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Christian Morality and Test Tube Babies, Part One

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Thursday, September 9, 2004

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The German theologian Helmut Thielicke once argued that we learn more about ourselves and our most fundamental convictions by considering those “borderline” questions which resist easy answers. This is certainly true in the case of the new reproductive technologies. One of these “borderline” questions is raised by the development and spread of in vitro fertilization techniques, known as IVF. This issue cannot be understood apart from the foundational issues of human dignity, the meaning of personhood, and the integrity of marriage and the family.

The reproductive revolution is upon us. The past half-century has seen the development of reproductive technologies previous generations could not even imagine, much less consider in moral perspective. These technologies have radically expanded human control over the biological process, and have been designed both to prevent and to achieve successful pregnancy. Some legal theorists now argue for a new human right—the right to complete “procreative liberty,” ensuring an individual’s right to these new technologies.

The technological basics of in vitro fertilization technologies are easy to understand. The moral issues are far more complex. In vitro literally means “in glass,” for the actual fertilization of the egg takes place in a laboratory context [early on, in a petri dish], rather than in the woman’s reproductive system. While infants conceived by this method are often called “test tube babies,” this is a misnomer, as no test tube is generally used. The phrase does, however, underline the technological character of the conception, which takes place in the laboratory.

The moral issues are more complex. What does it mean to separate conception from the act of sexual union? To whom should these technologies be made available? What is the moral status of the fertilized embryos? Those who dismiss these questions as irrelevant or inconsequential show disrespect for human dignity and human life.

At one level, the moral and theological issues at stake in IVF are identical to those related to artificial insemination. The insemination may be done with sperm from the husband in a married couple (homologous insemination) or with sperm from a donor (heterologous insemination). Beyond this, a new set of issues emerges. In IVF, an egg is removed from a woman, and is fertilized in a laboratory setting by the insertion of sperm cells into the dish. Once the egg is fertilized and the exchange of chromosomal material takes place, the embryo is implanted in the uterus, with the hope that implantation will occur and a pregnancy will continue to healthy birth.

Due to the high cost of each implantation and IVF sequence, multiple eggs are usually fertilized, and multiple embryos are implanted, with the remaining embryos kept frozen for possible future use. This practice often leads to multiple pregnancies, and in some cases healthy implanted embryos are then removed from the womb and destroyed—a process inhumanely known as “selective reduction.”

IVF technologies were developed as a means of assisting married couples unable to achieve successful pregnancy through natural means. The technologies are now widely available, however, and some clinics direct and advertise their services especially to single women and lesbian couples. Both heterosexual couples and homosexual male partners have opted to “have” children by use of IVF with a surrogate “mother” hired to carry the baby to term.

Clearly, these practices and technologies raise the most fundamental questions about what it means to be human, and about God’s intention for marriage and the family.

In the first place, human dignity is compromised by the artificiality of the IVF technology. The absolute separation of conjugal union and the sex act from the process of conception creates a new and artificial process of human reproduction—one that demands technological intervention at virtually every stage, from the collection of the sperm and eggs, to the actual fertilization, to the implantation of the embryo in the uterus.

This puts human agents in control of human destiny in a manner that overthrows natural limits. Theologians have debated this issue with intensity. Karl Rahner, the most influential Roman Catholic theologian of the century, believed that “there is really nothing possible for man that he ought not to do.” On the other hand, Protestantism’s Karl Barth, the father of “neo-orthodoxy,” warned that this would lead to a “dreadful, godless world;” one he could foresee in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

Clearly, God has placed natural limits upon our creaturely power and authority. Humans seem intent upon exceeding those limits in every sphere, and the rapid developments in biotechnology threaten to transform the understanding of what it means to be human. As Barth argued, human identity has been inherently related to parenthood and the conjugal bond. What does it mean to think of humanity severed from this parental relatedness?

The new technologies of IVF underline the extent to which the modern mind has reduced human reproduction to a technology rather than a divine gift, mystery, and stewardship. As Oliver O’Donovan argues, the biblical language reminds us that we are begotten, not merely made. This is not a semantic irrelevancy. Our language betrays our understanding of the meaning of human procreation.

Children are not the products of a technological process, like common consumer commodities, but are the gifts of a loving God whose intention is that children should be born to a man and a woman united in the bond of marriage, and as the fruit of that marital bond realized in the conjugal act. They are neither by-products of the sex act nor mere “products” of our technological innovations.

Paul Ramsey warned that we would be “de-biologizing” the human race by the use of these technologies. While we sympathize with couples unable to achieve conception by means within natural limits, these limits remain. “We ought rather to live with charity amid the limits of a biological and historical existence which God created for the good and simple reason that, for all its corruption, it is now—and for the temporal future will be—the good realm in which man and his welfare are to be found and served.”

Ramsey’s warning against the “messianic positivism” of these new technologies is a corrective to those who believe that this is merely a Catholic concern. Protestants, too, have historically recognized the intrinsic relatedness of parenthood to the conjugal bond and the act of marital sex as the design of a loving and merciful Creator, who imposed limits for our good.

IVF technologies threaten those limits in others ways as well. The IVF revolution has opened unprecedented opportunities for eugenics and the genetic manipulation of the embryo. Experiments on human embryos now involve the transfer of genetic material and offer the potential for genetic manipulation both before and after fertilization.

The technologies of IVF compromise the marital bond and threaten the integrity of the family. The use of donor sperm is unacceptable, for it brings a third party into the marital bond. The same is true for the use of a donor egg. A married couple should not invite the biological contribution of a third party—known or unknown. While the fertilization of the egg occurs in a laboratory (thus avoiding adultery), the marital bond is compromised by the use of another man’s sperm or another woman’s egg.

Beyond this, the use of IVF to allow unmarried women and lesbian couples to achieve pregnancy outside marriage

and heterosexual relatedness is a direct rejection of God's intention in the creation of humanity as male and female, and the limitation of sexual relatedness and procreation to a man and a woman united within the marital covenant. IVF is welcomed by radical feminists and lesbian activists as a technological marvel which promises freedom from male involvement, except as sperm donors. This is one specter of the "godless world" against which Barth warned.

The link between IVF and surrogacy is also deeply problematic. This allows a woman (or a couple) freedom from the burden and joys of pregnancy, but it also severs the maternal bond and reduces parenthood to genetic contribution. Again, the use of surrogates in connection with IVF by homosexual males (singles or couples) violates both the conjugal bond and the integrity of the family as the basis for parenthood.

By now, we all know couples who have been able to conceive and bear children through IVF technologies. Those babies—and growing children—are to be welcomed with undiluted joy and thankfulness. The moral status of a child born through IVF technology is not in question.

Yet, the Christian worldview requires that we consider means as well as ends in a moral and theological frame, and a host of further questions arises once the larger frame is considered. What about the hundreds of thousands of human embryos destroyed—and the hundreds of thousands now frozen in laboratory freezers? Who speaks for them?

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