

# Christian Engagement in Secular Society: Politics, the Gospel, and Moral Influence

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## Introduction

Political solutions that entail bringing Christian moral convictions to bear on public policy and legislation may at times be described as *the art of the impossible*. This seems particularly true in our “post” culture—what is said to be postmodern, post-Christian, and perhaps generally post-past. One of the features of the contemporary moral landscape in the West is to consider many moral issues, which were once thought to be in the public domain, to be matters of private choice (call it “post-public” morality). Curiously, despite an emphasis on community in the postmodern era, the privatization of morality has only increased. This has had a profound effect on political and legal judgments on issues such as contraception, sex, abortion, marriage and divorce, homosexuality, euthanasia, stem cell research, cloning, and assisted reproductive technologies, to name a few. Though such issues are increasingly relegated to a supposed private sphere, it is clear that they involve very public consequences. Given that this is the case, the question that is pressed upon Christians—and all citizens—is this: How should we seek to engage with and influence our culture, if we should at all, when it comes to matters of morality? If, for instance, we believe that a certain type of reproductive technology is immoral, should we seek to prohibit it in the law? There are

a variety of options by which we may have influence, each of which may have a place. However, the first and most significant way in which Christians ought to influence the surrounding culture is by the witness of proclamation, personal influence, and example, and not first and foremost by the political process.

## Proposals for Influencing Culture

United States politics has always had a strong presence of Christian *individuals*, many of whom have exerted significant influence. What has been remarkable over the last several decades is the growth of Christian political *groups* involved in the political process.<sup>1</sup> By most any measure, such groups have had a significant impact on the political landscape, largely by focusing attention on important moral issues. Yet, one danger of that success could be the temptation to seek political solutions as the primary mode of influence in society. Even worse, churches may be attracted to the power and influence of political groups, and focus attention primarily on the political process.

Political organization on the part of Christians does not simply stem from a desire for political power. Rather, it is often driven by a sense of desperation over changes in the moral landscape of seismic proportion in contemporary culture, and thus by an attempt to prevent further moral decay and to recover moral

commitments that have been lost. Political organization and legislation is sometimes assumed to be the only—or at least the best—way to effect change and influence the surrounding culture. This article represents a challenge to that assumption, and a reminder that a variety of options and opportunities exist for Christians to engage with and influence society. While political influence is often important and effective, some alternatives are more significant than the political process for producing true change and, more importantly, they are more consistent with the mission of the church.

In his book, *Choosing the Good*, Dennis Hollinger outlines nine possible strategies for influencing culture, ranging from political solutions to personal influence.<sup>2</sup> He places these on two continuums, both of which may be relevant in a particular case. The first ranges from remedial actions, which seek to address existing evils, to preventative actions, which seek to avert future problems. The second continuum ranges from personal actions, which focus on bringing about change at the individual level, to structural actions, which work to change laws and institutional systems to effect transformation across society.<sup>3</sup> Often circumstances will determine which approach may be the most effective or appropriate, and in many cases several strategies may be employed at once. This paradigm will be used as a means of discussing which models are most significant for Christian influence on culture, particularly with respect to the problem of infertility and certain morally problematic forms of reproductive technology. The strategies or models of influence presented by Hollinger are briefly summarized in the following paragraphs.<sup>4</sup>

### *Christian Relief*

This model seeks to meet needs as they arise, providing food, clothing, shelter, or medical help to those in need, for example, or to provide assistance in rebuilding after a natural disaster. It represents a consistent biblical exhortation to care for those in need, and it demonstrates Christian love as the practical application of the gospel. On the other hand, it often does not solve the problem that it addresses for the long term, and it may not have an impact on institutional dimensions of the problem.

### *Christian Alternative Institutions*

This method of influence also seeks to address human need, but on a much larger scale. It is often used to provide an alternative, particularly when important ethical commitments are ignored or disavowed in comparable secular institutions, or when there are no good choices available. Examples include hospitals or medical clinics, educational institutions, rehabilitation centers, and crisis pregnancy centers. These may be seen as complementary to, and in some cases as more effective than, political strategies to effect change on a particular issue. Like Christian relief, various alternative institutions demonstrate Christian love in action, and they also offer substantial remedies to structural problems in a secular society. Yet at times they may offer alternatives without effecting change where problems exist, or, as sometimes happens with Christian schools, they may represent a withdrawal from the world that Christians intend to influence.

### *Evangelism*

Hollinger acknowledges that some will find it strange to consider evangelism to

be a model for social change, yet he argues that its social effect is often powerful.<sup>5</sup> He notes that evangelism and social concern are interrelated.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, social action may open the door for evangelism, and often, social change is a result of evangelism, as those who have new life in Christ produce good works. These points serve as a reminder that Christians need not forsake evangelism to engage in social action, nor forsake social action to focus on evangelism. At the heart of the gospel, and of the church's ministry, is a concern for people's spiritual need. Yet the conversion of individuals by the gospel leads not only to individual change (e.g., Rom 12:1-2, Jas 2:14-26), but also at times to a transformation of a culture. Christians have consistently been among the most influential social activists in society, caring for people's physical needs.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, we may rightly be cautious about thinking of evangelism as a model for social change, for social change is not so much the aim as a consequence of evangelism, and to make it the aim would be to empty it of its meaning and thus to strip it of its power.

