of Genesis, I will limit my analysis to the scriptural text.

4. Genesis 1:28.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 85.

6. Ezra Taft Benson, *Conference Report* (April 1969): 12.

7. It is interesting that only Genesis 1:28 is ever used in reference to family planning, especially since other Old Testament passages are stronger and more explicit. Take the example of Onan (Gen. 38:8-10), who provides a clear example of withdrawal with contraceptive intent. Not wanting to give offspring to his brother, he withdrew, showing his selfish unwillingness to honor his levirate duty. The text clearly indicates that what he did was evil in the sight of the Lord and that the Lord slew him for it.

there are myriads of Heavenly Father's spirit children still awaiting mortal bodies. In a famous and often quoted statement Brigham Young explained, "There are multitudes of pure and holy spirits waiting to take tabernacles, now what is our duty?—to prepare tabernacles for them: to take a course that will not tend to drive those spirits into the families of the wicked. . . . It is the duty of every righteous man and woman to prepare tabernacles for all the spirits they can."<sup>8</sup> According to Brigham Young then, we are to make as many mortal bodies as we can for the spirits who are waiting their turn on earth. Leaders of the church also remind us that "The family concept is one of the major and most important of our whole theological doctrine. Our concept of heaven itself is little more than a projection of the home and family life into eternity."<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is common to hear that "the ultimate treasures on earth and in heaven are our children and our posterity."<sup>10</sup>

These doctrinal precepts, which together have been called a "pro-natalist theology," constitute the basic principle upon which all statements by church leaders regarding childbearing are founded.<sup>11</sup> The principle is that procreation is a good that should be pursued. But, what does the principle mean in practice? The principle of procreation says nothing about how soon, how often, or how many children one must have. Except for the implication to have more than one child, there is no quantifier inherent in the principle.<sup>12</sup> What then does the principle indicate about contraception? Although principles are basic, unchanging truths that have moral implications, principles must be interpreted to be applied. Interpretation of principle is no simple task. In fact, interpretations of the principle of procreation have been as varied as the people whose statements set church policy.

#### THE PRONOUNCEMENTS

Most statements about fertility regulation from church leaders in the nineteenth century were vague and only euphemistically referred to contraception. Brigham Young warned against "attempts to destroy and dry up the fountains of life"; Erastus Snow likewise worried about the Saints "taking villainous compounds to induce barrenness and unfruitfulness" and told them not to use "devices of wicked men and women" that

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8. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:56.

9. Hugh B. Brown, *Relief Society Magazine* (December 1965): 885.

10. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Great Plan of Happiness," *Ensign* (November 1993): 75.

11. Tim Heaton, "How Does Religion Influence Fertility?: The Case of Mormons," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (1986): 248-58.

12. Ironically, one multiplied by one is only one.

caused "apparent sterility."<sup>13</sup> During the nineteenth century, however, parenthood for the majority was assumed. As positive encouragement, various blessings of posterity, such as long life, were promised as rewards.

One of the earliest extended statements employing negative motivation explicitly to counsel against birth control was made by George Q. Cannon in 1894.

There is one thing that I am told is practiced to some extent among us, and I say to you that where it is practiced and not thoroughly repented of the curse of God will follow it. I refer to the practice of preventing the birth of children. I say to you that the woman who practices such devilish arts. . . will be cursed in their bodies, cursed in their minds, cursed in their property, cursed in their offspring. God will wipe them out from the midst of this people and nation.<sup>14</sup>

Although the "most significant limitations on Mormon family size may well have been infant mortality and maternal morbidity,"<sup>15</sup> President Cannon's statement implies that members of the church had already begun using methods to avoid parenthood.

By the first two decades of the twentieth century, contraception had become a topic of much discussion. This interest may have been partly due to the 1901 church statistical report that indicated that the LDS birth rate had dropped significantly. Although the emphasis on population growth was not explicitly referred to as an objection to contraception, in an official statement Joseph F. Smith wrote, "I do not hesitate to say that prevention is wrong." President Smith linked contraception with negative results in the larger society. He wrote, "It brings in its train a host of social evils. It destroys the morals of a community and nation. It creates hatred and selfishness in the hearts of men and women. . . it causes death and decay and degeneration instead of life and growth, and advancement."<sup>16</sup>

As strong as these statements sound to contemporary ears, LDS attitudes during this time did not differ largely from mainstream America. Even Theodore Roosevelt worried about the decline in the American birth rate and popularized the then common expression "race suicide" to

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13. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:120-121, 20:375, 26:219.

