

The Child as a Gift of God

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In the last half-century or so we have experienced what might well be called a revolution in reproduction. We are likely to describe it as a technological revolution, and it surely is that. But it is also—and perhaps more importantly—a revolution in our way of thinking about the relation between parents and children. Which came first—a changed way of thinking or technological development—is not easy to say. But, however exactly we tell the story, a commitment to the use of technologies of assisted reproduction is increasingly well established in our society and in many other societies throughout the world. Moreover, the goodness of such technologies is often taken for granted—and even commended—by many Christians. Might it be that sometimes our views are formed less by the structure of Christian belief than by our feelings and emotions? Or more by a desire for genetic connection than by the grace of Baptism that creates and sustains the church? This document is an invitation to reflection upon reproductive technologies in light of our belief that children are a gift of God.

The technologies of assisted reproduction

Artificial insemination has, of course, been used for a long time in animal breeding, and its use among human beings is more than a century old. The more far-reaching technological breakthrough came, however, with the procedure of in vitro fertilization (IVF), in which both sperm and ova are externalized and then joined in the laboratory, where fertilization takes place. The resulting embryo (or, more likely, embryos) can then be transferred to a woman's uterus in the hope of achieving a pregnancy. The first child known to have been produced by means of IVF—called at that time the first “test-tube baby”—was born in 1978. Now, however, approximately four decades later, it is estimated that about 400,000 children are born worldwide each year by means of IVF.

IVF was first developed in order to assist married couples struggling with infertility. When people think of that as its purpose, they may easily see IVF as good and praiseworthy. For, whatever one's reservations about the use of technology for reproductive purposes, sympathy for infertile couples is quite natural. This may be true especially for many Christians. Accustomed as we are to thinking of children (in the psalmist's terms) as a “heritage of the Lord,” and sympathetic to the natural desire to have what we often call “a child of one's own,” we may be reluctant to raise questions or concerns about the use of IVF. Surely, however, the technology has now developed (and will continue to develop) in such far-reaching ways that to think of it simply as help for infertile couples is to miss what is significant about the reproductive revolution. In fact, in the minds of many people it has no connection to the institution of marriage—that is, to the desire of a husband and wife to see their marriage express itself in a child who incarnates their one-flesh union. Rather, it is about individual desire to experience a certain kind of fulfillment. We need, therefore, to ask ourselves whether our understanding of the meaning of the presence of children is being formed by the basic Christian belief that a child is God's gift to those who are married, or whether our attitudes and actions increasingly reflect a belief that what counts is satisfying the desire to have a child of one's own (and, perhaps even, a particular sort of child).

IVF can and often does involve much more than simply taking sperm from a man and an ovum from his wife, uniting them in the laboratory, and then transferring the resulting embryo to the wife's uterus. IVF can also be a way to produce children free of certain defects or children of a desired sex. A couple or an individual desiring a child may commission others to fill some of the necessary roles. Thus, the sperm or the ova (or both) may come not from the commissioning

parent(s) but from “donors” (as they are usually called, although often they have sold rather than donated their gametes). The embryo(s) produced in the laboratory—whether from one’s own or acquired gametes—may be transferred not to the woman who has commissioned the reproductive project but to a surrogate, who agrees to gestate the child and then give it after birth to the couple or the individual desiring a child.

Because more embryos may be produced in the laboratory than can safely be transferred to a woman’s uterus, the commissioning couple may decide to freeze the remaining surplus embryos. They may use them at a later date to try again to conceive a child, or they may never use them, leaving the embryos frozen indefinitely, or discarded, or perhaps made available for use in research. An embryo that is produced in the laboratory but not implanted in a woman’s uterus is often referred to as a “preimplantation embryo,” as if it were simply an accident of nature that this embryo was somewhere other than in the womb of its mother. We should, however, train ourselves to call such embryos “unimplanted embryos,” making clear that their condition is no accident but, rather, one that we have willed and chosen. Such frozen, unimplanted embryos now number in the hundreds of thousands, and our society seems willing to permit that number to continue to grow.

Many of these frozen embryos will never be needed or wanted by those who produced them in an effort to achieve a pregnancy. What, then, is to be done with them? There is no satisfactory answer to that question. As long as we permit, and even encourage, freezing of embryos, we create for ourselves a moral problem for which there is no good solution. Leaving embryos frozen indefinitely seems unsatisfactory, but using them for research—which will inevitably involve their destruction—would be wrong. They have already been used once as a means to someone else’s reproductive project; surely once is enough.

