

# **Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 12, Reproductive Technologies**

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 12, Reproductive Technologies.

Okay, the next issue that we will discuss is reproductive technologies.

There are a number of moral issues in our time that have emerged because of moral questions that arise with the development of certain technologies. And this is nowhere more significant than when it comes to reproductive technologies. So, let's begin with an overview of some of the methods that are used.

What was formerly known as artificial insemination is now generally called intrauterine insemination or IUI. This is the artificial insertion of the man's sperm into a woman's uterus. There's gamete intrafallopian transfer, also known as GIFT, where multiple eggs are extracted from the woman and then placed with the man's sperm in the woman's fallopian tubes.

In vitro fertilization, which is a bit more well known, with IVF, eggs are fertilized in the lab, and then the embryos that are created are implanted in the uterus. Or in something called ZIFT, the embryos are implanted in fallopian tubes. Or the zygotes would be implanted in the fallopian tubes.

And then, in surrogate motherhood, a third-party woman is used to carry a baby to term, which, for whatever reason, the other woman cannot. The surrogate is impregnated through either IUI or IVF and then carries the baby to term, which she may or may not be genetically related to, depending on what eggs are used. So, what should be our approach to these issues? According to the utilitarian or the Kantian, we need only consider the future happiness or, I'm sorry, we need only consider the happiness or the pleasure of the people involved, which would be the mother, the father, the surrogate if we're talking about surrogate motherhood.

And we can also take into account the future happiness or pleasure on the part of the baby that's created. In the case of Kantian ethics, we consider the autonomy of the people involved, respect for persons, and so on. And can we universalize this practice? But from a Christian standpoint, we need to consider other practices as well.

Scott Ray is helpful in providing some moral parameters that are worth considering and various other considerations. One is that medical technology is a gift. You know, we are divine image bearers.

We are creative and innovative. And one of the things that human beings, as divine image bearers, have the capacity to do is create all sorts of technologies. So that is a blessing from God, other things being equal.

Technologies can be used for good or ill. And as we reflect morally on issues like this, we're striving to use our technologies for moral good rather than for evil. Secondly, procreation was designed by God to occur within the context of a heterosexual, monogamous marriage.

We'll talk about that in a separate lecture. Human sexuality, the moral questions that arise related to human sexuality. Thirdly, the sanctity of life and the moral status of the unborn are important considerations.

From a Christian point of view, we believe in the sanctity of human life, that all human life is sacred because human beings are made in the image of God, we're told, in Genesis 1. And as we talked about in our discussion of abortion, from a biblical standpoint, the unborn child is a sacred life. The sanctity of human life principle applies to the unborn child. So that needs to be kept in mind.

Fourthly, adoption is an important alternative to consider as opposed to opting for any of these reproductive technologies. It's something that is definitely a blessing for millions of couples who choose to adopt. It is a very redemptive thing to do, particularly when a couple adopts a child that otherwise would not be well cared for.

And that in any case, children are a gift from God. Whenever there's the natural production of a child through the procreative act, that is a gift from God. It's something that he does, especially within each womb when a child is created.

And finally, the virtue of faith. This is certainly a trial of faith for many couples who are having difficulty conceiving. And it's an opportunity.

I'm sure most don't view it that way. It's a time when one can grow in faith and trust God's sovereignty. It's a very difficult challenge, though, for many couples.

At what point should we give up, you know, striving to have our own child, whether through technologies like this or other means? At what point should we just pursue adoption or surrender to God that it is not God's will for us to have children? The pastor of my church or I'm a member, and he and his wife were unable to conceive. So, at some point, they just decided, well, it's not God's will for us to have our own children. For whatever reason, they decided not to adopt.

But they focused on other forms of ministry, welcoming different students into their homes, living with them, and sometimes people from other countries. And they've

ministered in that way, and it's been a very powerful ministry for them. But that can be a very challenging trial of faith.

Here are a couple of Roman Catholic theological distinctions that are not necessarily affirmed by most Protestants but are certainly worth considering and taking seriously. One is this idea of the unity between sex and procreation. In the Roman Catholic theological tradition, there's a norm that is recognized that marital sex should always be open to procreation.

So it's not saying that you should always be intending to have a child every time you have sex. But there must be an openness to procreation, and that would entail not taking steps to prevent procreation that are artificial, using technologies and contraceptives. Although something called the rhythm method is approved, and that is simply through self-control, avoiding having sex at times when it is more likely that the woman may conceive.

But there's a much tighter connection recognized and affirmed between the sex act and procreation in the Roman Catholic tradition that is generally the case with Protestants. And then, in terms of the proper role of technology in the Roman Catholic tradition, medical technology is recognized as something that can assist normal intercourse but may not replace it. So, that has implications for some of these reproductive technologies.

Here are some of the moral issues that arise in the context of some of these reproductive technologies. Intrauterine insemination and in vitro fertilization, as well as GIFT, the use of ovulation drugs in the cases of GIFT, IVF, but also sometimes in IUI, poses a significant risk for high numbers of multiples, sometimes four, five, six babies being produced through these methods that pose a high risk to the mother as well as the babies, and you have a higher incidence of loss of the children's lives. It's a difficult question given that when, say, in vitro fertilization is done, it's expensive.

You're spending tens of thousands of dollars for this, and when you have these embryos, then that has to be implanted; that process is also expensive. So, you want to get the most out of your money, so that is the incentive to insert a high number of embryos with the hope that at least one implant. But through the process of in vitro fertilization and the production of all these embryos, it is routinely the case that there are going to be leftovers and embryos that are not necessary because now, say, the couple has gone through the process two, three times, and they don't need to use the other embryos that are now being held in cold storage.