14. George Q. Cannon, *Deseret Weekly*, 1 Oct. 1894, 49: 739; reprinted in *Gospel Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 379.

15. Lester Bush, "Birth Control among the Mormons: Introduction to an Insistent Question," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 2 (Autumn 1976): 18.

16. Joseph F. Smith, *Improvement Era* 11 (October 1908): 959-61.

condemn contraception.<sup>17</sup> Between 1910 and 1920 there was great furor and debate over this issue nationally. By 1913 feminist activist Margaret Sanger had organized a national movement to legalize birth control and free American wives from compulsory childbearing and enforced maternity.<sup>18</sup> Although Sanger was considered a radical, many women supported the movement in varying degrees.<sup>19</sup> According to Susa Young Gates, even within the Relief Society, the subject caused “animated and sometimes heated discussions.”<sup>20</sup> Due to the sisters’ interest in this debate, Gates, editor of the Relief Society Magazine, requested statements from the church. After publishing commentaries from six apostles in 1916, she asked the First Presidency if they approved of these statements. In response, the First Presidency gave their “unqualified endorsement and commended the sentiments to members and nonmembers. . . everywhere.”<sup>21</sup>

These statements, all publicly endorsed by the First Presidency, include, among other things, a specific prescription for family size. Elder Rudger Clawson wrote, “woman is so constituted that, ordinarily, she is capable of bearing, during the years of her greatest strength and physical vigor, from eight to ten children, and in exceptional cases a larger number than that. She should exercise the sacred power of procreation to the utmost limit.”<sup>22</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith stated, “[W]hen a man and woman are married and they agree to limit their offspring to two or three, and practice devices to accomplish this purpose, they are guilty of iniquity which eventually must be punished.”<sup>23</sup> Elder George F. Richards likewise wrote unequivocally, “My wife has borne to me fifteen children. Anything short of this would have been less than her duty and privilege.”<sup>24</sup>

Elder David O. McKay issued warnings about the consequences of contraception for the marriage relationship. He wrote, “The desire not to have children has its birth in vanity, passion and selfishness. Such feel-

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17. Lester Bush, “Birth Control among the Mormons,” 20.

18. Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Cornwall Press, 1920), 11.

19. In her autobiography, Sanger says, “Never was there a more interesting demonstration of mental attitudes of a people than I found east and west of the Rocky Mountains on that tour in the spring of 1916.” (Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* [New York: Ferris Printing Co., 1931], 145.) Interestingly, that was the same year that Gates published official statements in the *Relief Society Magazine*.

20. Susa Young Gates, *Relief Society Magazine* 4 (1917): 68.

21. The First Presidency, *Relief Society Magazine* 4 (1917): 68.

22. Rudger Clawson, *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916).

23. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916).

24. George F. Richards, *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916).

ings are the seeds sown in early married life that produce a harvest of discord, suspicion, estrangement and divorce."<sup>25</sup> President Joseph Fielding Smith warned about the eternal consequences of contraception in the next life warning that "those who attempt to prevent their offspring from coming into the world in obedience to this great command, are guilty of one of the most heinous crimes in the category. There is no promise of eternal salvation and exaltation for such as they."<sup>26</sup> He later clarified, "Those who willfully and maliciously design to break this important commandment shall be damned. They cannot have the Spirit of the Lord."<sup>27</sup>

Should prevention of children be medically necessary to preserve the health or life of the mother, some counsel was given. Elder Orson F. Whitney wrote, "The only legitimate 'birth control' is that which springs naturally from the observance of divine laws, and the use of procreative powers, not for pleasure primarily, but for race perpetuation and improvement. If this involves some self-denial on the part of the husband and father, so much the better for all concerned."<sup>28</sup> In an earlier statement, Joseph Fielding Smith had stated that even in cases of sickness, "no prevention is legitimate except through absolute abstinence."<sup>29</sup> In its letter, the First Presidency makes an even stronger suggestion than abstinence within marriage. "It is so easy to avoid parenthood, if people wish to do so. . . . Men and women can remain unmarried. That is all there is to it."<sup>30</sup>

During the twenties and thirties the topic of birth control received little attention from the leaders of the church in official statements.<sup>31</sup> The relative silence may have been due to an initial increase in the birth rate in the 1920s. Nevertheless, both Mormon and non-Mormon birth rates declined steadily from 1933 to 1935,<sup>32</sup> which was most likely a result of economic necessity caused by the depression. Despite the dictates of the church regarding having a large family, the economic reality mitigated

25. David O. McKay, *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916).

26. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916).

27. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2: 85-89.

28. Orson F. Whitney, *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 7 (July 1916). Notice that this quote assumes that women have no sexuality. If abstinence is necessary for birth control, then the husband must use self-control, implying that abstinence would not require self-control by the wife.

29. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Improvement Era* 11 (October 1908): 959-61.

30. Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, Charles W. Penrose, *Relief Society Magazine* 4, no. 2 (February 1917): 68-69.

31. There were exceptions. B. H. Roberts wrote a lengthy essay on marriage in 1928.

32. Bush, "Birth Control among Mormons," 24.

such behavior.<sup>33</sup> Polls from the period show that the majority of American women believed in birth control.<sup>34</sup> LDS women were no different. A 1935 poll of 1,159 Brigham Young University students shows that 89% said that they believed in birth control of some form.<sup>35</sup>

During the 1940s the church again spoke out on the issue. In a December 1942 essay in the *Improvement Era*, John A. Widtsoe outlined the forbidding consequences of using contraceptives. He wrote, "Since birth control roots in a species of selfishness, the spiritual life of the user of contraceptives is also weakened. Women seem to become more masculine in thought and action; men more callous and reserved; both husband and wife become more careless of each other."<sup>36</sup> As in the earlier statements solicited by Gates, Widtsoe emphasized family size, writing that "[W]omen who have large families are healthy throughout life. . . . [L]arge families are the most genuinely happy," and reminded members that to "multiply and replenish the earth means more than one or two children."<sup>37</sup> For all of these pro-family directives and strong condemnation of birth control, Widtsoe explained that when ill health makes birth control necessary, "careful recognition of the fertile and sterile periods of woman would prove effective in the great majority of cases. Recent knowledge of woman's physiology reveals the natural method for controlling birth."<sup>38</sup> Widtsoe's comments indicate the beginning of a shift in attitudes toward sexuality since this is the first time anything other than marital abstinence is condoned to prevent conception.<sup>39</sup> Despite Widtsoe's progressive thinking, his article did not represent major changes in Mormon leaders' official stand.

The baby boom that followed World War II in the 1950s and 1960s influenced the size of Mormon and non-Mormon families alike. LDS families averaged four or more children even though it seems that birth

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33. Lee L. Bean, Geraldine P. Mineau, Douglas L. Anderton, *Fertility Change on the American Frontier* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 251.

34. Peter Smith, "The History and Future of the Legal Battle over Birth Control," *Cornell Law Quarterly* 49 (1963): 274-303.

35. Harold T. Christensen, "The Fundamentalist Emphasis at Brigham Young University: 1935-1973," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (1978): 53-57. 53% said they believed in birth control by artificial means.

36. John A. Widtsoe, "Should Birth Control be Practiced?" *Improvement Era* (December 1942).

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. David O. McKay followed Widtsoe in saying, "When the health of the mother demands it, proper spacing of children may be determined by seeking medical counsel, by compliance with the processes of nature, or by continence." From "Statements of the General Authorities on Birth Control," Department of Religion, Brigham Young University.

control continued to be widely used among church members.<sup>40</sup> Although no significant shifts occurred during the fifties, subtle changes were taking place. In 1960 President Hugh B. Brown broadened the acceptable reasons for prevention by the use of just one word. He wrote, "The Latter-day Saints believe in large families wherever it is possible to provide for the necessities of life. . .and when the physical and *mental* health of the mother permits."<sup>41</sup> Although Brown explicitly advocated the pro-family principle and indicated that large families were more desirable, including mental health as a consideration in family size created more space for individual variation than any previous statement. There were competing views at this time from church leaders, however. In 1958 the un-official but standard reference work *Mormon Doctrine* was published, in which Bruce R. McConkie quoted Joseph Fielding Smith, saying, "Those who practice birth control. . .are running counter to the foreordained plan of the Almighty. They are in rebellion against God and are guilty of gross wickedness."<sup>42</sup> While acknowledging the liberal perspective of Brown, one must be clear that McConkie's views were more common among church leaders, who continued their general condemnation of contraception.

