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Wonderfully
Made

Ethics and the beginning of human life

DR MEGAN BEST



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*For you formed my inward parts;
You knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Ps 139:13-14a

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Preface

I READ A NEWSPAPER article the other day, with this headline:
'Are these babies really a crime?'

Underneath were photographs of two adorable children lovingly clasped in their parents' arms. It was a story about gestational surrogacy, prompted by the birth of children to high-profile parents through the use of a surrogate mother.

Are they a crime? Of course not. All babies are beautiful, and these children are loved by their families and no doubt bring much joy. But it highlights the difficulty in evaluating the morality of issues in reproduction, because reproductive technologies are aiming to provide things that are in themselves good—things that are normal for humans to desire; things that we all desire. Because these technologies aim to satisfy these good desires, we hesitate to brand them as wrong. Nonetheless, evaluating them objectively is a necessary task if we are to put all areas of our lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

I have written this book in response to many requests from Christians who are struggling to find the information they need to think clearly about the morality of reproductive technology. I write from the perspective of believing that human life begins at fertilization and deserves protection from that time. I will give my reasons for this position, but I accept that some will not agree with me. This book may not be for them (although I hope and trust that it will provide clear and useful information on the current state of play in medicine and technology for all readers). The book will be particularly relevant to those who hold the Christian Bible as authoritative, and want to see how it can be applied to modern

reproductive dilemmas.

These matters involve personal decisions for which we will answer to God alone. No blame is intended for those whose past choices are now regretted. We make the best decisions we can with the information we have at the time. I now know from experience how difficult it is to get accurate information on some of these topics. This information is intended to help us look forward, not back, and make the best choices we can in the future. We live in a fallen world and none of us is free from the ravages of sin. Thank God that he knows our hearts and forgives our sins when we confess them to him (as 1 John 1:9 promises). Finally, I realize that some of the subject matter in this book refers to unspeakable personal suffering. May the God of all comfort hold you in the palm of his hand.

Megan Best

July 2012

The dilemma

IS IT EVER RIGHT to have an abortion? What about the case of a young girl who has been raped? Or what if the baby has something seriously wrong with it and we know it can't survive?

What about the right to have a child? When we 'create' test-tube babies, are we saying we know better than God who should be a parent? Is IVF ever okay for Christians?

These are all very good questions. However, they are also difficult questions that affect the whole of our lives. Children are a blessing from the Lord, and it is right and good to desire them. Yet the technology that can make fertility control possible does not always operate within a framework where human beings are valued from the time they are created. Not only that, but as more and more extreme manipulations of unborn humans become available, the less extreme ones seem more reasonable by comparison. Before we know it, as a community we find ourselves regarding unborn human life as a resource to use rather than a gift to cherish. We contemplate our ethical dilemmas and say to ourselves, 'How did we end up here?'

Due to the development of reliable contraception and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) we are told that we can now have sex without children, and children without sex. The question is: should we? The urge to have a baby can be powerful, and the fear of an unplanned pregnancy can be overwhelming. Faced with unmet desires in a world where anything seems technologically possible, in a climate where we are used to being in control, the pull between what is possible and what is ethical can create an unbearable tension.

People in church circles often feel this tension strongly, but discussions

about practical issues arising from our sexuality can be awkward and embarrassing, involving as they do images of “glistening eyes and soft dark orifices, moisture and menses, muscle and bones and blood”.¹ However, God made us as embodied creatures, and our physicality is an important part of what it means to be human. As the way society views our bodies moves further and further from the biblical understanding, we need to think through a truly Christian understanding of human procreation.

Reformed Christianity has not always been strong in this area. In fact, it is difficult to find a comprehensive theology of the issues surrounding human procreation. Whatever the reasons in the past, as the science involved gets more complex, it is imperative that we get a clear theologically driven handle on the questions it raises. Recent controversies about the morality of research on human embryos have made many people think more carefully about other ways we treat humans in this early stage of development. I am regularly asked, “If it’s not okay to kill a human embryo for research, why aren’t we more careful to check which contraceptives do the same thing?”

