

Marriage, Procreation and Infertility: Reflections on Genesis¹

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Introduction

“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the seas and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen. 1:27-28a).²

I am an *akarah*—a barren woman. After three years of the latest modern tests and drugs, of artificial inseminations (using my husband’s sperm), of long hours in doctor’s offices, of humiliating tests and frustrated hopes, and of moments of despair, I am still a barren woman. My husband is healthy; the problem is mine. We have used much of our savings, all of our patience. We have a serious operation to go that gives us a slight chance but may cause a serious risk to my health ... so I sit in the sanctuary as I hear the words ... *P’ru ur’vu*. God’s command to be fruitful and multiply has been given again to our people ... I feel the pain of emptiness, the despair of wanting to carry out the mitzvah [commandment] and not being able.³

The desire to have a child, and the common expectation of having children, is confronted by the painful experience of infertility for almost 1 out of every 6 married couples, or as many as five million couples of childbearing age in the United States.⁴ In our day of technological advances in medicine, the response to this problem has been the development of a myriad of ways to overcome infertility in the hopes of having a child. Since 1978,

when the first child was born by means of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), we have been introduced to such procedures as gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), zygote intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT), tubal embryo transfer (TET), intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) and cryopreservation, and other techniques to treat the problem of infertility.

Indeed, the proliferation of techniques to overcome infertility has been so rapid that it has been difficult to reflect adequately upon the moral acceptability of a technique before it is in widespread use. Not surprisingly, the moral debate concerning reproductive technology tends to focus upon whether a particular procedure is morally acceptable. As such, the attention is upon deliberation, or the question of which action is appropriate to reach a particular desired end. The end in this case is procreation, or more specifically, overcoming infertility (and thus overcoming human suffering). This is, in most respects, a good end to pursue, and the moral debate concerning the means to this end is important.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether the focus upon overcoming infertility has been adequate for understanding either reproductive technology or infertility itself. Further, it is questionable whether such a focus is based upon an adequate understanding of marriage and procreation. The experience of many couples, as the opening citation indicates, is that technology is not the answer to infertility. In fact, it is often not success-

ful, particularly when certain moral guidelines are followed. As a result, rather than alleviating human suffering, it may exacerbate the pain. Yet there may be an implicit assumption in the debate, which is also held by infertile couples, that morally acceptable forms of reproductive technology ought to be pursued by those suffering from infertility (if they can afford them).⁵ If there is such an assumption, it suggests that different sorts of questions should be addressed in the debate, such as whether even a procedure that is deemed morally acceptable ought to be pursued.

The point is that while there has been instructive deliberation in the moral debate concerning reproductive technology, there has been inadequate reflection concerning the problem of infertility and how to respond to it.⁶ As a result, the deliberation fails to take into account a full range of possible responses to infertility. This essay will attempt to reflect upon some questions that are central to an understanding of infertility, questions that are therefore indispensable for a consideration of the use of reproductive technology. Specifically, what follows is theological and biblical reflection on marriage and procreation.

The questions discussed relate to the place of procreation in marriage and the Christian life, such as whether procreation is a moral responsibility for married couples, whether it is the primary purpose of marriage, and whether a childless marriage is, as such, an incomplete marriage. Although an affirmative answer to each of these questions is often assumed, a theological and biblical reflection may yield a different set of answers.

Be Fruitful and Multiply

In Jewish tradition and interpretation, the imperative found in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is the first commandment given to humankind.⁷ It is considered to be a moral imperative, a religious duty that is meant to channel sexual passion for the purpose of the perpetuation of humankind.⁸ As such, the inability to have children because of infertility is sometimes thought to be equivalent to breaking a commandment. Though such sentiments are rarely articulated, they may be more common than one would suspect. In the opening citation, this view is expressed clearly and with desperate passion. Could it be that a similar view is widespread among infertile couples? Is there a perceived duty of procreation that exacerbates the difficulty of failing to have a child because of infertility? Does Genesis teach such a duty?

Procreation as a Moral Command

In Christian theology, the concept of procreation as a moral command is expressed in terms of a creation mandate.⁹ As John Murray states, marriage is the means through which the “command to procreate is brought to effect,” and thus “we cannot think of the *duty of procreation* in abstraction from marriage.”¹⁰ D. N. Peel claims that “God’s first recorded command to humans was to procreate . . . a sacred duty to be celebrated in joyful cooperation with God.”¹¹ Theodore Mackin adds that in Genesis 1:28 we find “God’s command to the first couple to procreate.”¹² In addition, Karl Barth interprets “the propagation of the race” in this verse to be an “unconditional command,” though one that has ceased as such since the advent of Christ.¹³ Helmut Thielicke contests Barth’s conclusion, but not his

premise, suggesting that procreation has not ceased to be an unconditional command.¹⁴ In each of these cases, the command is presented as a moral obligation for each individual or married couple.

The understanding of procreation in Genesis 1:28 as a command reflects a straightforward reading of the text, both with regard to the grammatical construction and the context of Genesis 1. The statement is in the form of an imperative, suggesting to some that the purpose for procreation is realized through obedience to the divine command. In addition, it fits with the pattern of “command and execution” throughout Genesis 1, indicating the intent of the Creator:¹⁵ God creates the “expanse” (1:6-8), and commands the celestial bodies to fill it (1:14-18); He creates the sky (1:6-8) and the seas (1:9-10), and commands the birds and the sea creatures to fill them (1:20); and God creates the land (1:9-10), and commands the beasts and humans to fill it (1:22, 28). The will of the Creator is made clear through His command, and His creatures are left to carry out His command.