With these few exceptions, during the fifties and early sixties, church leaders made very few statements on this topic. This is remarkable when viewed against the larger American landscape. By the mid-1950s there was a growing concern regarding overpopulation, which contributed to a revival in Neo-Malthusian efforts at population control. At the same historical moment, the first oral contraceptive became easily available. In 1960 the birth control pill was approved by the Food and Drug Administration and quickly swept the nation. Over the next five years, federal funds were set aside for birth control and thirty-six states established family planning programs.<sup>43</sup> Birth control had won public support. By 1965 both the national and the LDS birth rates had dropped to record lows, rates lower even than in the depths of the depression.

Although various leaders denied the population explosion, there was no official response to the birth control pill from the church hierarchy until April 1969 when the First Presidency sent a formal letter to bishops and stake presidents. This statement, often called a "masterpiece of diplomacy," has been since used by people on all sides of the opinion spectrum to justify vastly differing family planning practices.<sup>44</sup> Never-

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40. Bush, "Birth Control among Mormons," 26.

41. Hugh B. Brown, *You and Your Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 135-36.

42. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 81.

43. *Ibid.*, 289.

44. This phrase is not original, but I have lost track of its source. If, by chance, you know its author, please contact me through *Dialogue*.



theless, phrases such as "it is contrary to the teachings of the Church artificially to curtail the birth of children," and "those who practice birth control will reap disappointment by and by" make the statement seem conclusive on the subject of birth control despite the controversy about what the ambiguous word "artificial" may or may not mean.<sup>45</sup> Although other phrases such as "the mother's health and strength should be conserved," and "married couples should seek inspiration and wisdom from the Lord" ostensibly mitigate the stronger statements, the explicit overall directive remains clear.

This letter precipitated a deluge of sermons on the same topic.<sup>46</sup> That same month, Elder Ezra Taft Benson gave explicit counsel, "The world teaches birth control. Tragically, many of our sisters subscribe to its pills and practices when they could easily provide earthly tabernacles for more of Father's children. There are couples who think they are getting along just fine with their limited families but who will someday suffer the pains of remorse when they meet the spirits that might have been part of their posterity."<sup>47</sup>

Spencer W. Kimball was one of the most vocal opponents of birth control at the time. In a 1971 General Conference address he said, "loud, blatant voices today shout 'fewer children' and offer the Pill, drugs, surgery, and even ugly abortion to accomplish that. Strange the proponents of depopulating the world seem never to have thought of continence!" Besides the continued theme of advocating abstinence as the only acceptable fertility regulation, President Kimball frequently associated the Pill with abortion. Speaking to the Relief Society in 1975, President Kimball said, "Much that comes to your consciousness is designed to lead you astray. It is to tempt you. . . . [T]here is the pill. There is abortion." Later in the same talk, President Kimball said, "Those things that endanger a happy marriage are infidelity, slothfulness, selfishness, abortion, unwarranted birth control. . . and sin in all of its many manifestations."<sup>48</sup> Along with his counsel "not to postpone parenthood" or "limit your family as the world does," President Kimball elsewhere taught that "sterilization and tying of tubes are sins."<sup>49</sup>

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45. The reference to "self-control" makes it clear that abstinence is the only approved method of contraception and even then, only when the mother's health and strength require it.

46. The letter, mostly a summary of past statements including material from Joseph F. Smith in 1917, did not represent anything new.

47. Spencer W. Kimball, *Conference Report* (April 1960).

48. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Blessings and Responsibilities of Womanhood," *Relief Society General Conference*, October 1 and 2, 1975; *Ensign* (March 1976): 70.

49. *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 325.