This book, then, is an attempt to examine the different aspects of the quest for married couples to plan their families. It is not intended to replace a medical consultation at any level, but to give information that allows the reader to prepare ahead, and to think through the issues from a biblical point of view.

As we do so, there will be some inevitable clashes with the prevailing views of our society. Sometimes we will need to go against the flow, and not fall in with accepted modern practices. We will examine things carefully, and if necessary, do things differently, in order to be faithful to God. This can be hard. You might be seen as a nuisance or a crackpot. But Jesus Christ has called us to be salt and light in the corruption of our generation. We are the people of God. We *should* look different, and when we live out the kingdom’s values we bring glory to God.

Modern reproductive technology is very complex, and it is difficult to make ethical judgements about reproductive therapies if we don’t understand what is actually being done. This book is therefore organized to help you understand those areas with which you may be unfamiliar. As you read, please remember that this is an international publication, and so the availability of some practices will vary in different countries.

1. J Budziszewski, in ‘Contraception: a symposium’, *First Things*, December 1998, pp. 17-29.

Many of the key topics in medical ethics revolve around the question of when human life begins, so it is important we clarify that issue at the outset. We start by considering the biology of how human life develops in the womb, before looking in chapter 3 at the philosophical and theological questions of when life begins. Human beings are made for relationships, and we cannot make important life decisions in any other context, so chapter 4 looks at the background of biblical teaching on human relationships. A model for ethical Christian decision-making is offered in chapter 5 so that we can determine a biblical way to decide right from wrong, and see how this will differ from others in our community.

Following that we will consider separately the areas that can hold ethical problems for those who believe life begins at fertilization. This book assumes that the place for sexual relationships for Christians is within marriage. At the beginning of our married lives, there is usually more interest in contraception than child-bearing, so we begin with that topic in chapter 6. The easily available option of reversible contraceptives has, however, reduced the tolerance for unplanned pregnancy, so the corollary of legal abortion was almost inevitable. We deal with it next in chapter 7.

We look at normal pregnancy and find out the new and sinister agendas underlying many modern practices in chapter 8. In chapter 9 we go on to consider what can be done when you discover there is something wrong with your longed-for child.

Of course, not all couples will be able to have the baby they wish for, so in chapter 10 we examine infertility, before touching on the silent sorrow of miscarriage and stillbirth in chapter 11. One 'solution' to infertility is assisted reproduction and we look at that in chapter 12, before considering why you may decide against it in chapter 13. A common problem for Christians pursuing assisted reproduction is deciding what to do with leftover embryos. Options are discussed in chapter 14. Chapter 15 on human embryo research, stem cells and cloning helps clarify some of the options available to parents in this situation.

In the midst of all the discussion about assisted childbirth, we need to take time to consider whether it is ethical for Christians to embrace modern technology in the quest for a child. After all, if God had wanted us to be parents he could have made it happen naturally, couldn't he? When is it permissible to take things into our own hands? We look at this in chapter 16.

We end by considering how the Christian view of the value of unborn

human life has changed over the ages, and whether pastors need to rethink the guidance they offer their members in the new millennium.

The appendices allow us to consider in more depth a few issues raised in the text: whether the oral contraceptive pill causes abortions, what are the commercial markets created by abortion, advances in the study of human genetics, and what is meant when someone asks you if you want your baby's cord blood cells collected at birth.

Many of the papers and journal articles I refer to in the footnotes—and even some of the books—are available online and can be freely read or downloaded. Internet search engines are great tools for this purpose, and I encourage you to follow up on those references that interest you.

I think it is important that in all our discussion of these topics, we remember that we will touch on painful issues for real people who have had to come to terms with terrible sadness in their lives. My prayer is that this information will help those who are making decisions, and those who are supporting them, to bring glory to God.