It is not difficult, therefore, to understand why procreation is taken as a moral command, a creation mandate or religious duty. Further, it is not difficult to imagine how such an understanding may, perhaps subconsciously, add to the distress that an infertile couple experiences, and to the impulse to pursue reproductive technology. That is not to say it is the only, or even primary, reason that couples pursue reproductive technology, but it may be a subtle, yet powerful one.

Yet there is good reason to question whether the imperative in Genesis 1:28 should be understood as a moral command. The first reason is that while human beings can demonstrate an open-

ness to procreation, it is God alone who creates life. Since life is a gift from God (Psalm 127:3), understanding procreation as a command may place too much emphasis upon human procurement of God’s blessing.

David Daube points out other difficulties with understanding this imperative as a command. He argues that there is little evidence for such a duty elsewhere in the Bible, and that while children may be a blessing and childlessness a misfortune, this does not imply a duty to procreate.¹⁶ The principle texts for making a case for the duty of procreation, he continues, are Genesis 1:28 and the story of Onan in Genesis 38.¹⁷ Yet, he claims, these texts simply do not support the case. For instance, Genesis 38 deals with Onan’s family responsibilities, not a general duty to procreate. And although Genesis 1:28 is an imperative, Daube argues that it is better understood as an authorization than a duty. It is thus analogous to a text like Exodus 4:18, where Moses asks Jethro for permission to go to Egypt, and Jethro responds, “Go in peace.”¹⁸ In addition, the imperative is grouped with others, including filling, ruling, and subduing the earth, which are not promoted as moral duties. Finally, Daube argues that the phrase is not to be taken as a moral command or duty because it is given in identical words to the fish and fowl in Genesis 1:22, which are “obviously not intended to become responsible for their reproduction.”¹⁹ These arguments at least suggest that caution is warranted where the imperatives in Genesis 1:28 are treated as moral commands, and that it may be possible to interpret such imperatives differently.

Procreation as a Blessing

As an alternative to understanding

Genesis 1:28 as a command, some commentators emphasize the aspect of blessing.²⁰ For instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that “the fruitfulness of this union is not something that is commanded. (For biblical thought this would have been impossible; it was only in the age of rationalism and technology that it could come to be understood in this way). It is a blessing from God.”²¹

This, too, is a straightforward reading of the immediate text, as well as the context of Genesis 1 and beyond. In the first place, the imperatives in Genesis 1:28 are introduced by the words of divine blessing, “And God blessed them.” In addition, the entire creation account is a declaration of God’s blessing, as God gives life, provides for its sustenance and fruitfulness, and calls all that He has made “good.” This view emphasizes that the purposes of God are realized through the divine blessing, which is the “power of fruitfulness” and of life itself.²² Procreation is seen as a gracious gift of God for the propagation of humankind and other living creatures. Though the blessing is given in the form of imperatives, “they are not so much commands as authorizations by which the people are empowered to believe and act toward the future.”²³

Indeed, the blessing of fertility is a common theme throughout Genesis. As such, the larger context of Genesis both builds upon and helps to interpret the statement in Genesis 1:28. The fulfillment of the blessing of fertility in Israel is not used to demonstrate Israel’s obedience to God’s command, but to demonstrate God’s unmerited favor in blessing Israel. Fruitfulness is central to the promise given to Abraham and his descendants. Consider the following words of blessing, reflecting Genesis 1:28: “As for Ishmael . . . I will

bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly” (Gen 17:20); Isaac blesses Jacob, saying, “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you” (Gen 28:3); God says to Jacob, “I am God Almighty; Be fruitful and multiply; A nation and a company of nations shall come from you” (Gen 35:11; cf. Gen 48:4); “The sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied” (Exod 1:7).

In each of these cases we find words of blessing rather than command. Exodus 1:7 demonstrates God’s fulfillment of his blessing through Israel’s fruitfulness, even in a foreign land.²⁴ The case of Jacob is particularly important for understanding the imperative to be fruitful as a blessing rather than as a command. The allusion to Genesis 1:28 is made in both form and content. It seems clear that God is not giving a moral command to Jacob, since he already has had 11 sons.²⁵ Rather, it is a word of blessing, and a promise to Jacob that his descendants will be fruitful. This same sense of blessing, as opposed to command, is seen where individuals invoke the blessing on behalf of others.²⁶

It might be argued that fruitfulness is primarily a blessing rather than a command, but that when fruitfulness and barrenness are associated with reward and punishment, the notion of command becomes prominent. For instance, rewards promised for Israel’s obedience to God are fruitfulness (Lev 26:3), the prevention of miscarriage (Exod 23:26), and no barrenness (Deut 7.13-14). Further, disobedience is to be met with declining numbers (Deut 28:62). However, rather than presenting procreation as a command, these texts actually confirm the idea of blessing, for it is obedience to the Law, rather than to a command to be fruitful, which is referred

to in these cases. In other words, if Israel will obey the Law of God, they will be granted the blessing of fruitfulness.

The Distinction between Command and Blessing

In the above discussion, a distinction is drawn between command and blessing, at least at some level. Is such a distinction warranted? It seems that there is a valid distinction to be made, with some qualification. A first qualification is that any distinction between command and blessing should not suggest that God's command is not a blessing in itself. The Bible recognizes God's commands as great blessings, so that, for instance, the Psalmist delights in the Law of the Lord (cf. Psalm 119). Any sharp distinction between the two, therefore, would be foreign to Biblical thought. A second qualification can be made with regard to the concept of command itself. Even as a blessing, the imperatives "Be fruitful and multiply" are in some sense a command, such as God's command to be fruitful. In this sense, it is similar to the imperative when God commands, "Let there be light," and light appears (Gen 1:3). However, this sense of command is not what is intended when some refer to Genesis 1:28 as a creation mandate or a religious duty. As indicated earlier, in such cases, procreation is understood to be a moral obligation.