One proposed solution to the problem of surplus, frozen embryos—a solution that has been attractive to some Christians—has been called embryo adoption. This means simply that a woman (and, generally, her husband) make use of IVF technology to gestate someone else’s frozen and now unwanted embryo, hoping to bring that child to term and raise it as their own. No doubt those who do this are often moved by several considerations—both desiring to become parents and wanting to offer the possibility of continued life to an abandoned embryo. For some it may also be a way to deal with infertility. Although we cannot say that such embryo adoption is wrong, we can hardly recommend it when we remind ourselves of the millions of orphaned and abandoned children in the world who need a familial home. If we are searching for children in need of adoption—children who need but lack a family committed to their wellbeing, children who are likely to suffer continued harm unless they find such a family—these children are all around us in our society. If we have the resources and the ability to adopt, it seems better for us to direct that energy toward children already born who need a place of familial belonging.

More recently and increasingly, young, single women are using IVF technology to take the further step of freezing their unfertilized eggs. They do this not because they experience fertility problems but as a kind of insurance against any future health or reproductive problem, or simply in order to have time to pursue career opportunities before committing to marriage and parenthood.

Closely connected to the practice of IVF is the use of genetic testing. Our society has by now come to regard genetic testing of fetuses in utero as almost routine. Amniocentesis was available in the 1950s and chorionic villus sampling (taken from placental tissue) in the 1980s. Still more recently, Noninvasive Prenatal Testing, which can isolate fetal DNA in blood drawn from the mother, can be done early in the first trimester of pregnancy, and, at least in principle, it could enable the entire genome of a fetus in utero to be sequenced. (It has also, we might note, been extraordinarily profitable, with worldwide revenue in 2016 estimated at more than a billion

dollars.) Of course, at least at the present time, no treatment is available for most of the conditions that can be detected by means of prenatal screening of fetuses in utero. The only “treatment” that can avoid the birth of a child who will suffer from disabilities and genetic defects is abortion, which eliminates suffering only by eliminating the sufferer.

Preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD)—that is, genetic testing in the laboratory of the unimplanted embryo—moves the testing process back still further, prior even to the establishment of a pregnancy. It is now possible to identify in an unimplanted embryo hundreds of disease mutations as well as its chromosomal makeup. This allows the commissioning parent(s) to select only some of the embryos for implantation, avoiding in particular any that may have genetic defects (and, of course, any of what they regard as the “wrong” sex).

In principle, therefore, it is now possible for a child to be born with as many as five people who might be called its “parents” (the donors of sperm and ovum, the surrogate who carried the child during pregnancy, and two commissioning parents who undertook the reproductive project in order to have a child to rear). We stand on the brink of a world in which we will hardly know how to name some of the relationships produced by technological reproduction. A woman can give birth to her own “grandchild” by gestating a fetus produced in the laboratory from gametes taken from her child and his or her spouse. People can “have children” posthumously if their frozen embryos are implanted and gestated in someone else after their death. A woman lacking ovaries can receive an ovary transplant from an aborted fetus, in which case that fetus could become the genetic “mother” of a child born to the woman. By means of eggs made in the laboratory from induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) it may soon be possible to avoid the costly and medically burdensome process of retrieving eggs from women. And given that sperm are readily available, this would mean that an individual or a couple could produce many embryos from which to choose. Perhaps even—it is too soon to say for certain—researchers may be able to use iPSCs to make sperm from a woman’s cells or ova from a man’s cells, meaning that a child could be produced using sperm and egg derived from cells of the same “parent.” And it is not impossible to imagine that—as has already been done with a lamb—a child could be gestated entirely in an artificial womb. Thus, without any bodily connection of child to mother, we would have achieved in fact what Aldous Huxley only imagined in *Brave New World*.

Competing narratives: procreation vs. reproduction

Clearly, two quite different and competing ways of understanding the bond between parents and children are at work in our society; we tell two different stories about this most basic of human relationships. It is worth considering how they differ and the implications of each.

One story, deeply embedded in Christian teaching and belief, understands the child as a blessing given to a man and woman who have given themselves in love to each other. Aiming to express their love for each other as fully and completely as they can, they sometimes find that, in the providence of God, their love-giving has also been life-giving. Then they receive the child not simply as a product of their aims and intentions, but as a gift and a mystery, springing from their embrace—a blessing love gives into their arms. They might well say what the biblical writer says of Hannah after the birth of Samuel: “The Lord remembered her.”

