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Third-Party Gametes and the Christian

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Abstract

As more assisted reproductive technologies (ART) become available, Christians will find themselves grappling with thorny questions about which ones are ethical and acceptable for use by Christ-followers. Many ART technologies have already been widely accepted by the community of faith, while the appropriateness of others is controversial, due to religious convictions regarding marriage and the sanctity of life. One of the most controversial types of ART (especially among Christians) is third-party gamete donation in the context of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF). Infertile couples consider third-party gamete donation when one or both partners are unable to produce viable gametes. In such an instance, a couple seeks to conceive a child using either sperm or ova from another individual. This paper will reject as unethical such a practice, for three reasons: 1) it violates the sanctity of marriage, 2) it may lead to exploitation of human beings, and 3) it fails to give due consideration to the rights of the resulting children.

Keywords

Assisted reproductive technologies, third-party gametes, Christians

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As more assisted reproductive technologies (ART) become available, Christians will find themselves grappling with thorny questions about which ones are ethical and acceptable for use by Christ-followers. Many ART technologies have already been widely accepted by the community of faith, while the appropriateness of others is controversial, due to religious convictions regarding marriage and the sanctity of life. One of the most controversial types of ART (especially among Christians) is third-party gamete donation in the context of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF). Infertile couples consider third-party gamete donation when one or both partners are unable to produce viable gametes. In such an instance, a couple seeks to conceive a child using either sperm or ova from another individual. This paper will reject as unethical such a practice, for three reasons: 1) it violates the sanctity of marriage, 2) it may lead to exploitation of human beings, and 3) it fails to give due consideration to the rights of the resulting children.

The Scriptures make it clear that procreation is an event that God intended for within marriage (Gen. 1:28, Malachi 2:15). While few would suggest that third-party gamete donation is morally equivalent to adultery (since it involves no sexual act), it still separates one of the main purposes of marriage (procreation) from the boundaries within which it was designed to occur. Biblical characters such as Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel who separated procreation from marriage (Gen. 16, Gen. 30) not only incurred the displeasure of the Lord (Gen. 17), but faced many other serious consequences (Gen. 16, 21, 37). Francis stresses this point: “God’s ideal for marriage is that it occurs between one man and one woman. Artificial insemination can be done with a third party donor. This activity would violate the biblical ideal of monogamy . . . This technique [ovum donation] can violate the intention of marriage because it shares the outcome of marriage intimacy with a third party in a pre-meditated manner.” He goes on to state: “Marriage was meant to occur before procreation . . . God’s ideal for the family is participation of both a mother and father in the procreation and raising of children. This rules out cloning and most third party, substitute, or donor arrangements” (2000, pp.4-7). Kharb points out that “Most of the religions also don’t accept the impregnation of one’s wife by the sperm of a third person, as it doesn’t make the child one’s own and is looked down upon as illegitimate even in man-made laws . . . it is redefining the concept of family and turning traditional notions of reproduction upside down” (2007, p. 4).

A second reason that Christians should avoid third-party gamete donation is that it quite often results in the exploitation of human beings, who are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27). All persons and should be treated with respect and dignity, and not taken advantage of for one’s own personal interests (Phil. 2:3-4). Cooper and Glazer comment, “Assisted reproductive technology is not without medical side effects or risks, and people who are desperate for children may not be in the best position to objectively evaluate these risks to themselves or to third parties. . . some women who are not the intended parents (ovum donors and/or surrogates or gestational carriers) are being subjected to these risks . . . [and] financial incentives may be inducements to third parties to ignore these potential harms” (1998, p.32).

What are the risks that Cooper and Glazer are referring to? Shanner and Nisker explain the risks associated with harvesting donor ova: “Ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome may pose serious and even life-threatening complications for women undergoing ovarian stimulation . . . a [potential] increased risk of ovarian cancer has been reported . . . Small risks of punctured bladder, damaged blood vessels and pelvic inflammatory disease accompany ovum retrieval” (2001, p.1593). These risks may be minimized in an effort to encourage potential ovum donors to give up their eggs, or overshadowed by the temptation presented by possible financial gain: “On some college campuses single women have been solicited to rent out their wombs or sell their eggs for thousands of dollars” (Francis, 2000, p.5). There is also some risk to any woman impregnated by donor sperm: “. . . there have been numerous accounts of the transmission of infectious diseases, such as HIV, urea plasmids, cytomegalovirus, and herpes simplex virus. There is currently a lack of systematic screening of semen” (Macer , 1999, p. 141). In addition to the medical risks, there are psychological ones as well: “Gamete providers who are influenced by financial or other considerations rather than informed commitment to donor parenting may later regret the possible creation of unknown offspring. Such regrets may be especially severe if the donor later experiences infertility or, in sharing programs, a failure of IVF to result in the birth of a child” (Shanner and Nisker, p.1592). Ethically, it redefines offspring as commodities or property.

There are also socioeconomic disparities, inasmuch that women who provide reproductive tissues or services tend to be poorer, while recipients are from higher economic strata (Shanner and Nisker, 2001). Considering the risk of exploitation of women, along with financial coercion and the possibility of harm, Cooper and Glazer concluded that these are not “acceptable behaviors for Christians” (1998, p.32).

Finally, third-party gamete donation fails to respect the rights of the children that are born as a result of such infertility treatments. In the first place, children resulting from these technologies often do not have the option of knowing their actual biological parents. Privacy of the donor takes priority over the child’s right to know his roots. The emphasis on donor confidentiality undermines the interests of the recipient in knowing about his medical background and cultural ancestry (Shanner and Nisker, 2001).

Children even be deceived about the circumstances regarding their conception and birth, and it is hard to know what long-term effect this will have on them (Cooper and Glazer, 1998). There is also an increased risk of accidental incestuous marriages as there are increasing numbers of sperm donor offspring that do not know their history, and there are few restrictions on how much a donor’s sperm can be used.

Third-party gamete donation can also result in legal quandaries that could confuse children and damage their well-being, *viz.*: “A recent US case involving all 5 possible reproductive collaborators left the resulting child without any legal parent until she was 3 years old” (Shanner and Nisker, 2001, p.1590). Obviously, such a situation cannot be healthy for any child. And here is my key point: third-party gamete donation inherently prefers the rights and well-being of others over that of the children that result. The fact that the best interests of children are frequently overlooked in third-party gamete donation should be a major source of concern for any Christian.

These serious ethical concerns should not be ignored by anyone considering third-party gamete donation. It violates the sanctity of marriage and goes against God's created order by attempting to remove procreation from the exclusive context of marriage. It also seriously fails to consider the rights and well-being of the children that result from such infertility treatments, and subjects human beings to possible commoditization and exploitation. Third-party gamete donation and many of its consequences are contrary to Christian principles; it is an inherently unethical and immoral approach to addressing infertility. There are many better options available for Christians.

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