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Christian Reflection on Infertility and the ARTs

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Three things are never satisfied; four never say, 'Enough': Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, 'Enough'. (Prov. 30.15b-16, ESV)

The problem and pain of infertility

Infertility is a devastating experience for as many as one out of six couples. It is attested to in the Bible through the stories of barren women such as Sarah (Gen. 11:30), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Rachel (Gen. 29:31), the wife of Manoah (Judg. 13:2), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:7). Their experiences of suffering and disgrace are reflected in Rachel's exclamation to Jacob, 'Give me children, or else I die' (Gen. 30:1), and in the statement that Hannah 'wept bitterly' (1 Sam. 1:10). The text from Proverbs 30, which declares that the barren womb is never satisfied, is a reflection of the monthly reminder of unrealised hopes and of ongoing suffering.

What can be done?

In the past three decades, the problem of infertility has been met with a dazzling array of technological remedies known as 'assisted reproductive technologies' (ARTs), such as *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), zygote intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT), intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), and assisted hatching, to name a few.¹

Consider the following applications of such technologies:²

A woman unable to have a child 'of her own' had her ovum fertilised with her husband's sperm in the laboratory. The resulting embryo was then implanted in the womb of the woman's mother, who, having carried the pregnancy to term, gave birth to her own grandchild.

A husband and wife who thought they wanted a child 'of their own' contracted for the conception of a child, who would be conceived from sperm and ovum that came from anonymous donors and who would then be gestated in the womb of a hired surrogate. Shortly before the child was born, the husband and wife who had wanted this child divorced. A judge felt compelled to rule that the baby girl actually had no legal parents at all.

A young woman about to undergo chemotherapy for leukaemia, but hoping nevertheless some day to have a child 'of her own', had her ova harvested and fertilised with donor sperm before treatment; the resulting embryos were frozen. After she died of leukaemia at age 28, her parents sought a surrogate who would agree to gestate the embryos. In this search they used the Internet and an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show, intending that their son and daughter-in-law would raise the child if the pregnancy could be successfully carried to term.

A 63-year-old woman, wanting a child 'of her own' had implanted into her hormonally primed uterus an embryo made in the laboratory from her husband's sperm and an ovum from a younger donor. She then completed the pregnancy and gave birth to a child.³

Such stories may be expanded indefinitely. Gametes (egg and sperm) are bought and sold, and wombs are hired, allowing for children to have various combinations of parents: a genetic father and/or mother, a social father and/or mother, and a gestational mother.

What, if anything, should be done?

For many infertile couples who previously would have had little hope of having a child of their own, such techniques have made it possible to do so. But at what cost? Many techniques raise troubling legal questions concerning parental custody and contracts for children. And moral questions abound concerning the treatment of human embryos, and the nature of marriage, procreation and parenting.

It is not surprising that the debate surrounding ARTs tends to focus on whether individual techniques are morally (and legally) acceptable. This aspect of moral reasoning, called deliberation, concerns decisions about the means to achieve a given end. With the wide array of remedies to overcome infertility and achieve procreation, it is a necessary part of thinking morally about ARTs that we subject them to careful deliberation.

Yet while deliberation is necessary, it is not sufficient for our thinking about infertility and ARTs. It is not sufficient because while the debate may shed light on whether a particular technique (or ART as such) is morally acceptable, it does not speak to whether a couple should choose to pursue that means in order to conceive a child. When the focus remains on *which* means of achieving procreation is morally acceptable, it may be implied that some such means should be pursued. Further, procreation (or perhaps individual liberty) can easily be considered an almost unqualified good, blurring the edges of moral deliberation and leading to a ready acceptance and defence of questionable procedures.

The significance of moral reflection

Deliberation is an important aspect of moral reasoning, and yet it depends upon 'a reflective grasp of some truth'.⁴ Thus, in order to sustain, clarify or challenge the current deliberation about ARTs, and to move the debate forward, it is necessary to provide additional moral reflection, or to articulate it more clearly.