Thus, it is suggested that the distinction is valid in some sense, for a command implies an obligation placed upon the one commanded to fulfill the command as far as it is possible through morally upright action. A blessing, on the other hand, implies that there is something to be received. The recipient may wait expectantly to receive the divine blessing, but there is no duty to procure the blessing.²⁷

In addition, a command is necessary at times to overcome possible resistance or a lack of understanding, while a blessing operates as an assurance that something will happen. These distinctions indicate a difference between form and content in some cases, such as Genesis 1:28. The content of divine imperatives is ultimately a blessing, yet the form may be either a command or a blessing, which may have consequences for behavior, such as whether to pursue a specific course of action or to be prepared to receive a blessing.

In the case of procreation in Genesis 1:28, it seems that the imperative is better understood as a blessing with a corresponding promise than as a command with a corresponding duty. It is a blessing given to humankind, with an assurance that the blessing will be carried out. Thus, for example, Luther asserts that the divine blessing is given to ensure that humankind will indeed fill the earth.²⁸ The scope of the imperative is greater than individual marriages, and the aim of fruitfulness is to fill the earth. The purpose of God is that humankind should fill the earth through procreation, by means of the divine blessing, in order to rule and subdue the earth. There are obviously implications for an understanding of marriage, yet these imperatives are not dependent upon the fruitfulness of each marriage, but of marriage in general being fruitful. The divine blessing assures that the imperative will be fulfilled, and thus any false opposition between command and blessing is overcome.

Implications for Infertile Couples

One of the implications of the above discussion can be related to the use of reproductive technology. If procreation is understood primarily as a blessing rather

than a moral command, one may conclude that there is no necessity to pursue procreation by means of reproductive technology. This is not a specific claim about the moral acceptability of technological assistance in procreation, but an assertion that there is no sense in which an infertile couple is obligated to do everything possible to have children. This statement may seem obvious, yet it has been the experience of some infertile couples that deciding not to pursue available infertility treatment is tantamount to a refusal to have children.²⁹ Since some couples feel a sense of obligation, which drives them to pursue the use of reproductive technology and which exacerbates their difficult experience of infertility, we must state clearly that Scripture does not impose such an obligation.

This account of procreation is based upon a general understanding of the purpose of procreation for humankind, within the good order of creation. While it has implications for married couples, a more specific account needs to be made for the place of procreation within marriage. That is to say, even if it is proper to understand procreative fruitfulness primarily as a blessing rather than as a moral command, it is still necessary to spell out the relation of procreation to other purposes of marriage. Is procreation the primary purpose of marriage? Does a childless marriage lack something that is essential to marriage? What can be said about the context in which God has given the blessing of procreation?

Male and Female He Created Them

In his commentary on Genesis, Gordon Wenham indicates that the imperative to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), following on the statement in Genesis 1:27,

“male and female He created them,” explains the “divine purpose of marriage.”³⁰ In fact, Wenham here echoes the view that has dominated Christian thinking on marriage through much of the history of the Church, that procreation is the primary purpose of marriage. For instance, both Augustine and Aquinas, reflecting on the declaration that woman is created as a suitable helper for man (Gen 2:18), suggest that the help referred to is for the purpose of procreation.³¹ Likewise affirming the central place of procreation within marriage, the 20th century German theologian Emil Brunner comments that “it is an *essential* part of marriage that it should be fruitful.”³² Indeed, to emphasize the force of his statement, he adds, “by this I do not mean that a marriage which is involuntarily childless is not a marriage, but *it certainly is not a normal complete marriage.*”³³

Brunner’s statement reflects a sentiment sometimes felt by those who suffer from infertility, namely, that a childless marriage is experienced as incomplete, lacking something essential to marriage. Such a sentiment is not difficult to understand, but is it justified by careful biblical and theological reflection? If it is, it would provide a strong reason for making use of morally acceptable forms of reproductive technology, and may cause some infertile couples to see infertility treatment as a necessary means to a “normal complete marriage.” However, if such a view is not properly derived from biblical and theological reflection, then it should be stated clearly that a childless marriage is not for that reason an incomplete marriage, and that there is no necessary reason to pursue procreation by all acceptable means. Once again, Genesis serves as a starting point for the discussion.

The Context for Procreation

The first two chapters of Genesis give complementary accounts of the creation of human beings. The first chapter offers a distant look, and declares simply that God created humankind as male and female, and that this sexual differentiation is the condition upon which the blessing of fertility operates. As such, it seems that Genesis 1:27-28 does not so much explain the purpose of marriage as it does the condition for human fruitfulness, i.e., it is accomplished by the power of God's blessing through the union of male and female. This is a significant point, for, as Paul Jewett notes, "God could have used some other mechanism than sexual pairing for propagating the race, as in fact he did in the lower orders of creation. Therefore we should not reduce the meaning of Man's male/female polarity simply to the need for propagating the race in sexual congress."³⁴

It is important, then, to examine the context in which God gave procreation, and to understand the place of procreation within that context. In order to discern the significance of the creation of humankind as male and female, it is necessary to look beyond Genesis 1. It will be seen that Genesis 1 supports a deeper understanding of the relationship between male and female than merely biological differentiation for the purpose of procreation, even if it does not explicitly assert one. It is notable that in Genesis 1, looking from a distance at the creation of the world and of the human race, the focus is upon "male and female" rather than upon "this man" and "this woman" and their relationship. Even the blessing that is spoken by God is "from afar." The sort of intimacy that is found in a personal relationship is conspicuously absent in Genesis 1, par-

ticularly when measured against the relationship between God and the man and woman in Genesis 2. The first chapter is concerned largely with the creation and sustenance of all things, including humankind, yet the second chapter brings close and highlights the relationship between male and female.