Pronouncements on the principle of procreation were not limited to the 70's, however. Church leaders have continued to stress the command "to multiply and replenish the earth." As recently as 1993 Elder Dallin Oaks quoted President Kimball in General Conference, saying, "It is an act of extreme selfishness for a married couple to refuse to have children when they are able to do so. How many children should a couple have? All they can care for! Exercising faith in God's promises to bless them when they are keeping his commandments, many LDS parents have large families."<sup>50</sup> In 1995 the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve issued the Proclamation on the Family which states that, "God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force."<sup>51</sup> Likewise, there are still occasional reminders from the pulpit that postponing children for educational or economic reasons is not condoned.

Although an examination of the basic principle of procreation and the history of pronouncements from church leaders on contraception provides theological and historical context for contraception among Latter-day Saints, the personal dimension needs attention in order for us to fully understand the issue. What effect have the principle and pronouncements had on the women of the church in terms of their daily practices? In what ways have the pronouncements influenced their deliberations and decisions? How have the women of the church understood the principle?

#### THE PRACTICES

In order to begin to answer some of these questions, I conducted an Internet survey during July of 2003 in which approximately 200 women participated, ranging in age from 22 to 92. Although all consider themselves active and faithful members of the LDS church, they have made very different reproductive choices. As with any survey, there are limitations to mine. The sample number is not statistically significant and, therefore, cannot be used to draw broad conclusions about LDS women as a group. Furthermore, I did not control for education, income, or location of residence, all of which can play a role in birth rates and childbearing practices. Nevertheless, in these women's responses distinctive patterns do emerge regarding family planning attitudes. As a member of the church, each woman has inherited both the principle of procreation and a cultural con-

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50. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Great Plan of Happiness," *Ensign* (November 1993): 75.

51. President Gordon B. Hinckley as part of his message at the General Relief Society Meeting held September 23, 1995, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

text informed by a long history of strong pronouncements that necessarily affect the way she acts and interacts within her community.

Although I was predisposed to organize these narratives into the two most obvious groups: those who use birth control and those who don't, the complex interweaving of motives and purposes in the stories I received defied such simplistic categories. Therefore, I found it more true to the women's responses to divide the surveys into groups that reflect their priorities and the source they appealed to in determining practice. Thus, distinctive and sometimes contradictory practices exist regarding contraception within each group.

#### FIRST GROUP: PRIORITIZING PRONOUNCEMENTS

The first group among the women is comprised of those who prioritize the pronouncements of the prophets. Responses that fall into this general category show deference toward church leaders and a desire to be obedient. Making their decisions accordingly, most of these women choose *not* to use birth control. Carolyn from Washington (age 51) writes, "I made the decision to leave how many children I had up to the Lord. I had seven. I have never regretted that decision. After listening to and reading what the prophets had to say, it seemed to me that the decision was not really up to me, based on my needs, but a decision to be made by consulting the Lord seriously and prayerfully, and that children should never be postponed or avoided for selfish (monetary) reasons." Such responses are not limited to older women who were bearing children during the years—70s and 80s—when church leaders were making their strongest statements against birth control. Rachel from Arizona (age 28) writes, "I am presently a few weeks from having my seventh baby. My oldest child is nine years old. We have chosen to leave our contraception, or lack thereof, in the hands of the Lord. We have read many times the quotes by many prophets and leaders of the church throughout the years. We feel they are very clear when they say that the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth is still in full force."

Some women emphasize perspective in their narratives. Louise from Arizona (age 56) narrates an experience that is similar to many responses I received. She writes, "38 years ago my husband and I were struggling college students. It was the days of The Pill and we were waiting until things were "better" to start our family. President Joseph Fielding Smith gave a talk in General Conference about not putting off having a family—I cried through most of it. The next day my pills disappeared. Less than a year later, the Lord blessed us with a beautiful daughter. Over the next twelve years, we added five more daughters and one son. We didn't always have the fanciest or finest, but one of the greatest things we ever gave them was one another." Joalene from Ari-

zona (age 57) likewise writes, "We were married by President Kimball, when he was an apostle. He counseled us not to put off having a family. We had nine children in the next fourteen years and still managed to get a professional degree. There were times when I thought I was going to go crazy. My perspective became even clearer when our youngest son got his patriarchal blessing and was told that our family was organized in the pre-existence."

