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The Christian and Assisted Procreation

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Raising children today is hard work, but the blessings are great. In fact, the greatest blessings are the precious gifts of life themselves, the children, which God places in our care. God is explicit in Psalm 127 that children are gifts, rewards, like arrows in the hand of a warrior. In fact, when the word blessing is used in this passage it refers to the man who has many children; a quiver full. Many passages in scripture affirm the blessing of fertility and children. In contrast, bareness is generally considered in a negative sense and in some cases, a curse. It is remarkable that today with all of our advances in medicine and emphasis on healthcare, that infertility and bareness still occur. By some estimates, infertility can affect one out of every six married couples.

What should be the response of the married Christian couple to infertility? Should it be accepted as God's will that the couple remains childless or should it be considered an affliction that can be corrected through medical intervention? I believe that there are several valid biblically-supported options for couples confronted with infertility. For instance, in many cases, infertility is caused by a medical condition that can be corrected; medical intervention to restore biological function can be supported biblically. However, not all Christian couples may opt for this intervention; adoption and waiting for a natural solution can also be biblically supported God-honoring options.

What are the options for those who seek medical help? Some "medical" interventions devalue human life and are therefore not valid options. How can one decide whether an infertility treatment is God-honoring? Obviously, for the married couple who seeks treatment, understanding the biological and medical aspects of the treatment would be of assistance. In addition, general education of the Christian community about assisted procreation is warranted in light of the fact that these procedures have the potential to devalue life. As those who have been called to be salt in our culture we should be concerned about the preservation of moral principles and absolutes and therefore I believe we have a responsibility to know how technology is being used.

Assisted procreation technologies should be on the short list of technologies we should keep tabs on since they can be used to violate the sanctity of life and can diminish God's ideal for procreation and the family. In this paper, I would like to briefly define and characterize the general forms of assisted procreation technologies and then examine their use in light of biblical principles.

There are many different kinds and variations of infertility treatments. All infertility treatments are designed to restore one biological event: conception. Conception is defined as the merging of two sets of genetic blueprints (DNA in the form of chromosomes), one set from each parent, in a human egg cell. Typically, this involves the merging or fusion together of the egg (ovum) cell from the mother and the sperm cell from the father. Biologically, this is the first time during the procreation event that all of the information to make life is assembled in one place. Therefore we can say from a scientific viewpoint alone that conception is a special unique event that begins the life of a new unique individual. It is interesting to note, especially with all the debate that surrounds question of when life begins, that all of these techniques actually confirm the fact that conception is the beginning of the life of a human individual; and this is consistent both with modern biological science and the biblical record.

The names and abbreviations used to describe the assisted procreation procedures can be quite confusing. Regardless, the majority of infertility treatments fit into several general categories based on the way that they work biologically (Table 1).

Table 1: General categories of assisted procreation techniques:

- Ovary stimulation
- Artificial Insemination
- In Vitro Fertilization
- Surrogacy and third party arrangements
- Cloning

Ovary Stimulation

Ovary stimulation is the most common treatment for infertility. Stimulation of the ovaries, which is the female organ where eggs are stored, causes release of an egg or eggs. This process is called ovulation and is a natural process occurring on average every 30 days. Drugs that promote or regulate ovulation are called fertility drugs. There are different kinds of fertility drugs. For instance, some regulate the timing of the release of eggs and some are designed to cause release of a single egg or multiple eggs; “superovulation”. An individual drug may have been designed to cause release of one egg but depending on the person and their particular body chemistry, a certain percentage of the time it may cause superovulation. Compared to the other methods, ovary stimulation, could be considered the least invasive and most natural. It is used primarily to correct a defect whereby ovulation is diminished or ovulation results in release of defective eggs.

Since fertility drugs can be used to promote the natural event of conception it does not appear that use of these drugs would violate scriptural principles if the couple uses them to restore biological function. However I question the use of fertility drugs by a fertile couple and believe they should not be used to promote multiple births. There is no biblical support for promoting superovulation. Although we can attempt to correct a medical condition there is no biblical support for medical intervention that leads to a “super” functioning body. In every instance where Jesus healed an individual, the healing was miraculous but the biblical evidence indicates that the restoration was always back to proper typical function. This does not mean that God could not bless a woman with a pregnancy leading to multiple births, He does and He has accomplished His purposes through multiple birth (read the story of Jacob and Esau, Genesis 25). However, this is God's sovereign realm, we should not approach fertility treatments with the intention of causing a multi-child pregnancy. In addition, any drug should be used with caution and in consultation with a physician.