While Genesis 1 assigns procreation to the joining together of male and female, Genesis 2 describes that context in intimate terms, as a divinely given union of "one-flesh" (Gen 2:24). It asserts that only the woman is found to be a suitable "helper" or companion for the man, one who complements him and provides the remedy for his "aloneness." It is important to note here that the explicit reason given in Genesis 2 for the creation of the woman as a partner for the man is not for the purpose of procreation, but to provide companionship. Humankind is complete only after the creation of the woman. Even Augustine, who was earlier cited as one who argues that procreation is the "suitable help" in view in Genesis 2, recognizes the validity of marriage apart from procreation (as in, for example, the marriages of elderly couples) because of companionship. Thus he marvels at the strength of the bond of marriage, which "although it be tied for the sake of begetting children, not even for the sake of begetting children is it loosed."³⁵ By that he means that although marriage and sexual union are for the purpose of procreation, even the marriage that is unable to produce children does not cease to be a valid marriage.

What Augustine marvels at is that marriage can be good even if it is not able to produce children. While that is true, he does not acknowledge what Genesis 2 suggests, that the union of man and woman is expressly given for companion-

ship and not simply for the sake of procreation. Those who would argue that the sexual differentiation of “male and female” is given exclusively or even primarily for the purpose of procreation do not account for the fact that procreation is not even mentioned in Genesis 2. Rather, as Wenham notes in his comments on Genesis 2:18, “the help looked for is not just assistance in his daily work or in the procreation of children, though these aspects may be included, but the mutual support companionship provides.”³⁶ The emphasis upon companionship is confirmed by the exclamation of the man upon seeing the woman, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). His delight is that of seeing a complementary companion, not because he is given someone who can bear him children.

In Genesis 2, then, the explicit reason that God creates male and female is relational. It is a relationship of “one-flesh,” or “flesh and bone.” It is an expression similar to the English “flesh and blood,” so that “just as blood relations are one’s flesh and bone, so marriage creates a similar kinship between man and wife.”³⁷ Barth notes the significance of Genesis 2:18-25 by referring to it as the “Magna Carta of humanity,” which declares how “God completed the creation of man by giving him woman as a companion.”³⁸ The point is not to diminish the significance of procreation, but to discern the significance of the relationship between the man and woman. Taken together, the first two chapters of Genesis include both procreation and companionship as important aspects of marital union. Further examination is required to determine whether there is a priority between these aspects of marriage, which leads to a dis-

cussion of the purposes of marriage.

Procreation and the Purposes of Marriage

It was argued that neither of the first two chapters of Genesis indicates that procreation is the primary purpose of marriage, and that each has different interests. Indeed, based upon the focus on companionship found in Genesis 2, it may be said that an emphasis upon procreation could ironically divert sexual love in marriage away from its proper focus by replacing appropriate attention to one’s spouse with the “project” of procreation. On the other hand, the traditional understanding of the important connection between marriage and procreation should not be underestimated. Brunner although criticized earlier, is right to say that “sexual intercourse and procreation are essentially united in the order of marriage.”³⁹ The significance of the relationship between intercourse and procreation within the marriage context should not be underestimated, and any absolute refusal of procreation in marriage violates the nature and meaning of marriage. That is to say, there is a natural connection between marriage, sexual union, procreation and the nurturing of children. Further, the connection is not merely incidental, but forms a cord that ought not to be easily broken or untangled. Such a view calls for a balanced understanding of the purposes of marriage and sexual union, but it need not require an undue emphasis on each act of sexual union. The connection spoken of is why theologians have often been cautious with regard to an endorsement of contraception, particularly when it is used throughout the course of a marriage.⁴⁰ In order to find the proper balance, a theological examination of the purposes of marriage is necessary,

which begins with an examination of Augustine as a primary formulator of the theological tradition.

For the purpose of this essay, the discussion will focus on whether procreation is essential to marriage, that is, whether a childless marriage may have the integrity of a complete marriage. We shall not discuss whether or why procreation could be withheld from a particular marriage through the use of contraception, though that is an important question. The conclusions reached by a theological understanding of marriage will have significant implications for infertile couples.

As suggested already, it is difficult to deny that procreation is treated as the primary purpose of marriage among the Church Fathers. Augustine, for instance, asserts that the indulgence of sexual desire must be “under the guidance of reason . . . not for the gratification of passion, but for the continuance of the race through the procreation of children.”⁴¹ Indeed, Augustine is suspicious of any other purpose for intercourse, arguing that it is only without fault if it is for the purpose of procreation, for without that purpose, marriage will be used simply to satisfy sexual lust.⁴²

As indicated earlier, Augustine does not see procreation as the only purpose of marriage, for he insists that marriage consists of three “goods” or purposes, which are “offspring, faith, sacrament.”⁴³ By “faith” he means a commitment to chastity, which includes “paying the debt” of marriage by not withholding oneself from one’s spouse. Based upon 1 Corinthians 7, Augustine sees this as a good because it keeps marriage pure by avoiding adultery. Nevertheless, he sees it as a strange good, since it is not prompted by the procreative purpose, again showing

his focus on procreation as the central purpose of marriage. Indeed, “paying the debt” is a venial sin, according to Augustine, because, as he understands Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:6, it is pardoned but not sanctioned by marriage.⁴⁴ By “sacrament” Augustine refers to a bond that joins a husband and wife and that cannot be broken even by divorce, desertion or barrenness.⁴⁵ The strength of marriage, even apart from procreation, is seen in the fact that the marriages of elderly and barren couples are valid. Companionship is not left out, but is separated from sexual union, for he argues that marriages are more praiseworthy when couples agree to abstain from intercourse, and the good in such a marriage is fellowship or mutual companionship.⁴⁶ Despite his recognition of purposes in marriage besides procreation, it is procreation that receives supreme priority. Indeed, despite the fact that Genesis 2 celebrates the “one-flesh” relationship without even mentioning procreation, Augustine cannot make sense of the narrative unless procreation is the help that is in view.⁴⁷

