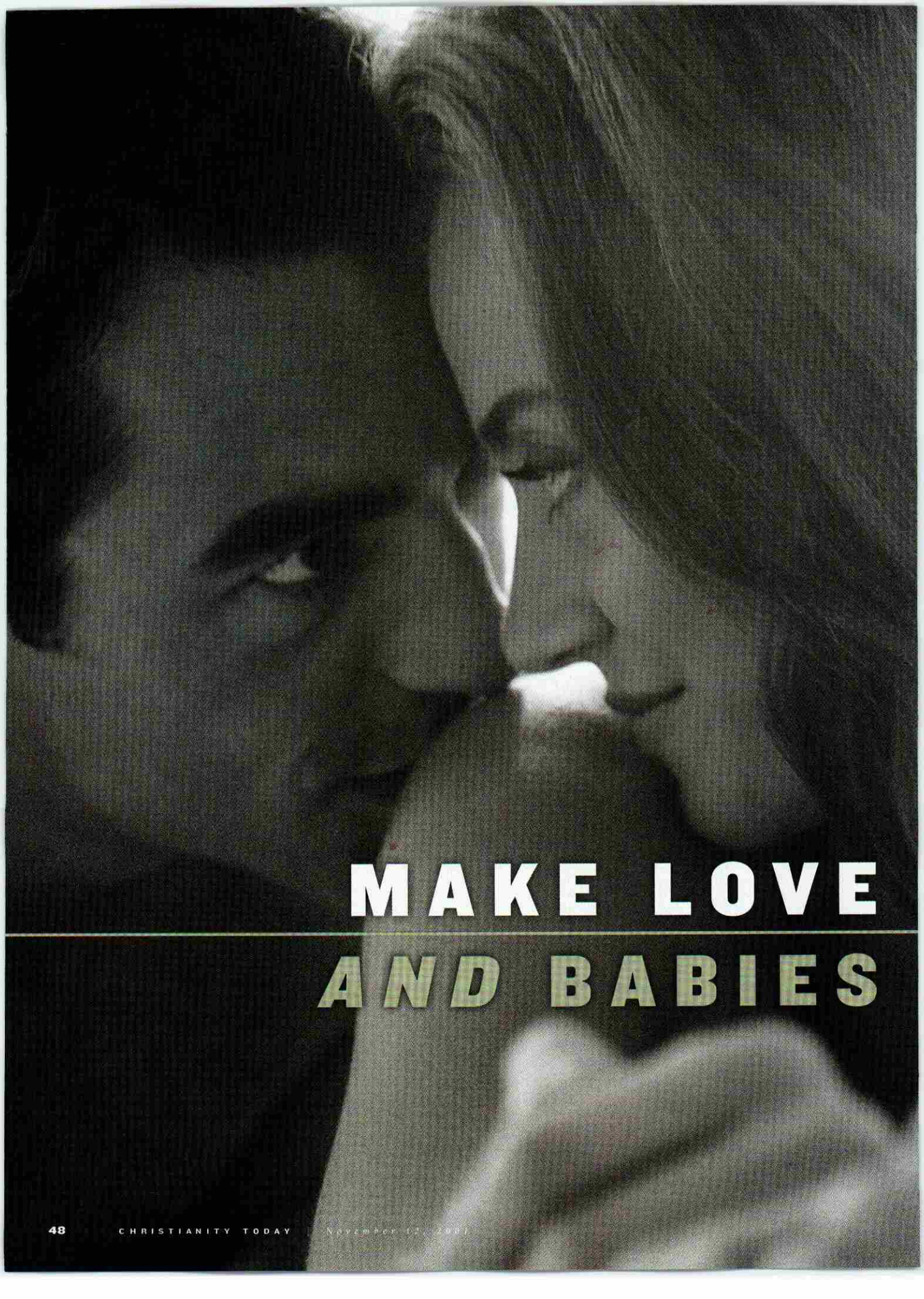

MAKE LOVE *AND* BABIES

Are children a risk or a blessing? Of course children are a blessing, most couples say; then again, many say they're not ready for this blessing just yet. In fact, most married Christians use thermometers, spermicidal jellies, contraceptive pills, and lovemaking techniques to delay this blessing.

Why is that? What happens when we treat childbearing as something to be delayed or avoided? This essay explains how one young couple answered these questions. An accompanying essay by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen (p. 58) reaches different conclusions. Both essays raise theological, ethical, and historical issues that all engaged and married Christians need to discuss. Finally, an article from Jenell Williams Paris (p. 62) debunks pervasive myths about marital sex.

"Dearly beloved," the minister began, "we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

The congregation was silent in rapt attention, except for the occasional cry of a disgruntled baby who had little interest in the sacred occasion.

