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Having Babies: Personhood or Product?

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Abstract

One out of every six married couples experiences infertility at some point in their relationship. Most couples expect and desire to conceive children, and thus fulfill their “procreative duty.” However, this desire is interrupted by the pain of childlessness. Modern technology has responded through procedures such as artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization (IVF). If these technologies are successful, the result is procreation, and alleviation of human suffering. While this may appear wonderful on a surface level, it does raise questions of whether we have correctly defined procreation. Our culture and consumerist attitude has altered the God-intended views of procreation and the way in which we approach child bearing. This paper will discuss procreative purposes in the light of Genesis, the relevance of the biblical commands today, how reproduction differs from procreation, and how reproductive technologies have affected societal views towards child bearing and the resulting shift towards a product oriented society.

Keywords

Ethics, children, personhood

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Having Babies: Personhood or Product?

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One out of every six married couples experiences infertility at some point in their relationship. Most couples expect and desire to conceive children, and thus fulfill their “procreative duty.” However, this desire is interrupted by the pain of childlessness. Modern technology has responded through procedures such as artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization (IVF). If these technologies are successful, the result is procreation, and alleviation of human suffering. While this may appear wonderful on a surface level, it does raise questions of whether we have correctly defined procreation. Our culture and consumerist attitude has altered the God-intended views of procreation and the way in which we approach child bearing. This paper will discuss procreative purposes in the light of Genesis, the relevance of the biblical commands today, how reproduction differs from procreation, and how reproductive technologies have affected societal views towards child bearing and the resulting shift towards a product oriented society.

Procreation is defined as the sexual activity of conceiving and bearing offspring. Genesis 1:28 says, “Be fruitful and multiply.” As the first commandment given to humankind, this is a call to procreate. Traditionally, it has been considered a moral imperative or religious duty. Insisting on the sentiment that sexual passion is designed for the express purpose of “being fruitful” fosters a belief that the inability to produce children somehow breaks the command. However, such an understanding can easily result in significant distress among infertile couples (Magnuson, 2000). The stress of infertility turns couples towards assisted reproductive technologies (ART).

Many couples, both Christian and non-Christian, see child bearing as an essential life process. Studies suggest that there may be some inherent biological, psychological, or social need to procreate (Freundlich, 2001). Infertility is often experienced as a burden and a major stress in life, especially for women. Because there may be a powerful biological drive for a genetically related child, many couples see ART as a valid option to conceive children and relieve personal suffering. It is said that these technologies, “afford the best approximation to the natural processes of conception, gestation, and childbirth available to the infertile” (Freundlich, 2001, p. 3).

There are several reasons that Genesis 1:28 should not be viewed as a moral imperative. The first is that God alone creates life. While humankind demonstrates openness to procreation, ultimately life is a gift from God. Procreation is a part of God plan, where He is in control (Francis, 2000). Humankind cannot procure God’s blessing, it is a gift to be given. In Genesis 1:28, other imperatives such as ruling and subduing the earth are seen along with procreation. These imperatives are not considered moral duties. The same word for procreate is also given to the animals, and certainly God does not intend for them to become responsible for their reproduction. This context implies that procreation is not a moral command (Magnuson, 2000).

Viewing procreation as a blessing rather than a command emphasizes that the purposes of God are realized through divine blessings. The blessings of fertility are a result of obedience to the Law (Leviticus 26:3, Exodus 23:26, Deuteronomy 7:13-14, 28:62). The difference between procreation as a blessing over a command is that there is no obligation to fulfill. Therefore, couples should not feel pressured into seeking out technologies that will afford them to have children (Magnuson, 2000).

However, even if procreation is considered a blessing, one should also ask if procreation is even the primary purpose of marriage. The answer begins with a discussion of the creation of male and female. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (ESV). God’s intent for marital intimacy and procreation was monogamy, a relationship between one man and one woman. Mohler writes, “Throughout the Bible, a complementary pattern of relation between man and woman, particularly within the institution of marriage, is presented as the divine intention” (2004). Sexuality and gender are gifts from God. Along with these is the gift of sex that Scripture consistently puts in the context of marriage. Procreation is one of the three great goods of marital sex. Yet this is not the only purpose or good that comes from sex. Mystery and union are other gifts that come from marital intimacy (Budziszewski, 1999).