The criticism of such a view leveled by modern readers, who are more inclined to elevate companionship to a central place (and to understand it romantically), is often that such views are antiquated or chauvinistic, out-of-step with our own times and therefore irrelevant. Yet we have much to learn from the early theologians. Before criticizing and replacing their views, it is important to try to understand them. Augustine is relevant because he synthesized early Christian thinking on marriage and formulated a position that dominated Christian thinking for more than a millennium, and one that still exerts its influence, both positively and negatively, today.⁴⁸ Indeed, the early

Fathers were important recipients and transmitters of the gospel who applied Christian thought to many issues for the first time. It is therefore sensible to heed Paul Ramsey's suggestion that problematic aspects of early Christian thinkers will not be overcome by ignoring them or rejecting them completely and replacing their wisdom with something modern but no better. Indeed, many of the problems can be overcome by internal criticism, allowing us to preserve what is helpful while discarding certain errors.⁴⁹

We begin by asking why procreation was held to be the primary purpose of marriage. It is suggested that, first, such a view represents an attempt to understand the significance of marriage and family within the history of salvation, given that all things are filtered through the knowledge of God's revelation of himself through His son Jesus. Second, such a view is an attempt to defend the goodness of marriage and to make an apology for the Christian faith itself. The first point is a general one, which requires a more lengthy treatment than what is possible here.⁵⁰ The second point can be treated briefly in outlining a balanced view of the purposes of marriage in Christian thought.

Augustine's "apology" for marriage and procreation can be understood, in part, as a careful avoidance of the extreme views of the Manichees, who condemned procreation as evil, and the Pelagians, who did not account adequately for depravity, especially in the area of sexuality.⁵¹ Against such views, Augustine concludes that the problem of concupiscence, which for him relates especially to sexual sin, even in marriage, is remedied by the good of procreation.⁵² In terms of his rejection of the Manichees, for instance, he insists

that they destroy marriage by denigrating procreation and using sex for mere enjoyment, turning marriage into a brothel and their wives into harlots.⁵³ They use women for pleasure and for spiritual gain, promoting a false spirituality and a false understanding of marriage. By affirming procreation as the primary purpose of marriage and justification of even marital intercourse, Augustine avoids the problems that he sees in the Manichees and Pelagians.

Augustine was not the first Christian theologian to use marriage and procreation in a defense of Christianity and Christian morality. Clement of Alexandria argues that intercourse must be directed at procreation or it will serve only to satisfy and fuel passion. Sexual immorality is not applied to those "who chastely use marriage for procreation alone, but to those who were desiring to go beyond procreation."⁵⁴ His aim is to refute false gnostics who would throw off all bodily restraints. In addition to Clement, such theologians as Justin, Athenagoras and Minucius Felix each declare that Christians marry only to produce children, as a means of justifying Christian behavior to the world.⁵⁵ Clearly, such an argument is intended to impress "outsiders" with Christian morality.

The main reason that procreation is emphasized as the primary purpose of marriage is thus connected to a justification of marital intercourse. Sexual desire is viewed with suspicion even in marriage, as something that is too easily out of control and subject to selfish pleasure. In order to bring it under control, it is necessary to subject it to the will and reason, something that sexual desire resists because of concupiscence. For Augustine, Clement and other early theologians, the

one aspect of sexual union that is able to be brought under the direction of the will is procreation.⁵⁶ Accordingly, the strength of marriage is such that it makes other purposes of marriage good, but only the procreative purpose is without fault.

This view is confronted by the challenge that sexual desire can serve other purposes in marriage than procreation, and it does not have to be treated with the suspicion and disdain that is found in the early Fathers. They rightly recognize that even in marriage sexual desire may be overindulged, and that sexuality is somehow especially subject to the deleterious effects of sin. But they fail to see that it may serve the purpose of companionship and the marital bond in a way given by God even apart from a procreative intention. Indeed, it may be that sexual desire functions apart from a subjection to the will and reason *because* in doing so it especially serves the purpose of companionship.⁵⁷

This point leads to another corrective of Augustine's view on the relation between sexual desire, marriage and procreation. Augustine's view of the power of sexual desire and its tendency to be especially corrupt no doubt arose from his own experience. Prior to becoming a Christian, he had been attracted by philosophies and religious thinking that allowed for and encouraged sexual indulgence—the very philosophies that he would later attack fiercely.⁵⁸ His experience made him particularly suspicious of sexual desire, which led him to the position on marriage and procreation already outlined.