"Marriage is an honorable estate," the minister continued, "and not to be entered into lightly, but reverently and soberly, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained."

"First, it was ordained for the procreation of children."

At this point, a guest later reported, the calm was interrupted by a snort of disapproval—"humpf!"—from one of our relatives, who crossed her arms in dismay.

That snort summed up a good deal of modern thought on childbearing. Partly thanks to the wide availability of artificial contraception (along with dual careerism in an increasing number of marriages), married couples these days are having fewer and fewer children. Many Christians see this as a blessing. Hormone and barrier contraceptives, they feel, allow newlyweds to spend time "getting to know each other" before the kids start coming. For this reason, before we were married a number of Christians advised us to wait a year or two before having children.

Neither of us had been brought up to oppose contraception. Growing up, Sam believed that the Catholic church forbade artificial contraception, but he assumed it was a superstition left over from the Middle Ages. Birth control was never mentioned in his Baptist church. In high school, his friends ridiculed the Catholic position by quoting the lyrics from the satirical Monty Python song, "Every Sperm Is Sacred."

As a teenager, Bethany occasionally discussed contraception with her best friend. Though her mom had taught her to be wary of the hormonal contraceptives because of their side effects and suppression of the body's natural fertility cycle, she argued in favor of barrier methods such as condoms. When she met Sam, such speculations ceased to be merely theoretical. She would be getting married soon, and she needed to think practically and deeply about birth control.

Unfortunately, we found little help on this subject at Protestant bookstores. Most of the popular Christian relationship guides seem to assume that couples will be using artificial contraception and that this does not affect their marriage. James Dobson's book with the promising title *Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide* is disappointingly silent on the

The contraceptive mentality says children are something to be avoided. We're not buying it.

by SAM AND BETHANY TORODE

MICHAEL GOLDMAN/FPG

subject of birth control.

During our engagement, it became increasingly clear that for love to flourish, we had to grow in knowledge and respect for each other's bodies—not just our minds and souls. We found a number of Catholic resources that helped us along the way. By taking a home study course in Natural Family Planning (NFP—the natural method of fertility regulation, or child spacing, endorsed by the Catholic church) we learned far more about our fertility, with its God-ordained cycles and rhythms, than we had ever been told by doctors or health educators. More than that, we were prompted to communicate with each other on a deeper level than before, and were immersed in what we found to be a profound, biblical perspective on the meaning of love and marriage.

When we exchanged vows, we did not promise to give each other goose bumps.

ONE FLESH

The pastor who presided at our wedding used the eloquent 17th-century *Book of Common Prayer* ceremony. This service gives three purposes of marriage: first, it was instituted for the procreation of children; second, it is a remedy against sin; and third, it provides for the mutual society, help, and comfort of the spouses.

Although all three purposes are drawn from Scripture, several of our friends objected to the order in which they were given. They argued that companionship was the most important reason for marriage, and that procreation was a distant second. In response, we said the point is not that one purpose of marriage is more important than another—each is important and none should dominate at the expense of the others. Later, we came to believe that there is good sense in listing procreation first: having (or adopting) children ought to bring spouses closer together and expands the community of marriage. The responsibilities, trials, and joys of parenthood are means of sanctification.

Sex is the *consummation* of marriage—it epitomizes the complete union of husband and wife. As Genesis 2:25 states, husband and wife become one flesh. Jesus reiterates this teaching when he condemns divorce: "They are no longer two, but one flesh." The apostle Paul writes that this one-flesh union is of mystical significance—it is a sign of the union between Christ and his church.

In her novel *Souls Raised from the Dead,* Doris Betts provides a beautiful picture of a one-flesh union. Describing two grandparents, she writes: "A plain and stocky couple, once blond and ruddy, now bleached by the same work and weather and habits, they might have been siblings . . . or resemblance might deepen over the years from steady absorption of each other's bodily fluids. . . . *Ye shall be one flesh.*"

It may seem strange to say that, within marriage, the free exchange of bodily fluids is a means of experiencing the grace of God, but we believe this to be true. As the Bible makes clear, the mystery of marriage is not about becoming one mind or one soul, but one *flesh,* encompassing the totality of man. When unobstructed, this one-flesh union leads to procreation and spousal unity. It's important to remember that married couples don't create children—God does, and they are a gift only he can bestow. We see our part as remaining open to children by being one flesh, and refusing to compromise that union.

INTENDED FOR PLEASURE?

In the United States today, you aren't likely to win popularity points by saying that sex is meant for procreation and spousal unity. Thus, in order to stay culturally relevant, many evangelicals stress that God designed sex to yield pleasure. In fact, according to the title of one evangelical sex guide, sex is "intended for pleasure." In subtly elevating pleasure to the place belonging to procreation and unity, we may be unconsciously buying into our culture's hedonistic pursuit of pleasure as an end in itself.