There is a parallel in pastoral counselling. If the minister is to help an infertile couple seeking counsel, it will not do first to direct their attention to whatever morally acceptable means are available to overcome infertility. This may be a necessary part of the counsel, but it is not sufficient, and it is not the place to begin. Rather, the minister will do well to reflect with the couple about marriage, their desire to be parents, and their understanding of childlessness (since even the most aggressive

treatment fails to provide a child for many couples), and so on. Decisions about whether or not to pursue any treatment, and about which treatments are morally acceptable, depend upon this type of prior reflection.

In the debate about ARTs, it is necessary to make explicit some such reflection to guide and serve as a foundation for deliberation. Otherwise the moral framework can easily be reduced to an account of procreative liberty and the right to bear children. A few comments about some central themes may be helpful.

Marriage and its purposes. There is a growing tendency to understand marriage to be primarily about self-fulfilment, and to fit spousal relationships and even procreation into such a framework.⁵ It is clearly inadequate. In Genesis 1 and 2, we see something of God's intention for the relationship of male and female in marriage. Procreation is a blessing and a central purpose of marriage, which highlights the void created by infertility. Yet marriage is also a partnership in a common calling that is to be marked by covenant faithfulness in a permanent and exclusive one flesh union (cf. Matt. 19:4-6; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31). Attention to these aspects may at least put childlessness into proper perspective.

Parenthood. There is also a tendency to be consumed with having a child who is biologically related, at least to one parent. This desire ought not to be minimised, and certain techniques that allow a married couple to have a child who is biologically related to both of them may be welcomed. Yet Christians especially have good reason to understand parenthood in more than biological terms.⁶

We should be concerned about the lengths to which some will go to have a child 'of one's own', including the use of 'donor' gametes and surrogacy, in which couples enter parenthood apart from their one flesh union. An understanding of parenting begins with the biological. Yet it is expanded through adoption, and further through parental roles that can be assumed by those without children, including teaching and child care, as well as the simple yet profound contribution of additional adult influence upon all children, especially those whose own parents fail to provide the care that children need.

Childlessness. Literature on infertility has focused on underscoring the pain of infertility, on overcoming

infertility, and on counselling childless couples. All of these are important contributions, but perhaps there is a need for further understanding of childlessness itself. For instance, we may understand that a childless marriage is missing something *significant*, for marriage is intended to be procreative, yet it is not for that reason missing something *essential* to marriage. Such a marriage may be *unfulfilled* in some way (underscoring the void and pain left by childlessness), but it is not for that reason *incomplete*. Nevertheless, for some, the option of appropriate medical treatment for infertility will be received as a blessing, and it can be said that such treatments may be consistent with the gospel, and especially with Jesus' ministry of physical healing. For others, childlessness could open the way for possibilities that the couple would not have initially sought or embraced, which are derived from an understanding of the gospel.

Implications of the gospel. ⁷It must be said, first, that ultimate hope is not founded upon having children, but upon inclusion in God's kingdom. The barren woman in Isaiah 54 and the eunuch in Isaiah 56 can rejoice because they are named among God's people and may therefore be fruitful—even bearing many 'children'.

Second, a childless couple, like the single person, may come to see their situation as an opportunity for 'undivided devotion to the Lord' (1 Cor. 7:35; cf. Matt 19:12). Since 'the appointed time has grown very short' and 'the present form of this world is passing away' (1 Cor. 7:29, 31), childlessness may allow a detachment from the usual patterns of life and a more focused investment for service in the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul exemplifies these points, for while he did not have physical children, he nevertheless begat many children in Christ, becoming their father through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15).

Third, there may be a unique – even if unwelcome at first – opportunity to experience the grace of God and of the community of believers that is not experienced as deeply by those who are fully invested in their own children (cf. Mark 10:29-30; Matt. 12:46-50). Perhaps the childless couple will find a Family – if the church is faithful to respond – that will share their burden, and discover a fellowship of 'brothers', 'sisters', 'mothers', 'fathers', and 'children' that more than compensates for – though it does not replace – biological relatedness. These are some possible themes, and there are others, that may be developed in biblical reflection

on marriage and infertility in order to provide a more complete context for deliberation about ARTs. Such reflection on marriage and procreation and the significance of the gospel provides a moral framework that will give greater intelligibility to the question of means, and shape the deliberation in the debate (whether or not our final conclusions change).