Artificial Insemination

Artificial insemination is a technique that aids conception by using artificial rather than natural means to place the sperm in the female reproductive tract. The technique is rather simple, can be used to overcome male infertility, does not involve drugs and does not violate life. However, there are several ethical issues that must be considered. One is that this technique like some of the others separates intimacy in marriage from the procreation event. There is a God-designed relationship between love and procreation (Genesis 1:27,28). We should be careful how we proceed when these two events are artificially separated. I think we have some freedom to separate them but the decision should not be taken lightly nor should the medical intervention interfere with intimacy in marriage. Also, God's ideal for marriage is that it occur between one man and one woman. Artificial insemination can be done with a third party donor. This activity would violate the biblical ideal of monogamy and opens the door to a variety of legal and social issues. In addition there are concerns involving how the sperm is harvested. Techniques involving collection by the husband alone may involve immorality.

In Vitro Fertilization

In vitro, literally means, in glass. This technique involves recreating conception in a solution in a glass dish outside the body. The embryo that is formed in the dish is then transferred back into the women's reproductive tract. This technique is used in combination with fertility drugs. In this procedure, fertility drugs are used to stimulate multiple egg release. Since conception is only successful a small percentage of the time naturally, doctors harvest multiple eggs at one time and typically fertilize as many as possible. On average, 4 embryos are put back into the womb. This many embryos are transferred with the hope that at least one embryo may survive the procedure. Unfertilized eggs and defective embryos are discarded. Excess embryos may be discarded or frozen for later use. This raises several ethical dilemmas for the Christian couple. Embryos are living human individuals, if they are discarded, this would be killing of an innocent human life. In sanitized medical terms this is referred to as "selective reduction." Selective reduction can occur twice during the IVF

procedure, once at the embryo stage and through selective surgical abortion later in the pregnancy. However, in-vitro fertilization can be done without selective reduction if the couple can find a doctor who is willing to do it this way. A note of caution concerning the freezing of embryos: Freezing an embryo rather than killing it is a preferred option, however embryos cannot be maintained frozen indefinitely. If the embryo is not implanted it will die within a few years. Thus freezing can be a procedure that essentially signs the death certificate for the embryo if he is not transferred. Also, several legal battles have occurred in the courts over the “property rights” that parents have over frozen embryos. Because of these problems I believe that freezing of embryos should be avoided if at all possible. The other ethical dilemma with this technique is similar to the one encountered with artificial insemination; the procreation act is separated from physical intimacy. However, if carefully done, and if no unborn children are intentionally killed or delegated to death by freezing, then I believe it is a valid option.

Surrogacy and third party arrangements

Although each of the technologies considered so far can be done in a God-honoring way this is not so easily said for surrogacy. This technique intentionally involves a third party to provide a womb, egg, or human embryo for a couple or individual. This technique can violate the intention of marriage because it shares the outcome of marriage intimacy with a third party in a pre-meditated manner. In addition, these kinds of arrangements can raise a variety of other ethical and legal issues. For instance, it can involve removing a child from the birth mother breaking the bond that has occurred between mother and child during pregnancy. It often involves a business transaction and contract, which tends to minimize important family relationships and reduces individuals to commodities or property. On some college campuses single women have been solicited to rent out their wombs or sell their eggs for thousands of dollars. Legal battles have already occurred over the custody of children that have been born to a surrogate mother. Although one can think of a family situation whereby one family member could carry children for another family member, I find little biblical support for

surrogacy and third party arrangements.

Cloning

You may be surprised to find cloning on the list of assisted procreation techniques. Cloning, technically, is an assisted procreation technique because it involves the procreation of a new individual using genetic material. The way cloning is currently being done involves the restoration of conception-like conditions in an egg cell. What makes it different from the other techniques is that it involves only genetic information from one parent. It is not a faithful reproduction of biblical procreation because it is a violation of the way procreation was intended to be done. It is not a faithful reproduction of biological reproduction for the same reason, because it only involves one parent and the genetic material from that parent. This is not the way we observe sexual reproduction occurring in nature except among creatures that reproduce asexually. Not only is human cloning not permissible it is not needed. There are other assisted procreation techniques that recreate more faithfully the events of procreation. I believe it is not permissible for human use for any reason. Cloning can easily be eliminated as an option for assisted procreation.