Such an understanding of human procreation shaped Christian thinking about parents and children. Moreover, when taken seriously it can provide young men and women in our society something they are often lacking today and desperately need—namely, a “cultural script” that helps them understand both their individual identities and their relation to each other. They can learn to see their relation not merely as a matter for choice but as entry into a pattern for life given by God. They can learn that the erotic desire they experience for each other is also a desire to give

birth, to turn outward as a couple. They can learn to think of the body not as an instrument used by a person to produce desired outcomes, but, rather, as the very place in which we are personally present to others in friendship and in love. Moreover, the script they enact is not just a natural fact. It has its basis in the mystery of God's own creative work. The opening chapter of the Gospel of John is clear that our world was created in and through Jesus, the One who is God's Word of love to us. So also, our own procreation, growing out of the giving and receiving of love between a man and a woman, can image the mystery of God's creative work.

According to the other, competing story, which is becoming increasingly influential in our culture, parents are simply people who undertake what we might call a reproductive project. The purpose of that project is to produce a child of their own—that is, one who satisfies their desire for a child to rear, a desire that they feel must be satisfied for life to be fulfilling and complete. If for one reason or another they are unable or unwilling to produce a child of their own through sexual intercourse, they can have recourse to technological means of assisted reproduction to accomplish that goal, and they can (if needed) hire a woman to serve as a surrogate, using her body as an instrument to gestate the child.

If we think only in terms of results, we may suppose that they have simply found another way of doing the same thing others do through ordinary procreation—namely, have a child. In fact, however, although a child may result from both sexual intercourse and various forms of assisted reproduction, these are not simply different ways of doing the same thing. In the first, spouses align themselves with God's act of creation in love. They do not suppose that the person exists apart from the body. They do not use the body as an instrument to produce a desired result. Rather, they simply give themselves to each other in love—not just in spirit but also in body. And then, sometimes, God blesses such mutual love with the gift of a child.

Thus we have two stories marked by different ways of thinking about our bodies and our children. Is the body the place of personal presence, in which we give ourselves in love? Or is the body an instrument we use to accomplish our goals? Is the child a product of our own will and choosing, one whom we have made? Or is the child one who is begotten, springing from our mutual love and our equal in dignity?

When we use our bodies as instruments for reproduction, we learn to think of ourselves less as the embodied creatures God has made and more as free spirits—detached from the body and free to use it as an object for achieving whatever purposes we desire. Then it is hard not to think of the desired child as a product we have made—and, quite possibly, made to meet desired specifications. Moreover, we may then have no reason to refrain from using gametes acquired from third parties or from hiring a surrogate to gestate the desired child; these may, after all, simply be among the necessary means of production. Indeed, Christian women have sometimes been eager to serve as surrogates, thinking of their fertility simply as a capacity they can give to others. Compassion for those who are infertile becomes then a formless emotion, no longer taking its shape from God's own creative work. For if we have come to think of ourselves as free spirits who may choose to use the body for whatever good purposes we have in mind, it may be that our churches have failed to teach us how rightly to honor our creation as embodied persons.

God so structures human life that marital love serves both to strengthen the bond between spouses and, sometimes, to give rise to the next generation. We might say that in both the love-giving and the life-giving dimensions of marriage the most basic gift God gives a husband and wife is the gift of a shared time. They are given time to learn what fidelity in love means; time for each to learn to care for another who is as different as their bodies are different; time to shape a future together; time for their union to give rise, by God's providence, to the next generation; time

for their union to turn outward in other shared ways as well. The companionship of marriage is, therefore, much more than a series of isolated sexual acts; it is a shared history within the time God gives us. Likewise, when we think of the gift of children, we should see them within the context of that gift of time, as the fruit not of isolated sexual acts—as if a marriage were a series of one-night stands—but of the marriage as a whole. Hence, although contraception (for which different methods are available) may be misused, it can also be rightly used when husband and wife seek to shape their time together in response to God’s calling. The shared history of each married couple, the time God gives them, will have its own particular shape, with children differently spaced and in different numbers, in ways appropriate to their own particular and peculiar life together. Each married couple will need to attend to the shape of that shared life; there is no one shape that fits all. We can only say that their shared time should be marked by companionship that is faithful for the whole of life, a companionship that turns outward to the world—usually, though not necessarily, through the gift of a child or children born to them or adopted by them.

