

# Evangelicals and embryo adoption

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Infertile couples desperate to conceive children are increasingly turning to fertility specialists for help. But widespread use of assisted reproductive technology has led to an unintended consequence: the creation of a large population of frozen human embryos. That reality has ignited a vigorous moral debate among scientists, politicians, theologians and parents about what should be done with the surplus store of nascent human life.

The most common assisted reproductive technique is in vitro fertilization with embryo transfer, or IVF-ET, in which a woman is induced to produce multiple eggs. Four to six of the most viable eggs are retrieved and then fertilized in the laboratory, with the resulting embryos transferred to the woman's uterus. To decrease the probability of complications associated with higher order multiple pregnancies only two to three embryos are usually transferred to the uterus in each in vitro attempt.

At the best clinics, the success rate for each in vitro attempt is between 25 percent and 50 percent. Assisted reproductive technology doctors typically respond to the costs and mortality rates by producing more embryos than are feasible to implant at a single time. This overproduction of embryos requires the surplus to be stored for later possible use. Currently, in the United States alone, nearly 500,000 human embryos are being cryopreserved at some 430 fertility clinics.

With this routine overproduction of embryos in IVF-ET, questions arise that science alone cannot answer. Technology, it seems, has outpaced our understanding of the fundamental legal, political, theological and moral issues in the creation and management of human embryos.

Christians and defenders of human dignity who acknowledge embryos to be preborn persons have a dual responsibility to protect the innocent and also to do no harm. One response to these responsibilities has been the practice of embryo adoption. The stakes are high because, as Ron Stoddart, founder of Nightlight Christian Adoptions, stresses, "An embryo is not a potential human life – it is human life with potential."

Four U.S. adoption programs facilitate embryo adoption: Nightlight Christian Adoptions, the Center for Human Reproduction, Bethany Christian Services and the National Embryo Donation Center. The goal of each is to transfer frozen donor embryos to infertile recipients who intend to use them to procreate.

At first glance, embryo adoption appears to be a life-affirming response to the vast number of frozen embryos being stored at fertility clinics. Yet it is not without problems. In embryo adoption, as in IVF-ET, it often takes repeated attempts before a successful pregnancy is achieved with frozen donor embryos.

These realities point to a moral conundrum for Christians who support both IVF-ET and embryo adoption. Embryo adoption is, at best, a response to the embryo surplus created by IVF-ET, which itself raises fundamental moral questions that Protestant ethicists have not yet probed in sufficient depth.

Routine overproduction of embryos and high mortality rates suggest that IVF-ET degrades and instrumentalizes the very life it seeks to create. The fundamental purpose of every embryo is to realize its own life: to fulfill its divine purpose of achieving life as a rational, social, creative, spiritual and morally free and responsible person. In assisted reproduction and cryopreservation – unlike in normal conception and gestation – the natural progression of an embryo's life from potential to actual can be temporarily interrupted, stalled for a time, or worse, permanently thwarted from achieving its purpose.

Among Protestants in general, there is an absence of critical moral discernment on bioethical issues outside the scope of abortion debate. This stems, in part, from Protestant skepticism toward natural law (God's will as expressed in creation, imprinted on the conscience, and known through reason). The challenge for pro-life evangelicals is to develop systematic moral reasoning that can be applied to a range of issues including embryo adoption, human embryonic stem cell research, assisted reproductive technology, "therapeutic cloning," genetic engineering and birth control.

Evangelicals tend to be pragmatic, wedding political activism with biblical appeals, but this has resulted in moral reflection operating on a mostly private and intuitive plane. The tragic pitfall with this style of ethical decision-making is that adverse spiritual and moral consequences often go undetected.

Aside from the issue of what to do with surplus embryos, the more fundamental question remains: How will pro-life Christian supporters of IVF-ET and embryo adoption resolve the moral Catch-22 brought to light by the vast stores of nascent human life? Protestants need to think seriously about this moral paradox and to retrieve older, more sophisticated traditions in ethics – such as natural law – to provide assistance.

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