Interestingly, even women who are now in their childbearing years quote statements made decades ago, but with important additions. Jennifer (34) from Washington writes, "We feel that having children is a sacred duty and to refuse is, as Joseph F. Smith said, a violation of our sealing covenants we have made. That being said, it is a matter of intense prayer and fasting and consultation." Despite the strong word "violation" she quotes from Joseph F. Smith, Jennifer's modification to the statement allows some room, at least, for "consultation." In contrast, Marta from Japan (age 33) writes, "My husband and I have six children. We have been married for ten years and have seen many ups and downs, but we have never used birth control. We strive to live by covenant, not convenience, and to follow the counsel of the prophets, who have said on many occasions not to put off your family for schooling and 'to live together naturally and let the children come.'"

Other women followed their leaders not out of deference but under duress, and sometimes with mixed feelings. Norma from Florida (age 50) writes, "We had two sons, starting immediately after we were sealed. At that time in our stake you didn't get a recommend unless you were using no birth control. I don't regret a moment. On the other hand, had we waited until my husband completed his education, we would have been able to better provide for our family." Norma doesn't regret her children, but she admits that she may have made different decisions had there not been adverse consequences for using birth control. Rochelle from Utah (age 40) writes, "From the time I can remember I have heard from the pulpit that it is our privilege and our duty to bear children and raise up families to the Lord. As a young woman there was part of me that resented one gender giving this counsel to the other gender while acknowledging that the mother would bear the greatest responsibility in nurturing these children. There seemed to be no forum for the gender being counseled to give feedback or to voice their concerns, to be heard. I still struggle with this. However, I am nothing if not obedient, and I love my children."

Beyond following the prophet, some women complied with their *local* leaders' counsel or even suggestions from other ward members. Stacey from California (age 52) writes, "When my husband and I were newlyweds in 1978, we decided to wait for a while to begin our family. However, a few months after our marriage. . .the elder's quorum presi-

dent chastised me for waiting to have children. He told me that I was being disobedient to Heavenly Father's commandments. I'm not usually timid about standing up for myself, but for some reason, perhaps out of respect for his "stewardship" over us, I decided to change our plans. I became pregnant soon after, and although I love my son with all my heart, I still regret listening to this man." Describing a similar situation, Melody (age 42) writes, "After our second child, a sister in the church told us that if we were to choose birth control, we would lose our temple recommends and good standing in the church. At the time it terrified me, and we went on to have seven more children. We have struggled financially all these years. I wonder if we would have been better off to have four or five children and be able to offer them more."

Interestingly, the follow-the-prophet method of family planning, in which pronouncements are highly valued, resulted in some women's choosing to use birth control. Judy from Utah (age 37) writes, "We were wisely advised by our stake president at the time of our marriage to be conscientious in our family planning. He told us that it is not healthy for a woman to have baby after baby, but rather to let the body heal and prepare properly and be healthy." Ann from North Carolina (age 62) writes, "President David O. McKay said that children are a blessing. So I decided that if a child would not be a blessing in my life, I should not have a child." Still other women want more specific guidance. Renee from Minnesota (age 34) writes, "Sometimes I wonder how many children the Lord wants us to have. I'm not sure how it all works, as far as. . .if I don't have more children, am I denying a spirit to be born into our family when it was pre-ordained to be mine? I wish the Prophet would give us clearer direction in that area. I know we are supposed to use our free agency and be prayerful about the issue, but it would be nice to have more concrete words from the Lord."

#### SECOND GROUP: PRIORITIZING PERSONAL REVELATION

The second group among the women's narratives includes those who identify their personal religious experience as playing the most important role in their reproductive decisions. These women value the principle of procreation itself. They show a deference to what is perceived to be God's commandment on the subject, and they often refer to "multiplying and replenishing" in their narratives. Women in this group may also point to LDS theology about the pre-mortal world as motivation. While some of them cite official counsel, they do not necessarily look to prophetic pronouncement as the only legitimate interpretation of the basic principle. These women feel enabled through their personal experience with the divine to interpret the principle for themselves.