So, what to do with them? They could simply be destroyed, donated, or stored indefinitely, or used for experimental purposes such as stem cell research, which many people advocate. The financially risky solution here is to create no more embryos than you're willing to carry to term. I have been consulted by couples

before about this, and I remember one in particular where I was asked this question, knowing that this was a concern.

They were a young Christian couple, and they were worried about the prospect of having embryos that went unused and, therefore, died. They believe it, right? These are human persons with a right to life. So, my recommendation to them was to use whatever embryos that they created or that were conceived through in vitro fertilization and implant all of them with the intention of all of them implanting and coming to term and being born.

And I don't know how many they did, but total, but I know it's through several implantations, they would do, say, around three or four at a time, and they were certainly open to all of them being implanted. They probably would have ended up with 15 or 16 kids if that had happened each time. As it turned out, it was successful, I think, three different times.

They implanted all the embryos, so none of them were left in cold storage, and they didn't have to worry about what to do with the other embryos that were unused because they were all used. And now I think they have about four kids. Maybe that's a bigger family than they would have intended otherwise, but it was their conviction that out of respect for the sanctity of human life, this is what we're going to do, even if it means we have eight or nine kids.

So, that's an approach that I somewhat tentatively recommended. Some pro-lifers would not even go that far, and they would eschew the use of this method altogether. But that's the approach that I recommended.

Now, with regard to surrogate motherhood, this is far more problematic. When you involve a third party in the process of reproduction, here are some standard arguments against surrogate motherhood. One is that it is exploitative, that it turns babies into merchandise because it's often done for profit where the surrogate mother is paid a certain amount, even thirty forty thousand dollars, to carry this baby to term.

That would not be the case in situations where, say, the woman who can't carry the baby to term has asked her sister to be the surrogate. A lot of times it happens within families like that. So you don't have that profit concern or motive there, but where that is involved, then you've got this exploitation worry that I think is significant.

A second argument is that surrogate motherhood turns a vice into a virtue by sanctioning a woman's detachment from her body. So, some laws will actually be written in such a way as to refer to surrogates as human incubators. It would ordinarily be understood to be a vice on the part of a mother to be emotionally

detached from her child, but that's exactly what is wanted in this case, so that the surrogate mother will readily give up this child she just gave birth to.

So, isn't a practice that turns a vice into a virtue or regards a vice as a virtue morally suspect for that reason? In many cases, the surrogate changes her mind and becomes so attached to the child emotionally that she does not want to give it up, and that can create and has created many conflicts and complications in the cases of surrogate motherhood. That leads to another question. What rights, if any, should we recognize the surrogate as having regarding her baby? That's not easy to figure out.

It becomes very complicated. And you have, again, the various practical problems related to this, including the emotional distress, even if she does decide to give the baby up. This, in some cases, has a lasting negative emotional effect.

So here are some concluding questions that we can ask. Might Roman Catholics have been correct all along that the problem lies with the strong separation of sex and procreation? Should married couples always be open to the possibility of conception for this reason? In the Protestant world, among Evangelicals, things have changed dramatically in the last 50 or 60 years, particularly with the advent of the birth control pill, which, when the birth control pill was first put on the market in the early 1960s, I've read that as many as 95% of Evangelicals were against it, which is interesting because now the numbers would probably be reversed. The strong majority of Evangelicals would be okay with the birth control pill, and that shows just how much this particular practice has impacted perspectives in the Evangelical community.

But evidently, far more Evangelicals back in the 60s recognized a kind of natural connection between sex and procreation that the idea of a birth control pill was, you know, contradicting. And it's true with a lot of things, right, that are kind of cultural developments that are shocking at first, and then we tend to get acclimated to the idea. I know the bikini bathing suit was introduced around the same time, and that was quite a scandal among Christians, basically just coloring underwear and then presenting it as legitimate swimsuit attire, and now you don't hear many complaints about bikinis.

So, we can kind of get accustomed to things and, for that reason, lose any kind of moral qualms when, for all we know, they really are morally problematic. Another question: at what point are the financial and emotional costs of dealing with fertility problems prohibitive? What should couples, or when should couples turn to adoption instead? At what point do you just say, this is really too risky, too expensive, let's adopt. Of course, adoption becomes very expensive typically.

So, at what point are the financial commitments there too much? And when might the cost of either of these suggest that it really is God's will that, you know, that the couple have no children or have no more children? I know that in the case of my pastor, I'm sure financial dimensions or, you know, important considerations were important in their decision to finally settle on the conclusion that it was God's will for them not to have children. Another question we can ask is, have we shifted in our society from the view of children as a blessing from the Lord to one that views them rather as either a burden or an entitlement? Among many pro-choicers, there is a prevailing view, at least in many cases, that children are a burden. I was at a conference many years ago where a paper was being presented on abortion, and in the ensuing discussion, a woman in the audience compared conception to a traffic accident.

If she found that she conceived a child, she would view that as something comparable to, you know, a traffic accident, which made me wonder about what she would say about my own conception as a result of a spermicide that failed. I am the equivalent of the product of a traffic accident, you know, in terms of her psychological perspective. But that would be to view children as a burden, childbirth, and conception as a burden.

Those who view children as an entitlement take, you know, a very different perspective, and that's a common attitude as well, and that impacts a kind of maybe uncritical attitude towards a lot of these reproductive technologies that need to be reconsidered as well. So even our attitudes as a society or as individual Christians towards childbirth and how we should view it have significant implications for how we approach this issue of reproductive technologies.

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