Moral deliberation on ARTs revisited

A few brief guidelines concerning the use of ARTs may be suggested in closing. Some of these arise directly out of the above reflection, while others require additional reflection along slightly different lines (such as reflection on an understanding of human life and the status of the embryo). Before seeking a technological remedy for infertility, couples will do well to take some time to pray, reflect, and seek counsel. If they wish to proceed, they will also do well to decide in advance just what they will and will not do.

Resistance of the technological imperative. Faced with the painful reality of infertility, it is easy to treat ARTs as almost unqualified goods. Further, the very availability and offer of ARTs can exert coercion, causing infertile couples to feel pressured to make use of them in the pursuit of the good of children. It needs to be said that there is no necessity for a married couple to make use of even those ARTs that are morally acceptable, for marriage has an integrity of its own and can be complete even without the existence of children. The gospel can relieve couples of any such burden.

Children from one flesh. Couples who do feel led to pursue infertility treatments may demonstrate their partnership in service to God and their sharing of strengths and weaknesses by a commitment to become parents only through their one flesh union. This suggests resisting the use of donor gametes or a surrogate. To anticipate a common objection, it may be noted that these procedures are different from adoption, in which the couple share an equal relationship to the child, who is 'redeemed' from a difficult and existing situation.

Treatment of human embryos. While this point requires additional reflection on the status of the embryo and what it means to be human, it is important to say something about it here, since it is central to the debate about ARTs. We ought to resist procedures that involve great risk to or destruction of human embryos, and instead affirm and protect the dignity of human life at its earliest stages. The desire to experience the beauty of pregnancy and childbirth,

and to welcome new life as an extension of the love of marriage, ought not to be pursued in the context of the destruction of human life.

Conclusion

The Bible does not minimise the sorrow experienced by those who are unable to have children, but rather resonates with it. Proverbs 30 declares that the barren womb is never satisfied, and yet the stories of barren women attest to the fact that the one who is barren is the object of God's love. The question is whether the church reflects the Bible's sensitivity and concern for the childless. The experience of many infertile couples suggests otherwise: instead of comfort and encouragement, many have experienced insensitivity or even accusations of selfishness, from those unaware that childlessness is not chosen by many. As a remedy, Scripture challenges us to realise that no one in the church is without family, for the church is Family, and it is to be a place of fellowship, comfort, and encouragement. Will the church take up the challenge?

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1. For a detailed description of various causes of infertility and the possible technological remedies, see Sandra L. Glahn and William R. Cutrer, *The Infertility Companion: Hope and Help for Couples Facing Infertility* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).
 2. Adapted by Gilbert Meilaender from actual cases in his essay entitled, 'A Child of One's Own: At What Price?' In John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham and W. David Hager, eds, *The Reproduction Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of Sexuality, Reproductive Technologies, and the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 36-45.
 3. In 2005, Adriana Iliescu made headlines as the oldest woman to give birth, at age 66, thanks to artificial insemination using both donor sperm and egg. 'Romanian Woman Gives Birth at 66', BBC online, Sunday, 16 January, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4179057.stm>
 4. Oliver O'Donovan, 'Christian Moral Reasoning.' In David J. Atkinson and David H. Field, eds, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 122.
 5. For some development and a critique of this tendency, see Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester, England: IVP, 2003).
 6. Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 145.
 7. Among recent Christian ethicists, Hauerwas, as well as Meilaender to some degree, both mentioned already, have attempted to show the significance of the gospel for moral reflection on infertility and ARTs. Karl Barth is perhaps most explicit in his *Church Dogmatics*, III/4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 265-268.

For further reading

Brendan McCarthy, *Fertility and Faith: The Ethics of Human Fertilization* (IVP, 1997).
Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford University Press, 1998).
Brent Waters, *Reproductive Technology* (Pilgrim Press, 2001).
John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham, and W. David Hager, eds, *The Reproduction Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of Sexuality, Reproductive Technologies, and the Family* (Eerdmans: 2000).

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