Without the suspicion that Augustine holds towards sexual desire and pleasure, it is possible to see that sexual desire is a good given by God, to serve the purpose of companionship in marriage. In fact,

Augustine himself suggests that he might have recognized sexual desire and pleasure as good, even apart from procreation, except for his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:6, in which his suspicion of sexual desire and pleasure is sustained by his reading of Paul. He states:

It is possible that it might not have been considered a sin to have intercourse with a spouse, not with a view to the procreation of children, which is the great blessing of marriage, but *for the sake of carnal pleasure* ... it is possible, I say, that this might not have been considered a sin, had the apostle not added: "But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment" (1 Cor 7:6). Who, then, can deny that it is a sin, when confessedly it is only by apostolic authority that permission is granted to those who do it?⁵⁹

Again, Augustine's complaint is that intercourse for "carnal pleasure" alone, apart from a procreative intent, is sinful in some sense even in marriage, though such sin is pardoned by marriage. Yet Augustine's interpretation of Paul is certainly problematic, for Paul's point is that spouses should not defraud one another by withholding their bodies from each other (1 Cor 7:5). Therefore the concession, or "permission," that Paul makes is that they can stay apart only for a time, for the purpose of prayer, rather than that they may "come together." Indeed, Paul exhorts them to return to one another, in sexual union, in order to avoid temptation.⁶⁰ It is Augustine's reading of Paul in this passage that permeates his view of marriage and sexuality, and that leads him to treat sexual pleasure itself as a sin, and to rely on procreation to justify even marital intercourse.⁶¹ Were it not for this understanding of Paul, Augustine's own indication is that he could have under-

stood companionship as a primary purpose of marriage, and perhaps sexual desire and pleasure as goods because they serve the purpose of companionship.

One of Augustine's contemporaries, Lactantius, speaks with a voice much less audible than Augustine's, yet he demonstrates more openness to sexual desire as something good, by taking the focus off the will and attributing great importance to emotions:

When God invented the plan of the two sexes, He placed in them the desire of each other and joy in union. So he put in bodies the most ardent desire of all living things, so that they might rush most avidly into these emotions and be able by this means to propagate.... That adversary of ours knows how great is the force of this desire ... and he transfers it from a right and good use to one depraved and evil. He put in illicit desires so that the foreign ones contaminate those *which are proper, which it is all right to have without any fault.*⁶²

This statement of Lactantius is somewhat unique among early Christian thinkers.⁶³ Even in this view, procreation is elevated as that toward which the desire and joy of sexuality are directed. Yet it is a balanced view, celebrating not only procreation, but also sexual desire and pleasure as gifts of God. It is also a reminder to the modern mind of the intimate connection between all of the aspects of marriage and sexual union, a connection that ought to be maintained in order to uphold the integrity of marriage. Further, Lactantius does indicate that procreation need not be that which justifies marital union or marriage itself.

Among influential theologians of the 20th century, the view of Lactantius is advanced by Bonhoeffer and Barth, who

affirm that marriage is not dependent upon procreation. As mentioned earlier, Bonhoeffer declares that "marriage is not founded upon the purpose of reproduction but on the union of man and woman."⁶⁴ Thus procreation should not be allowed to take priority over marital companionship and bodily union. Such union should not be entirely separated from procreation, Bonhoeffer claims, but where procreation is impossible, marriage is not in any way deficient.⁶⁵ Barth develops a balance of the goods of marriage, for he affirms that marriage implies "an inner readiness for children," and yet he maintains that marriage "is in no way conditioned by the co-existence of children. It subsists without the founding of a family, even as the life-partnership of a possibly childless marriage," for "husband and wife form a sphere of fellowship independent of child or family."⁶⁶

An important text that has not been discussed is the Song of Solomon, which celebrates human love, intimacy, desire and joy in the relationship between spouses, without the mention of children as the primary aim of that relationship. There are parallels to the second chapter of Genesis, giving further evidence that such a view of marriage is not foreign to the Old Testament, even with its emphasis upon the blessing of procreation. As Barth suggests, the Song of Solomon observes the delight that the man and woman have in one another, of the mystery of marriage as an incomparable covenant between human beings, one that points to the covenant that God makes with His people.⁶⁷

In this account of marriage, mutual love and companionship are highlighted, and sexual desire and union serve not merely the purpose of procreation, but to

foster love and companionship. From this point of view, undue attention on procreation as the primary aim of sexual union between spouses may actually detract from the proper focus of that union. It may, as a result, turn marriage into a project of making children rather than a communication of personal love out of which children may be received as a blessing. This can be especially true when the attempt to have children leads to the use of reproductive technology.⁶⁸

The Desire for Children

Many factors contribute to the desire to have children. It is, in a manner of speaking, one of the most “natural” desires of human beings. Indeed, it is God’s intention and design that marriage will be “fruitful.” Marriage is, by its very nature, outward seeking, and the creative love that God bestows on His creation is modeled in the giving and receiving of love in marriage, and in bringing forth and nurturing children. Marriage is not only a model of God’s own gift of love, but also, amazingly, of the relationship between Christ and His Church (Eph 5:32). It calls for the giving of oneself unselfishly for the benefit of one’s spouse and children. And it is meant to be a model of reaching out unselfishly beyond the immediate family to others in the forming of community. But the first place that such an impulse is located is in the relationship with one’s spouse and children. Without those relationships (as in the case of single adults or childless couples), there is a void that should be filled through other relationships.

There is, then, a “healthy” void that many couples experience when they are unable to have children because of infertility. It may be filled in a number of ways,

through adoption, outreach to children and others in need, or more recently through the pursuit of biological children by means of reproductive technology. In such a case, there is a natural progression from a desire that is given by God to the fulfillment of that desire. Reproductive technology should not be the first or only option that an infertile couple considers, but it certainly is one option. When a couple has taken into account the expense and failure rate involved in reproductive technology, proper motives for its use, and especially the moral acceptability of the particular method being considered, the use of reproductive technology may be a legitimate option for them.

As this essay has discussed, the desire for children and the pursuit of reproductive technology may be the result of a sense of religious obligation or moral duty. One of the opening citations indicates as much, and although the woman is Jewish, a similar understanding of Genesis 1:28 is held by some Christians. Even if such a view is subconscious or unspoken, it may seem that infertility is a sign of God’s displeasure. Further, as indicated, it may produce a sense that a childless marriage is, as such, an incomplete marriage. In such circumstances, there may be a powerful pressure for the infertile couple to do everything possible to have children, including making use of whatever forms of reproductive technology that are deemed morally acceptable.