A few months after we were married, we looked through the best-selling Christian sex manual, Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage.* We found the LaHayes' advice on birth control (and much else) similar to Dr. Ruth's. For example, the LaHayes enthusiastically recommend birth control pills for newlyweds. "Because of its safety and simplicity," the LaHayes write, "we consider the pill the preferred method for a new bride in the early stages of marriage. Then, after she and her husband have learned the art of married love, she may decide on some other method."

Of course sex is pleasurable. But those Christians who endorse artificial methods of contraception, asserting that by eliminating the "risk" of pregnancy you can magnify God's intent of sizzling, marriage-enhancing sex, seem to have forgotten that while sex is accompanied by pleasure, that's not its purpose. Ironically, if pleasure becomes the focus of our lovemaking, true and lasting pleasure will elude us.

What exactly is "pleasure"? An intense stimulation of nerve endings? Or that and much more—the knowledge that you are giving yourselves in your entirety, fertility and all, to each other? Spousal love is intended to be completely self-giving. "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:22, 25). As a married couple, we must always be on guard against treating each other's bodies as objects, or using them for purposes other than those for which they were created.

In the traditional Christian wedding service, there is no mention of pleasure or feelings. When we exchanged vows, we did not promise to give each other goose bumps. Instead, we vowed to remain faithful always, even through hard times, poverty, and sickness. The lasting pleasure to

be found in marriage is the fruit of selfless love. Bearing and raising children brings pleasure; establishing a household together brings pleasure; serving each other brings pleasure. All these things bring sorrow, too. It's hard work, but, in the words of poet, teacher, and farmer Wendell Berry, "work is the health of love."

BODY LANGUAGE

The most thoughtful evangelical defense of artificial contraception we've heard is that, by harnessing procreation, the cautious use of contraception can elevate unity, nurturing spiritual companionship. We believe that one cannot elevate one purpose of marriage by suppressing another. By attempting to elevate the "spiritual" (unity) over the "physical" (procreation), contraception pits the spirit against the body. As a result, the body can too easily be reduced to an object. The Bible, however, speaks of a human being as a unity of matter and spirit, a "living soul"—not a holy soul trapped in an evil body, as the gnostics taught. We, in our entirety, are created in the image of God. Not only do our souls and minds bear the divine image; our bodies, too, reflect the glory of God.

The contraceptive mentality—treating fertility as an inconvenience, danger, or sickness—seems to go against what the Bible has to say about the goodness of creation and children.

Christian proponents of contraception assert that when it comes to birth control, it's our *intentions* that matter, not necessarily our actions. Contraceptives, they believe, are tools that can be used for good or ill. One author condemns using contraception to indulge in promiscuity, but calls it a great blessing when it gives couples time to grow in greater love and commitment at the beginning of marriage. Deliberately severing the biological link between sex and procreation is by itself a morally neutral act. But with contraception, as with all of life, actions and intentions cannot easily be separated. What we do with our bodies we do with our souls. Paul writes of this astonishing truth in 1 Corinthians 6: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! . . . Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."

Actions speak louder than words, and the bodies of Christians ought to sing praises to the Most High. In the language of the body, each sex act simultaneously symbolizes our marriage and renews the marriage covenant. Putting the male and female bodies together says something; it mysteriously speaks of the union of Christ and the church. Artificial contraception appears to alter the language of the body. Regardless of our intent, it seems to send a message: "I am not giving myself completely to my spouse" or "I will not accept my spouse in his entirety."

What we do to our bodies, and with our bodies, tells God what we think of his handiwork. He thought it "very good"—do we? We ought to respect the integrity of our bodies, and to alter as little as possible the way they're intended to function. This does not mean that all medical technology is bad—far from it. There are occasions when the body is not working right, and medical intervention is necessary to restore it to rightful order. While we were writing this article, Bethany came down with appendicitis. Her appendix was infected and had to be removed for her body to function properly. The female fertility cycle, unlike appendicitis, is the norm of a healthy body. Children are not an illness—why vaccinate against them?

We've heard it said that since artificial birth control is not explicitly forbidden in the Bible, it's fine for Christians to use it. But the contraceptive mentality—treating fertility as an inconvenience, danger, or sickness—seems to go against what the Bible has to say about the goodness of creation and children. The Bible teaches us to approach sexual intimacy and the possibility of conception with awe and reverence. The womb is the place where God forms new life in his image, not a frontier to be invaded and conquered.