A child of one’s own?

When married couples who hope for children experience infertility, it is natural that they should feel sadness; for erotic love naturally desires to give birth. It is natural for them to hope that their mutual embrace will be creative, will give rise to a child who embodies the oneness they share. It is natural that they (and, no doubt, their parents who want to be grandparents) should value the human significance of the lines of kinship and descent that locate us in the world. And it is not surprising that, driven by desire for what they think of as a child of their own, they may consider turning to technologies of assisted reproduction.

To be sure, an infertile couple could turn to IVF, use no third party gametes and no surrogate, implant all the embryos produced, and refrain from using PGD to screen those embryos. Perhaps in such a case the deeper significance of procreation will not have been lost, although even such a limited use of IVF risks beginning to think of the child not simply as gift but as product. Moreover, we should realize how rare such an approach would be, how difficult it would be for a couple to set themselves against the momentum that beginning a process of IVF involves, how hard it would be to resist the pressure to use acquired gametes, to produce additional embryos that are not implanted, to screen those embryos for defects, or to secure the service of a surrogate. Part of the sadness of life is that we sometimes cannot and at other times ought not do what we deeply desire to do. If technologies of assisted reproduction often distort the meaning of the presence of children, we should not allow a sense of desperation to tempt us to transform the meaning of procreation into a technical act of reproduction.

Although we recognize and acknowledge the sadness of infertility, Christians have good reasons to resist the desperate desire for a child of one’s own. In the first place, we should be clear that there is for Christians no continuing obligation to have children. The one-flesh union of husband and wife should always turn outward; a child is the way in which that most naturally happens, but it is not the only way for them to do so. The divine word “be fruitful and multiply,” spoken at the creation, is as much a blessing as a command. And insofar as it is a command, it has been reshaped and transformed in the history of redemption. Because The Child has been born—that is, the promised Child in whom human life has been created anew—we have no need to produce generation after generation of children.

Moreover, those who are unmarried or childless, whether that state is deliberately chosen or an accident of one’s personal history, have an important role in the life of the church. In their singleness they remind us that the wedding feast of the Lamb is something quite different from the

restoration of our earthly marriages; in their childlessness they remind us that the church grows not because of our natural capacity to give birth but through the grace of adoption as God's children. Theirs is a special vocation in service to the whole church.

Indeed, the antidote to a desperate search for a child of one's own is given us in Baptism. There we learn to take seriously that, as St. Paul writes, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." There we relinquish any claim to a child of our own and, having given it up, receive the child back as one before whom we now stand as the representatives and mediators of God's covenant love and care. Therefore, it is neither biology nor genetics that is at the heart of parenthood; rather, it is the lifelong commitment to be a parent to the child whom God has adopted as His own and now places into our hands. Knowing ourselves to be God's children only by adoption, we can rejoice in the truth that, whether our children have been given us through natural birth or through adoption, they are not our possession but a trust given us by God.

Conclusion

We can draw together these several lines of discussion and summarize what it means to think of a child as God's gift if we think of children within three angles of vision: in the light of our created nature; in the light of the new creation into which we are baptized; and in the light of the redeemed creation God promises, when all of us will share as members of Christ's Body in the marriage feast of the Lamb.

We are created as embodied creatures, occupying a fixed place within the generations of humankind. Lines of kinship and descent locate and identify us, and the sexual union of a man and a woman is naturally ordered toward the birth of children. Hence, the child is less a product of our will and choice than a gift God bestows on the embodied love of a man and a woman. In this way God continues to sustain and care for the creation.

Nevertheless, that natural kinship is always in need of transformation. We need to be shaped in a way of life that does not think of children as our possessions. Therefore, within the church we bring children for Baptism into the new life we share in Jesus, the crucified and risen One. In handing the child over for Baptism, parents acknowledge that, in the most fundamental sense, this child is not "their own." The kinship that identifies us is not determined by DNA; it is the life we share in the new community that is Christ's Body.

Finally, we live toward a day in which the creation redeemed in Christ will be fully perfected. Even now we are given a hint of that day in the Eucharistic meal the church shares. And in that redeemed creation all of us—husbands and wives, parents and children—will share as brothers and sisters in the great Eucharist that is the wedding feast of Christ and His church.