If one holds such a view, even if it is unspoken, it needs to be said that childless couples have no obligation to make use of acceptable forms of infertility treatment in order to have children. Such a statement is not clear in the debate about reproductive technology. The ambiguity found in the debate on this point is illus-

trated in the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The catechism affirms procreation in marriage and discourages illicit forms of reproductive technology, and concludes that “spouses who still suffer from infertility *after exhausting legitimate medical procedures* should unite themselves with the Lord’s cross.”⁶⁹ This statement simply does not make it clear whether infertile couples are encouraged to exhaust legitimate medical procedures in an attempt to have children, or whether they are encouraged to rest from such efforts and to take comfort in the cross. Protestant writings are no clearer.

Paul Lauritzen recounts that in his own experience, “the doctor’s diagnosis [of infertility] was followed almost immediately by a presentation of possible ‘therapies’ ... all presented as points on the same therapeutic continuum.”⁷⁰ He and his wife were not encouraged to consider various options, including the possibility of remaining childless. As a result, the process seemed somewhat coercive, for “once an individual is presented with a treatment option, *not* to pursue it is, in effect, to choose childlessness and to accept responsibility for it.”⁷¹ Indeed, for this reason it has been argued that presenting reproductive technology simply as another option for infertile couples is somewhat deceptive, because the simple presentation of choice may assert social pressure to make use of the choice.⁷² Surely this should not be the case. Yet, even the church has not made it clear to the infertile couple that remaining childless is a valid option.

The subtle pressure placed upon infertile couples to have children by means of reproductive technology comes in different shapes. It is illustrated, for instance, by Stanley Grenz’s claim that “modern

technological capabilities allow a married person, motivated by the desire to facilitate the wish of one’s spouse to give birth to biological offspring, to choose willingly to set aside his or her ‘right’ to be the sole means whereby the spouse is able to become a parent.”⁷³ Grenz thus seeks to defend, at least in some cases, the use of donor eggs or sperm if necessary. The use of donor eggs or sperm is itself a cause for concern. Beyond that is the concern that the infertile spouse is “encouraged” to sacrifice so that the desire of the fertile spouse can be achieved. Is it not better to encourage spouses to be willing to support one another through such sufferings? If one is to make a sacrifice, should it not be the one in the “stronger” position to demonstrate the strength of the marriage vow and surrender any “right” to have children by some means other than his or her own spouse? And does not a statement such as Grenz’s reinforce the view that a childless marriage is incomplete and that all attempts ought to be made to have children?

Conclusion

Often reproductive technology is not the answer to the problem of infertility, and it should not be presented as the primary solution for infertile couples. A fuller discussion of the use of reproductive technology is necessary. However, it is important first to think carefully about marriage itself, and to develop a theological and biblical understanding of childlessness. Only then can options be entertained thoughtfully. One such option is to remain childless, or to wait and seek opportunities in other ways to reach out to others in love. Perhaps adoption is a possibility, even the adoption of children with special needs. A further option is to provide

parental love to children who do not receive it from their own parents, or who do not have both parents at home.

After considering such options, it may be that a couple will seek to have a child by means of a morally acceptable form of reproductive technology. In such cases, the opportunity to do so ought to be celebrated. The point is that if careful reflection precedes such a choice, and if such attempts fail, the disappointment will be eased somewhat by the knowledge that the marriage is not lacking something essential to it, and that such a marriage may yet be fruitful, though in other ways. This essay is an attempt to provide such reflection for infertile couples and all those who would contemplate the blessing of marriage and the place of procreation within marriage.

ENDNOTES

- ¹This article is an adaptation of a chapter from my doctoral dissertation entitled, "Procreation and Childlessness in Theological Perspective: An Examination of the Debate About Reproductive Technology" (University of Cambridge, 1997).
- ²Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are to the NASB.
- ³S. Blumberg, "Akara," *Shema* 17/323 (Dec 12, 1986) 1. Cited in S. Dresner, *Rachel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).
- ⁴C. Kircher, "Fertility and Infertility," in *Encyclopedia of Family Life*, ed. C.L. Bankston III, 5 vols. (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1999) 2:600. For information on reproductive technologies and the moral questions surrounding them, see www.bioethix.org, the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity.
- ⁵For a first-hand indication that there is such an assumption, see P. Lauritzen, "What Price Parenthood?" *Hastings Center Report* (March/April 1990) 38-46.
- ⁶For a helpful discussion of the relation between reflection and deliberation in moral reasoning see O. O'Donovan, "Christian Moral Reasoning," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. Atkinson, et al. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995) 122-127. Also Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, in *The Loeb Classical Library* (London: William Heinemann, 1982) III.iii.11.
- ⁷D. Shapiro, "Be Fruitful and Multiply," *Tradition* 13/14 (1973) 47.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹For example, see J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 45.
- ¹⁰Ibid (italics added).
- ¹¹D. N. Peel, "Procreation" in *Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987) 328.
- ¹²T. Mackin, *What is Marriage?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 98.
- ¹³K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, 4 vols. in 14 parts (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-1975) III.4, p. 268.
- ¹⁴H. Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. J.W. Doberstein (London: James Clarke, 1964) 202 n. 3.
- ¹⁵Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, "The Structure of P," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38/3 (1976) 290.
- ¹⁶D. Daube, *The Duty of Procreation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977) 1-2.
- ¹⁷For a typical coupling of these two texts, Daube refers to *Diodorus of Sicily*, vol. 12, trans. F. Walton, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1967) 284-285.
- ¹⁸Daube also notes Deut 33:18 in this