KISSING THE PILL GOODBYE

Understandably, many people fear that by giving up contraception, they will lose control of their lives and bodies. While Christians believe that our bodies are not our own—they belong to God—we're also called to be good stewards and responsible parents. When Bethany was 16, she volunteered at a Christian-run crisis pregnancy center where married couples occasionally would seek advice on birth control. To her surprise, the center did not advise its married clients to use contraceptives—not even condoms. Instead, the center counseled them to become aware of their fertility and, when appropriate, use natural forms of child spacing.

To most Protestants, the phrase "natural child spacing" means the notoriously unreliable rhythm method. *The Act of Marriage,* for example, describes the rhythm method as the "least effective" method of birth control, and mentions no other natural method. But, apparently unknown to these authors, the rhythm method was superseded decades ago by

NFP, the natural and, we think, reliable way of child spacing. This method pinpoints the days per cycle that a woman can become pregnant by monitoring three different signs: her temperature upon waking, her body's production of cervical fluids, and the position of the cervix. These signs are recorded daily and tracked on a chart. The couple then decides whether to make love during the fertile days or to abstain until they have passed.

Unlike artificial contraception, NFP has no harmful side effects, only side benefits. Perhaps the greatest of these is that NFP fosters communication between spouses. NFP encourages a husband to learn the rhythms and cycles of his wife's body. Some evangelicals and even non-Christians have embraced NFP's benefits. One secular author, Toni Weschler, has been teaching and speaking on fertility awareness for years. "The beauty of charting is that a man can be involved as his partner—taking her temps, jotting down her fertility signs, determining when her fertile phase has begun and ended," Weschler writes in her book, *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*. "And rather than perceiving it as work, most people agree that the minute or two a day is so enlightening that it can be fun rather than a chore. . . . The potential for furthering intimacy is obvious."

What exactly is 'pleasure'? An intense stimulation of nerve endings? Or that and much more—the knowledge that you are giving yourselves in your entirety, fertility and all, to each other?

The knowledge required to practice NFP is easily acquired and very inexpensive. You may have to buy a book and a thermometer, but that's it. In-depth information on NFP can be found at Couple to Couple League's Web site *(www.ccli.org)*.

Some readers may ask, "What's the difference between natural and artificial birth control? Don't couples who use either means have the same goal in mind?" The fundamental difference between spacing children by NFP and by artificial methods of contraception is that periodic abstinence (prudent self-control) preserves the integrity, symbolism, and sacramental wholeness of each sex act. The one-flesh union is neither diminished nor compromised.

Elisabeth Elliot, one of the few well-known evangelicals to espouse NFP, explains: "The distinction that became so clear to me is the difference between the deliberate interruption of the transmission of life during the fertile period, and the responsible use of the natural rhythms which are imminent in the reproductive system. In other words, the difference between impeding a natural process, or making legitimate use of the natural disposition which God the Creator has built into the reproductive system."

However good, NFP can of course be misused. By always abstaining during the fertile times of the cycle, NFP can become a means of avoiding children for selfish reasons. But on the whole, NFP is starkly different from artificial contraception. While the latter makes children out to be failure-rate statistics, couples using NFP can remain fundamentally open to life. This results in a completely different view of "unplanned pregnancies."

HAVING BABIES, NOT REGRETS

Fertility has never been a given, and this is especially true today. Infertility, alongside artificial contraception use, has been steadily rising since the 1960s. The longer you put off having children, the better chance you have of becoming infertile.

We have never heard a Christian parent say, "You know, I really regret having that fifth child" or "I wish I hadn't had any children at all." We have only heard regrets from those who chose not to have more children, and sorrow from those who are physically unable to have any. We have read many stories from Christian couples who gave up artificial contraception—none regret it.

Initially, we were interested in NFP because we hoped to avoid having a baby right away. But as our wedding day approached, we found ourselves more and more looking forward to having a child, and we decided not to put off having a baby for our own convenience or because we were afraid our marriage was not yet ready for such a test. God's timing is different for every couple, and some have legitimate reasons for postponing children immediately after marriage, but we did not. We knew this was a responsibility to be approached with fear and trembling, but we believed that by inviting new life we would grow closer in ways we had yet to fathom.

Completely self-giving love between spouses is never sterile. It cannot be contained in just two bodies. It overflows, spilling over into love for others. For married couples, this love finds expression in its openness to participating with God in the creation of new life. It's time for us, as Christians, once again to embrace childbearing with joy, as a gift, and fertility as a mystery to be reverenced.

Sam and Bethany Torode work at home in rural Wisconsin. Their son, Gideon, was born in September. This article has been developed and expanded into a book, *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception* (Eerdmans, Spring 2002). Their Web site is *www.torodedesign.com*.