

An Approach to Bioethics

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It would seem appropriate for us as Lutherans while approaching ethical issues to ask the catechetical Lutheran question "What does this mean?" As someone once said "ideas have consequences." It is always good to inquire about the meaning of those consequences before becoming too enamored with the technologies. In our culture ethics is approached from the perspective of constitutional rights and the focus is on learning to step precisely on the politically correct stepping stones in taking action that can then be termed ethical. Many see the word ethical as synonymous with the word legal. As such, the rule is that following the law, protocol, or procedure properly constitutes the substance of being ethical. Additionally, the second rule of thumb is that an action is ethical as long as no one is harmed by what we do.

But Lutherans have always begun with inquiry about the meaning of what God has done. It is a Gospel beginning. We then look at that meaning for both our justification and our sanctification. We then act in response accordingly. In that Lutheran tradition we might think about the following:

A Theology of Procreation

We might think about language first and compare the biblical inference which we have come to know as procreation with the cultural inference we have come to call reproduction. The difference between procreation and reproduction is the difference between the begetting and the making of a child. Appearing first in Genesis, the word translated "beget," found its way into the Nicene Creed to express the nature of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The word beget was chosen to confess that the Father and the Son are of the same substance. That is, the Son was "begotten, not made." Like the Father, the Son is also God. Applied to the relationship between a human father and his child the same (in a less significant way) might be said. For example, my son and daughter were begotten by my wife and myself; we did not make them as something apart from ourselves. Only God can make something new. We merely pass on what God has already made. Children are begotten of our loving embrace while the focus is not on our making a child, but on our making love. Indeed, no parents know precisely when or if a child might result from their love. There is little, if any, control over that. Our children, like all children, were a gift, not the result of our own making. And this is part of the biblical meaning of conception, namely that children are a gift of God which God may or may not give regardless of what we desire, do, or intend. Although it may sadden us not to be given that gift, it is another thing to set out to make a child through other means. (This is not to say we ought not aim at curing diseases that prevent conception.) The Genesis command to have "dominion over" and

to "subdue the earth" is aimed at man's relationship to animals and the planet. It is not intended that people should have dominion over other people as some reproductive technologies enable us to do, for example, when we make and discard human embryos as will. More needs to be said of this in another opportunity.

The Language We Use

The word reproduction as a metaphor of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century implies the production of things and envisions the assemble line. In production we make products for our use. Products or commodities must pass quality control and may be rejected if they are not what we desire. There is nothing personal or intimate about producing goods. We acquire them for our needs and wants. The outcome is a good product, but nothing more. Such ideas have consequences when applied to producing humans in the laboratory.

Children are not products and ought not be expected to meet the need we have for fulfillment as persons that only God can meet. We may be proud of our children, but they ought not become our gods. It is one thing to desire children. It is another to become desperate for children. In the desire for a child that drives a married couple or even a single woman to seek reproductive technologies people frequently say they will do anything to have a child of their own. Indeed, the things they are offered by fertility specialists is unlimited. In the end, husbands and wives often move from being receivers of a gift to being demanding of a child to satisfy their desire. As sincere and loving as they may be as husband and wife they also contend with their own sinful human nature.

There are losses in the use of reproductive technologies:

- (1) Intimacy must be sacrificed in the technologies of making a child.
- (2) Often the making of a child bypasses one spouse and selects what another person outside the marriage can provide. It makes little difference morally that husband and wife agree to the terms of this arrangement.
- (3) Quality control is operative through amniocenteses and the "selective reduction of embryos." That is, screening for imperfect, damaged embryos, or wrong-sex fetuses or children-in-the-making often results in abortion and the repeated attempts to make a child acceptable to parents or reproductive specialist.
- (4) And often the parents, even as Christians, are not aware or will not allow themselves to think of what is happening in their desperation for a child. Through ignorance or willful intent sinful human nature still results in the need for daily contrition and God's gracious absolution.

A Pastoral Word

These issues have the nature of a "hard saying" about them. It is difficult to look critically at these issues when they affect the feelings of childless couples. But feelings or sentiment alone are not enough to justify silence. The practice of seeking the aid of a fertility specialist is more common today than we may realize since infertility is on the rise. Since desperation often motivates childless couples they are unlikely to broadcast to the congregation that they are seeking such help. The pastoral task becomes even more complex when pastors and their wives in their desperation have also sought such help. The point of examining these issues is not to condemn, but to be faithful to the meanings of these things according to the biblical revelation and, when necessary, to repent for our overstepping the limits God has set. Repentance is not easy when it affects our deepest desires and it is not always clear where it is warranted. If it is discovered that we have sinned we have a gracious God who will forgive our sin and heal our wounds. Grace surely abounds but *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"* (Rom. 6:1-2). The pastoral task of applying Law and Gospel in helping parishioners is still ours to do.

Like abortion, the fallout for many has yet to occur. Children born of technology are also gifts of God for all life comes from God, but it is not the child who is in question. It is what and how we do things that is in question. Our children born of our desperation may someday have questions about the absence of intimacy in their origin, questions of lineage and identity where third party donors of sperm or egg and surrogate mothers have been used. These children too will need our love and care and not our cover-up as they ask honest questions of us.

Reproductive Technologies

Three technologies concern us most: in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, and surrogate motherhood.

In vitro (Latin for "in glass" meaning a Petri dish) fertilization involves the bringing together of sperm and egg in the laboratory to form an embryo which is then implanted in the woman. The first child was conceived this way in 1978 in England. Today, twenty years later, the success rate for achieving a full-term delivery through *in-vitro* fertilization is still low. The expenses are high (\$25,000 to 40,000), payable whether successful or not. The stress of failure to conceive often results in depression for the woman and even divorce for the couple.

Artificial Insemination has been accomplished in the breeding of animals for a long time. It can be as simple as having a husband's sperm injected into the vagina or uterus of his wife in a doctor's office or it can be as complex as involving donors so that the child conceived is that of the wife, but not of the husband. In artificial insemination fertilization takes place *in vivo* (in the uterus of the woman) rather than *in vitro*. Again, intimacy is sacrificed and the one flesh meaning of marriage violated if a donor is used.

Surrogate motherhood is the use of a woman's uterus other than that of the mother who will raise the child. Pregnancy may be achieved through artificial insemination or through *in vitro* fertilization with or without donors involved. In surrogate motherhood a child is conceived for the purpose of giving it away. This in itself is morally objectionable since the biblical meaning of a child as gift of God to be received and nurtured is set aside. Surrogate motherhood differs from adoption in that here a child is not conceived for the purpose of giving it away, but rather is unknowingly conceived and unwanted. Surrogacy is for fee and often invites the poor and needy to sell their bodies for money. Where surrogacy is offered out of compassion and not money it is still incompatible with a biblical understanding. No child should be conceived with the intention of not loving it and treating it as a "thing" to be given away as a gift.

Sentiment and the Deed

In the culture around us the determination of ethical or moral is often based on the sentiment of the one making the decision. In the minds of many motive justifies the act. Justification can range from the openly abrasive, "If it feels good do it," to the more subtle, "If a person means well and is compassionate then it is good." In both cases it is sentiment that declares the deed moral or good. Historically, great evil has been done in the name of compassion. But Lutheran theology has a way of viewing the objective act itself as either compatible or incompatible with what God does for us. God does not treat us as things, but makes us his own, breathing into us his own breath of life (Genesis 2). The truth of God's Word defines right and wrong. Pastors will have to become informed of the meanings of Truth in these issues and speak in love when they serve God's people in these matters