- regard. *The Duty of Procreation*, 3 n. 3. W. Brueggemann sees Genesis 1:28 in the same way, "The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1972) 400-401.
- ¹⁹Daube, *The Duty of Procreation*, 3.
- ²⁰Some prominent examples include J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2 vols, trans. J. King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847, 1850) 1:97-98; D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. N. Smith, ed. E. Bethge, paperback ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 179-180 n. 16; and C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) 160-161.
- ²¹Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 179-180 n. 16.
- ²²Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 18.
- ²³Brueggemann, "The Kerygma," 400-401.
- ²⁴Ibid.
- ²⁵Contrary to Von Rad, who holds that Jacob is still childless at this time, and that the text apparently has been carelessly misplaced by a redactor (*Genesis*, 339).
- ²⁶Cf. Gen 24:60 (pronounced to Rebekah by her family); Gen 28:3 (Isaac to Jacob); Gen 48:15-20 (Jacob to Ephraim and Manasseh); Gen 49:25 (Jacob to Joseph).
- ²⁷Daube notes that there are many blessings in the Bible that are delightful, such as wealth, food, children and land, but there is no obligation to pursue them (*Duty of Procreation*, 6-8).
- ²⁸Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 6-14*. In *Luther's Works*, vol. 2, ed. J. Pelikan, trans. G. Schick (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1960) 142-143.
- ²⁹Cf. Lauritzen, "What Price Parenthood?"
- ³⁰G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) 33.
- ³¹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Questions LXXV-CII, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.) question XCII, art. 1, answer (p. 275); cf. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 2 vols., trans. J. Taylor, *Ancient Christian Writers* 41-42 (New York: Newman Press, 1982) 2:75.
- ³²E. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. O. Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937) 368 (italics added).
- ³³Ibid, 653 n. 16 (italics added).
- ³⁴P. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationship from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 32.
- ³⁵Augustine, "On the Good of Marriage," trans. C. Cornish, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (hereafter cited as *NPNF*), ed. P. Schaff, first series, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988 [reprint]) section 7 (cf. section 3).
- ³⁶Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.
- ³⁷Ibid, 71.
- ³⁸Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.2, p. 291.
- ³⁹Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, 367.
- ⁴⁰For a helpful theological discussion of the use of contraception by theologians of various traditions, see "Contraception: A Symposium," *First Things* 88 (December 1998) 17-29; for a historical understanding of attitudes towards contraception, see J. T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, enlarged edition (London: Belknap Press, 1986 [1965]).
- ⁴¹Augustine, "Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon," trans. R. Stothert, *NPNF*, ed. P. Schaff, first series, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [reprint]) section 22.30.
- ⁴²Augustine, "On the Good of Marriage," section 18.
- ⁴³Ibid.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., sections 4, 6.
- ⁴⁵Ibid, section 7.
- ⁴⁶Ibid, section 3.
- ⁴⁷Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 2:75.
- ⁴⁸See Noonan, *Contraception*, for the extent of Augustine's influence, e.g., 557 (index, under "Augustine, influence of").
- ⁴⁹See P. Ramsey, "Human Sexuality in the History of Redemption," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16/1 (1988) 64ff.
- ⁵⁰However, for an excellent discussion of Augustine in this regard, see *ibid*.
- ⁵¹Cf. Noonan, *Contraception*, 134.
- ⁵²Augustine, "On Marriage and Concupiscence," trans. P. Holmes, *NPNF*, ed. P. Schaff, first series, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971 [reprint]) sections 1.8-9.
- ⁵³Augustine, "Reply to Faustus," section 15.7.
- ⁵⁴Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, book III, "On Marriage," trans. H. Chadwick, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 2, ed. J. Oulton and H. Chadwick (London: SCM Press, 1954) 3.15.96; cf. 3.7.58.
- ⁵⁵Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, trans. A.

- Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter cited as *ANF*), vol. 1, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [reprint]) chapter 29; Athenagoras, "A Plea for the Christians," trans. B. Pratten, *ANF*, vol. 2, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [reprint]) chapter 33; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. R. Wallis, *ANF*, vol. 4, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [reprint]) chapter 31.
- ⁵⁶Augustine, "On the Good of Marriage," sections 6, 18; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 3.7.58.
- ⁵⁷Ramsey, "Human Sexuality," 60.
- ⁵⁸See Augustine's *Confessions*, trans. J.G. Pilkington, *NPNF*, ed. P. Schaff, first series, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 [reprint]) pp. 45-207.
- ⁵⁹Augustine, "On Faith, Hope and Love," trans. J. Shaw, *NPNF*, ed. P. Schaff, first series, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988 [reprint]) section 78 (italics added).
- ⁶⁰For an examination of this text, see C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A. & C. Black, 1968) 157-158; also G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 283-284. Ramsey, "Human Sexuality," 69, discusses this error in Augustine and its implications for his thinking.
- ⁶¹Ramsey, "Human Sexuality," 69.
- ⁶²Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, trans. M. McDonald, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 49 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1964) 6.23 (italics added).
- ⁶³Cf. E. Fuchs, *Sexual Desire and Love* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983) 248 n. 9.
- ⁶⁴Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 179 n. 16.
- ⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 178-180.
- ⁶⁶Barth, CD, III.4, p. 189.
- ⁶⁷*Ibid.*, III.1, pp. 312-313.
- ⁶⁸For a helpful discussion along these lines, see O. O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- ⁶⁹*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1994) par. 2379 (italics added).
- ⁷⁰Lauritzen, "What Price Parenthood?," 39.
- ⁷¹*Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁷²G. Corea, et al., "Prologue," in *Made to Order: The Myth of Reproductive and Genetic Progress*, ed. P. Spallone and D. Steinberg, The Athene Series (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987) 8-9.
- ⁷³S. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990) 152.