Asserting that procreation is the sole purpose of marriage provides a strong incentive for ART, and implies that a childless marriage is somehow incomplete. Procreation is certainly a part of marriage, but unlike the views of the early Church Fathers (e.g., Augustine), it is not the sole purpose of marriage. Magnuson writes with a hint of natural law theory that, “there is a natural connection between marriage, sexual union, procreation and the nurturing of children” (2000, p. 33). Sexual desire and union serve the purpose of procreation, but they also foster love and companionship to strengthen a marriage.

Reflecting on Genesis reveals that procreation is a blessing given in marriage, but the imperatives that follow are commands to fill the earth. So this raises the question, “Is procreation still relevant?” Surely procreation is still a part of marriage, the argument goes, but not an essential aspect, so if the earth is already full, why not take advantage of technologies that allow us to limit our population? Hall describes this mentality as “meticulously planned procreation” (2008).

The 18th Century British scholar Thomas Robert Malthus, who first raised significant alarm about worldwide population growth, taught that procreation is no longer necessary and that child bearing should only be considered by those who have the resources to support their children. He believed that the power of population is greater than the capacity of the earth to sustain man (Avery, 1997). Essentially, if kept unchecked, the population would increase to enormous numbers, and our resources would be depleted.

According to Malthusian principles, it is an individual’s duty to wait until he has the means to support his children. This includes decreasing the desire to marry in order to achieve this goal. The poor implicitly lack self-control, reproducing beyond their means. These Malthusian ideas about fertility strongly influenced the early debates over birth control, until individual liberty became a greater priority in the ongoing discussions (Ruhl, 2002).

Although our pragmatic society still responds to alarmist Malthusian ideas, personal autonomy has become the predominant driving force in regulating our desire for offspring.

Reproduction is usually defined as the action of making a copy of something, or the production of offspring by sexual intimacy. This may sound very similar to the definition of procreation, but there is a key difference. The idea of procreation focuses on the *conceiving and bearing* of offspring, while reproduction focuses on the *production* of offspring. The sexual revolution and modern technologies have tilted the way society views the idea of having babies. The results claim to be the same, but have reproductive technologies diminished the concept of procreation?

Christians must ask themselves this question: Are reproductive technologies a part of God's plan of procreation, or do they simply offer a way of producing offspring? According to Howard, "Reproduction depends on industrial and mechanical metaphors, making copies of the human species. In contrast, procreation roots sexuality and childbearing deeply within two relations: that of the man and woman, and that between the couple and God" (2006). All of the procedures of assisted reproduction have one common goal: repairing the biological defect of a couple who cannot have children. Yet these procedures should not be taken lightly, inasmuch as they may devalue human life, and corrupt God's plan for procreation and the family.

With the rise of reproductive technologies, there are more than thirty ways to make a baby. Artificial insemination may help to overcome male infertility. Ovary stimulation or fertility drugs may help a woman to ovulate. Extra-uterine conception, such as in IVF, involves the processes of egg harvesting and sperm collection. The egg is fertilized in a petri dish using collected male sperm. Viable embryos are then transplanted into a women's uterus (Rae & Riley, 2001).

ART raises several ethical concerns. Ovary stimulation is used to restore the biological event of ovulation. However, the drugs given have the potential to overstimulate the ovaries, giving rise to multiple embryos. In Scripture, we see that Jesus healed the sick only to restore them to typical function. This may mean that fertility drugs should not be used to achieve multiple pregnancies (Francis, 2000).

ART separates intimacy from marriage, and may violate God's intent for monogamy if a third party donor is used. Sperm is often collected through means of masturbation, which can raise problems within a marriage. IVF raises some similar concerns, mainly separating the act of conception from marital intimacy. Genesis 2:24 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

IVF gives homosexual couples or single women the opportunity to have biologically related children. Because of this, the nature of the family in our society is beginning to evolve, and perhaps not for the better. Rae and Riley have said, "God designed permanent, monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the sacred context for both sex and procreation" (2001, p. 41).

