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Wombs for Rent? *Newsweek* Looks at Surrogate Mothers

Friday, April 4, 2008



The cover of this week's edition of *Newsweek* magazine is sure to attract a lot of attention. The cover photograph reveals the abdomen of a pregnant surrogate mother along with these words — “Womb for Rent: The Complex World of Surrogate Mothers.” The coverage offers an unprecedented view into what surrogate motherhood now represents as a moral challenge.

As *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham explained in his introductory column, “The idea of surrogacy makes many people uncomfortable—some conservatives find it unnatural, some liberals say it exploits women—but our reporting destroyed a lot of popular preconceptions.”

Reporters Lorraine Ali and Raina Kelley chose to shape their analysis through a series of stories involving real-life surrogates and their experiences, along with the stories of those seeking surrogates.

The report explains that surrogacy is not a completely new development, citing historical sources. But the looming issue in the article is the growing commerce in surrogate motherhood, a reality the reporters acknowledge is “an act of love, but also a financial transaction.”

Indeed, surrogates now prefer to be known as “gestational carriers” — a term that carefully avoids the more emotional (and natural) word, *mother*. The typical payment for a “gestational carrier” in the United States is \$20,000 to \$25,000. Surrogates carry babies (most now not their own biological child) for married couples, unmarried couples, gay and lesbian couples, and single adults of all walks of life.

The moral issues are indeed complex. In the first place, the very idea of a surrogate introduces a third party as an agent in the biological equation — a context that for Christians is defined by the married couple. Surrogacy also involves all the issues related to the IVF [in vitro fertilization] process.

Beyond these very significant issues, Christians must also be concerned about the redefinition of motherhood, especially in the experience of the surrogate, who carries a baby for hire. This is where the concerns of Christians and the secular left coincide. Feminists are concerned that the commodification of motherhood and gestation is just another form of prostitution. As Professor Margaret Little of Georgetown University commented, “Surrogacy raises important red flags . . . because you are selling use of the body, and historically when that's happened, that hasn't been good for women.”

Ali and Kelley get to the heart of the controversy:

But what kind of woman would carry a child to term, only to hand him over moments after birth? Surrogates challenge our most basic ideas about motherhood, and call into question what we've always thought of as an unbreakable bond between mother and child. It's no wonder many conservative Christians decry the practice as tampering with the miracle of life, while far-left feminists liken gestational carriers to prostitutes who degrade themselves by renting out their bodies. Some medical ethicists describe the process of arranging surrogacy as “baby brokering,” while rumors circulate that self-obsessed, shallow New Yorkers have their babies by surrogate to avoid stretch marks.

Much of Europe bans the practice, and 12 states, including New York, New Jersey and Michigan, refuse to recognize surrogacy contracts. But in the past five years, four states—Texas, Illinois, Utah and Florida—have passed laws legalizing surrogacy, and Minnesota is considering doing the same. More than a dozen states, including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and, most notably, California, specifically legalize and regulate the practice.

In that single paragraph the reporters greatly expand the moral issues involved in the question of surrogacy. It should be noted that Europe generally outlaws the practice, and that several U.S. states refuse to recognize the contracts as legally binding. No one is even sure how many surrogate births take place each year, but the number exceeds 1,000.

More:

The numbers vary because at least 15 percent of clinics—and there are dozens of them across the United States—don't report numbers to SART. Private agreements made outside an agency aren't counted, and the figures do not factor in pregnancies in which one of the intended parents does not provide the egg—for example, where the baby will be raised by a gay male couple. Even though the cost to the intended parents, including medical and legal bills, runs from \$40,000 to \$120,000, the demand for qualified surrogates is well ahead of supply.

Those are staggering costs, indicating the intense desire for a child that drives the demand side of this equation. But the moral issues just pile up, as *Newsweek* explains:

Any comprehensive road map of surrogacy should include not just potential attachment but an entire pull-down sheet on the second most difficult area of terrain: the relationship between surrogate and intended parent. The intentions and expectations of both parties are supposed to be ironed out ahead of time through a series of agency questionnaires and meetings. What kind of bond do they seek with one another—distant, friendly, close? Do they agree on difficult moral issues, like abortion and selective termination? And what requests do the IPs have of potential carriers? The parties are then matched by the agency, just as singles would be through a dating service. And the intended parents—or parent—are as diverse as the surrogates: gay, straight, single, married, young and old. Much of the time it works, even though it does often resemble an experiment in cross-cultural studies. “In what other world would you find a conservative military wife forming a close bond with a gay couple from Paris?” says Hilary Hanafin, chief psychologist for the oldest agency in the country, Center for Surrogate Parenting.

Even as *Newsweek* reports on these issues, *The New York Times* reported March 10, 2008 that women in India were resorting to “reproductive outsourcing” as a means of escaping poverty. The very idea of “reproductive outsourcing” raises urgent moral concerns.

The moral status of the baby is not in question here, but the moral status of the practice of surrogacy *is*. *Newsweek* helps to make this verdict clear. Wombs should not be made available for rent.

We discussed this issue on Thursday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [[listen here](#)].

