

## The Pain of Infertility



by Rev. Dr. Robert W. Weise

Many couples can relate to Rachel's pain, **"Give me children, or I'll die"** (Genesis 30:1). The desire to have a child for the infertile couple causes a very deep emotional and spiritual struggle. All Christians must be aware of this struggle and the need to listen to infertile couples. We are to **"Help carry each other's burdens"** (Galatians 6:2 *GOD'S WORD*<sup>®</sup>). Infertility affects 10 to 15 percent of married couples. Couples dream of having their "own" child. This desire for "self-fulfillment" is hard to understand unless you have been there. A variety of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) offer many promises to have these dreams come true. However, we must also keep Jacob's question in mind, **"Can I take the place of God ...?"** (30:2b *GOD'S WORD*<sup>®</sup>). The use of some ART can go too far and leave God out of the picture. Along with the promises, there are perils associated with ART that couples need to be aware of as well.

### Promises

Since the birth of the first reported in vitro (test tube) baby, Louise Brown, born on July 25, 1978, "baby making" has seen rapid advancement. Procreation, the conception of a child in the natural way between husband and wife, has been aided by reproduction, the intervention of various technologies in

the procreative process. Since Louise Brown's birth, ART can make a baby in at least 29 ways. With the advent of cloning, reproduction may give way eventually to replication.

In addition, baby-making by ART can also promise more choices in terms of the various characteristics of the child conceived. Everything from hair and skin color to athletic or music abilities are not left to genetic "chance" but can be part of the selection process. Sex selection, choosing the gender of your child, is another possibility.

The promise of ART is the conception and birth of a healthy child-of-choice. Couples struggling with infertility are filled with awe at the wonder of what science can do to assist them in their desire to have their "own" child. There are many promises.

### Perils

But there are also many perils to be aware of particularly in the commonly used ART of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Embryonic children are created by the union of sperm and egg in a Petri dish. Many couples do not realize that these embryos are "graded" by the naked-eye under a microscope. A grading system is applied and those that don't "make the grade" are rejected and discarded. In addition, embryos not used are frozen and couples often face difficult decisions about keeping them frozen or having them destroyed by the clinic or using them for embryonic research.

IVF also allows for what is called "pre-implantation genetic diagnosis." This technology may be used to inform a couple about a child who will need special attention due to a genetic disease after he or she is born.



However, this technology tends to be used to cull and destroy “defective” embryos before implantation into the mother’s womb.

Another peril couples need to be aware of is related to parenting. When you freeze an embryonic human being, parenting remains frozen. You cannot parent a frozen embryo. Parents are called to raise their children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord. Freezing an embryonic child withdraws the parent’s responsibility toward baptizing and teaching. Children are blessings—gifts from God—and not commodities or projects for parents to do with as they please.

The sanctity of marriage must also be considered. The Lord established marriage as the context for the procreation of a child. Marriage is not to be compartmentalized into separate acts of marriage and procreation. Marriage and procreation are God’s work. They are not separate entities. Any form of ART that separates the relational aspect of marriage from procreation must be avoided. Using donor eggs or sperm or a surrogate mother, for example, would violate the God-given one-flesh union of marriage. The Bible story of Abraham who had a child through his wife’s handmaid, is an example of not trusting in the ways and will of God when it comes to procreation (Genesis 16:1-4).

### The Promises of God

Christians brought into the covenant relationship with the Triune God approach the use of ART and the manipulation of human embryos within the context of God’s Word. God’s Word, the Bible, speaks of the embryo as a human being. The embryo is a creature of God, created by the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The embryo is a human being, the only creature created in the image of God. As Oliver O’Donovan says, “This implies a commitment in advance to treat all human beings as persons, even when their personal qualities have not yet become mani-

fest to us. The embryo is of interest to us because it is human; it is ‘ourselves’” (*Begotten or Made?*, Oxford University Press, 1984).

Thus, the embryonic human being, whether he or she is in a Petri dish or a womb, is the Christian’s neighbor. Because we are forgiven by God’s grace through faith, the relationship that God has with us and we with our neighbors in the womb or Petri dish, is based on this covenant of love. As we reflect that love, we do not hurt nor harm our neighbor, but help, support, and befriend them in every bodily need.

God does want us to “be fertile, increase in number” (Genesis 1:28). However, ART that involves the death of human embryos is not consistent with this command. We dare not use any means to achieve a desired end. God’s command is for procreation not for making a child by means that are not consistent with God’s procreative process. God is the one who does the making through this process.

God’s word does not specifically address ART. However, it does have plenty of positive things to say about marriage, procreation, and proper motivation for the decisions we make. When considering ART, the Christian should heed what the Bible says. The Christian is called to trust in God and His promises which find their “yes” in Jesus Christ. The infertile couple will find hope, patience, and strength in these promises.

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