The cryopreservation or "freezing" of embryos is involved also raises significant ethical concerns. Cryopreservation maintains leftover embryos from IVF that were not yet implanted.

Such embryos have five possible outcomes: they can be implanted at a later time, adopted by another infertile couple, remain in a state of limbo, destroyed, or donated for research. A utilitarian would claim that since the embryos are going to be destroyed anyway, some good might accrue if they were used for research.

Yet if we hold to the sanctity of life from conception, it is not right to destroy embryos by discarding them or using them for research. The prophet Jeremiah has said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer. 1:5). Every human embryo is a living, human entity that God has loved, and has designed for a purpose. Cryopreservation, in contrast, is yet another example of how our society is motivated by consumerism and individualism (Kilner, Cunningham, & Hager, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, third-party arrangements have created many cultural controversies, including the ability for gay and lesbian partners to have children. Liza Mundy writes, “And if anybody can be a father, it follows that anybody can be a mother. It follows that a mother is not something you automatically are, but something you do. And anybody—including a man—can do it” (Mundy, 2007, p. 126). In a world where sexual freedom is regarded higher than relationships, anything goes. The Bible speaks on issues surrounding homosexuality, but the problem here is that assisted reproduction has the potential to offer the same benefit of sex that heterosexuals enjoy: conception of a biologically related child.

Genetic engineering and the utilization of IVF has resulted in “designer babies.” Selective reduction (a euphemism for early abortion), is used to eliminate embryos genetically undesirable traits. Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis is commonly used to select for “savior children” that are conceived in order to provide blood or other body parts to a sick brother or sister.

Such eugenics ideas have even led to the use of PGD to predetermine the gender of a couple’s child, and scientists predict that soon it will be possible to select for curly hair or blue eyes. Tuhus-Dubrow writes, “Less certain, but plausible, is that scientists will be able to identify genes for more complex traits, such as intelligence and homosexuality. Genetic engineering, which will enable not merely the selection but the insertion of desired genes, is on the horizon. In the United States, this rapidly advancing technology is unchecked by any regulatory mechanism” (2007, p. 37).

Many of the negative outcomes of reproductive technologies, such as individual choice and decreased relational/marital intimacy reflect the popular beliefs of the sexual revolution. The sexual revolution of the 1960s occurred during a time when the scientific method was replacing classical thinking and natural science. The “revelation of modernity” believed that science had the power to conquer human limitations. Thus, science sparked the rise of individual autonomy. Individual choice and freedom replaced the relational matrix in place before the sexual revolution. The desire to expand the range of individual freedom requires that people accept every type of lifestyle and behavioral choice. The rise in individuality and freedom will have to consider the growing number of infertile couples who seek to have biologically related children. This will most likely produce an increase in the use of genetic selection and cloning as technologies continue to advance. Kuehne writes, “[S]o long as individual choice remains the

highest ideal of the society and people continue to believe that humans are merely physical, rather than also spiritual beings, it is hard to imagine any of these developments being stopped” (2009, p. 90).

This mindset has created an environment in which relationships and having babies are more like business transactions than a procreative act. This is evident in the practice of donating either sperm or eggs for monetary compensation. Once donated, these gametes become “reproductive material.” The donor as a person is severed from his or her “reproductive material.” Having a baby thus becomes a consumerist act that violates the terms of what and who we are through creation, marriage, and human dignity (Kilner, Cunningham, & Hager, 2000).

This paper has explored the differences between procreation, as described in Scripture, and reproduction. The individualistic ideal and the use of reproductive technologies create an environment in which having babies is more like purchasing a product. So how can we encourage childless Christian couples who see reproductive technologies as unethical? Adoption is a way to redeem, care for, love, and raise a child. It is also important to prayerfully consider God’s sovereign plan for infertility in the couple’s life. Couples should seek contentment in their lives, and firmly establish their marriage. They should carefully consider both the positive and negative consequences that reproductive technologies can have on their intimate lives.

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