Some of these women still decide *not* to use birth control. Desiree

from Florida (age 47) writes, "Deciding to have six children was Heavenly Father's idea, not ours. What gives me strength is knowing that Heavenly Father told us both at separate times that this was His desire and did so in a way that we could not deny or ignore it." Kila from California (age 46) writes, "I love my children, all eleven of them. They range from 28 to 23 months. I worry about the fact that if I didn't have my children, where would these spirits go? To a druggie, prostitute, or be in a child abuse situation? I always try to go to the temple and ask the Lord if there are any more up there waiting to join our family. Lately he has informed me that there is one more coming soon. I'm willing to follow his direction. I tried to talk the Lord into letting me adopt my last one, but that is not the answer for me at this time."

As we might expect, there are also women who feel endowed with power from God to interpret the principle themselves who *do* choose to use various forms of birth control. Angie from Arizona (age 47) writes, "I have always felt the decision to have or not to have children is a choice made by the couple with the help of the Holy Ghost. Birth control is a personal choice. Permanent solutions like tubal ligation and vasectomy are also personal choices. This, like other decisions, is a matter of faith and prayer." Although Angie emphasizes personal choice, individual decision is not removed from the Holy Ghost, faith, and prayer. Some women received specific spiritual impressions regarding their family planning. Tauna from Colorado writes, "When we started praying about starting a family, we both felt the same answer, 'start trying in January.' We used birth control when prompted; we stopped using it when prompted. No matter what method you use to prevent or promote pregnancy, as long as it is done with prayer and guidance from our Heavenly Father, you are doing it correctly."

### THIRD GROUP: PRIORITIZING REASON

Other women do not report significant spiritual experiences surrounding their childbearing decisions, but instead emphasize the role of reason in their personal interpretation of the principle. Heather from Florida (age 50) writes, "Some things you simply know are true, and I believe that there are many reasons for couples to practice birth control." Becky from Canada (age 62) writes, "Contraception should be used. I believe that God gave us a brain and expects us to use it." Kathy from California (age 45) writes, "We stopped at four because we thought it was important to use common sense when it comes to having children." Sometimes other factors play a role in choosing contraception. Marilyn from Utah (age 69) writes, "We did discuss birth control and used it, of course. I still don't know what Joseph Fielding Smith was talking about, but we got over that. We didn't want a baby every year. We couldn't take

care of them! It wasn't good for my health. It just didn't fit." Other women mention the need for birth control in order to experience healthy intimacy in marriage. Nancy from Minnesota (age 46) writes, "Contraceptives can be a part of spacing a family if a couple is going to have an enjoyable sex life." Many sisters refer to their emotional or mental health as a reason for using birth control. Toni from Arizona (age 40) writes, "We used birth control to space our children so that I wouldn't be an emotional wreck." Besides these themes, low-income, poor health, and marital strife were also cited as legitimate reasons for birth control among women in this group.

Despite the abundant anti-contraception rhetoric of the late 1970s and 80s, many of these women who were bearing children then chose to use birth control.<sup>52</sup> Many felt their own interpretation of the principle of procreation was as valid as pronouncements from the hierarchy. In some instances personal revelation from God or individual circumstances even overruled general pronouncements made by church leaders. How do we make sense of the discrepancy between the leaders' pronouncements and the practices of the people?

One possible answer is that LDS women have taken prophetic pronouncements given to the body of the church as general guidelines that must be applied by individuals in different ways appropriate to their various situations. This can also become necessary when women are faced with dilemmas caused by the policies themselves. For example, several women pointed out that while church leaders have discouraged birth control, they have also discouraged debt. Many of these women chose smaller families in order to follow the precept of self-sufficiency.

Another possibility is that women are committed to the pronatalist principle, which they perceive as eternal doctrine, but not necessarily to the anti-contraception pronouncements, which may be viewed as temporary policies. Two consistent statistics seem to support this theory. First, although there has been a movement toward greater conservatism in attitudes, polls over time show that LDS women as a group have consistently believed in and used birth control of various kinds. Second, despite the widespread use of birth control, LDS women tend to have higher fertility rates than do other women. This is true even when socioeconomic factors like income and education are considered.<sup>53</sup> The

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52. Although Tim Heaton and others have suggested that Mormon fertility and family planning practices are related to a particularist, pronatalist theology, this essay has shown that the clear and common anti-contraception rhetoric must be included in any analysis of past practices.

53. Tim Heaton, "How Does Religion Influence Fertility?" 248-58.