A List of Biblical Principles

There are several biblical principles that together make a helpful resource for decision-making about the use of assisted procreation:

- The sanctity of marriage. Marriage was meant to occur before procreation. A couple should not proceed with an assisted procreation technique outside the confines of marriage and any technique that violates monogamy or the general principles of monogamy should be ruled out. (Genesis 1)
- The sanctity of life. Life is inviolable. Assisted procreation techniques must not violate the sanctity of life. Life is sacred from conception until death. We cannot kill or deviously manipulate innocent life. (Exodus 13, 2 Kings 24:4, Jeremiah 1:5, Job 1:21, Matthew 25:40)

- The sanctity of the family. God's ideal for the family is participation of both a mother and father in the procreation and raising of children. This rules out cloning and most third party, substitute or donor arrangements. (Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 6:2, Psalm 128:1-3)
- Medical Intervention is permissible to restore proper typical function as designed by the Creator. (Mark 2:17, Matthew 9:35)
- Procreation is part of God's plan (Genesis chapters 1 and 2).
- Children are a blessing and a heritage (Psalm 127).
- Patience. God's plan may require us to wait. We must be open to the fact that childlessness may be part of his plan for a season or a lifetime (Judges 13, Genesis 25:20-26, Matthew 19:10-12, I Cor 7:7). We must be sensitive to those who cannot have children. (Romans 14:4)
- God is sovereign. His sovereignty must be considered before our desires. (I Samuel 1-10, Luke 1:46-55). Even though we can assist conception it is God who opens the womb.
- God weighs actions and listens to prayer (1 Samuel 2). Therefore we must be obedient, act biblically and pray always.
- Stewardship. It is true that God provides for us, but He also wants us to be responsible stewards of what He have been given. Many of the assisted procreation techniques are quite expensive easily running into the thousands of dollars. (Luke 14:28, Proverbs 3:9, I Timothy 5:8)

Infertility, part of God's plan

There are several women mentioned in the Bible who were afflicted with infertility. In fact, each woman was a major character in several of the main story lines in the bible. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hanna and Elizabeth all eventually gave birth to children after direct intervention of the Lord. It is fascinating to note that in each case God used each woman's infertility to Glorify himself and direct his plan. For many of these women the Biblical record indicates that the infertility lasted for many years. Both Sarah and Elizabeth

did not get pregnant until late in life and long after their natural reproductive years (Genesis 18, Luke 1). Isaac and Rebekah showed patience by praying for 20 years before the Lord opened her womb (Genesis 25). Several biblical principles seem to jump out of all these situations: patience; the role of prayer; and God's sovereignty. All of these principles are clearly evident in the story of Hannah.

Hannah, a story of prayer, faith, courage and God's sovereignty

Although we don't know the physical aspect of Hannah's infertility it is written that God closed her womb (I Samuel 1). Hannah was married to Elkanah who also had a second wife by the name of Peninnah. Despite being ridiculed by Peninnah for years, and enduring insensitivity from her husband, she remained faithful to her marriage and God. Hannah considered her infertility an affliction and did not sit idle, she took action. She traveled to the Temple frequently, and fervently petitioned the Lord about her infertility for many years. On one occasion she was so fervent in her prayers that the priest, Eli, thought she was drunk. After her prayer it is said that the Lord remembered her and she conceived and gave birth to Samuel. She then prayed an awesome prayer of thanksgiving recorded in Samuel chapter two. Her prayer is not only one of thanksgiving but one that extols God's sovereignty in particular His ability to weigh actions and direct events. She remained faithful to God and her family and attended yearly to Samuel who was dedicated to the Lord's service and lived in the Temple. The Lord then blessed her with 3 sons and 2 daughters! What a story! What an encouragement for those who experience infertility!

A biblical model for addressing infertility

I would like to propose a general biblical model that can be used to address the issue of infertility. The first principle to be considered is patience and recognition of God's sovereignty. I would suggest that infertile couples consider waiting several years before seeking a medical intervention. Since infertility is defined as the inability to conceive after one year of trying to become pregnant, waiting several years should not be considered

excessive even though it may seem like a long time. God is sovereign, as Hannah pointed out He is aware and active He “weighs actions” and He can open a womb at anytime with or without medical intervention. Prayer should be a part of the process from the beginning. Hannah prayed faithfully and specifically prayed for God to reverse her infertility. The scriptures document that Isaac prayed for his wife's infertility soon after his marriage to her and she gave birth to the twins' 20 years later. The implication is that Isaac prayed for 20 years! Living a prayerful, faithful life in recognition of God's sovereignty should also help take the focus off of self and make one focus on God and His plan. His plan could include medical intervention if the intervention is one that honors the created order, honors the sanctity of marriage, and honors the sanctity of life. Finally, we should be content with however God wants to bless us. We should also be encouraged. As the Angel proclaimed to Mary concerning Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy in her old age, “nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:36,37)