### *Prophetic Pronouncements*

This model for promoting social change "involves the voice of the church or Christian groups speaking to the world to challenge existing values, policies, structural arrangements, and cultural practices and to commend new forms in their place."<sup>8</sup> It flows out of the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament, as well as in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. It is seen in the proclamation of the Word of God in preaching, and also in denominational statements that express Christian convictions on justice and particular moral issues. However, it

faces significant challenges, including the difficulty of gaining a public hearing, and the confusion caused by sometimes conflicting calls that are issued in the name of the gospel, both by different individual preachers and denominations.

### *Lobbying*

There is a long history of political lobbying in order to produce social change. It seeks to influence legislators in order to shape public policy, and to raise awareness among certain constituencies on issues in order to mobilize them to express their views through phone calls, letters, emails, and political gatherings and marches.<sup>9</sup> Lobbying can be effective in bringing about social change by voicing the concerns of many Christian citizens who otherwise might not be heard. However, there is a danger that a measure of success will persuade Christians that the political process is the primary way to influence society, and there may be a strong temptation to compromise to attain power.

### *Political Parties/Political Groups*

Many Christians believe that the political process is a valid way to influence society. "Since the state is ordained by God, it is argued, the political process can be a legitimate means for carrying out God's purposes on earth, especially in relation to human behavior."<sup>10</sup> This model for social action has plenty of critics, however, both within and outside of the church, and it is surely the most controversial. Opponents see political action and influence by Christian groups as a violation of the separation of church and state, or at least an intrusion into the secular sphere of politics, and those groups are often treated with contempt by

secular thinkers. In addition, some inside the church see involvement in politics as corrupting and a diversion from the true mission of the church. Nevertheless, Christian groups can influence the electorate and the political process, bringing attention to issues from a Christian moral framework, and shaping to some extent the debate on those issues. In some cases, it is effective for restraining immoral behavior, and thus establishing a relative justice. On the other hand, it is not clear how significant or lasting an influence it is without a change in the heart and soul of the surrounding culture.

### *Nonviolent Resistance*

Nonviolent resistance, which is sometimes considered a social ethic more than a method of influence, exerts pressure on society and often on public policy by peaceful means, frequently outside of any formal political process. It uses the power of love and peace, to highlight social injustice and to produce change where the law and moral persuasion have failed. Martin Luther King Jr. is a paradigmatic example of this approach. His commitment to peaceful marches and resistance to racial injustices set in motion lasting cultural change. This method can also be seen in examples such as strikes and boycotts against companies that are involved in unjust practices, and peaceful protests at abortion clinics. It has been effective at times, in terms of personal influence and even structural change, but is sometimes ineffective when large numbers of people do not get involved, or when it is used too frequently.

### *Christian Embodiment*

This model emphasizes how the church is distinct from the surrounding culture,

and that it is to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. The church stands as a witness to, and against, the world by being a counter-cultural community, both in what it believes and in how its people live. Most Christians will recognize the importance of setting an example for others by embodying moral ideals. Yet, as Hollinger says, “adherents emphasize that embodiment is the primary model through which God wants to work in culture.”<sup>11</sup> This view does not advocate withdrawal from society. Rather, it challenges the church, though not necessarily individual Christians, to resist the desire to influence society by entering into the political process or identifying itself with any particular political party. Christians are to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-16), to offer a foretaste of the kingdom of God before the world. There is much to commend this approach, and the failure of the church to embody its own moral ideals is a cause of moral decay in society. Nevertheless, critics of this approach argue that it is a necessary but not sufficient model for Christian influence, in part because it inadequately addresses issues of social justice in society.

### *Individual Impact*

This model shares much in common with that of embodiment, but its concern is particularly with the impact of individual Christians on the surrounding culture by their various spheres of influence through jobs, clubs, civic involvement, sports and entertainment, and other activities. Some within this model stress the concept of vocation, in which Christians are seen to have a calling from God to be His representatives in the particular spheres in which God has placed them, where He works in and through them to accomplish

His purposes in the world. This model finds a biblical anchor in Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 7 of the issue of marriage and singleness, in the middle of which he asserts the principle that Christians should remain in the situation in which and/or to which God has called them (1 Cor 7:17-24). It can serve as a powerful model of influence throughout society, and yet it may not adequately alleviate systemic injustices.

### **How Then *Shall* We Influence?**

Having described these models or strategies for influencing culture, particularly in terms of moral issues and social action, the question remains, "Which model ought we to employ?" The easy answer, especially for an ethicist to offer, is "It depends." And so it does. The particular context, issue, and opportunities will often determine which model is most appropriate, and in many cases a combination of approaches will be used at the same time. However, while it is true that all of these methods may be appropriate in certain situations, it is not true that each of them is central to the mission and purpose of the church or even of individual Christians. In what follows, I will illustrate why I think that the most significant influence that Christians can have in culture, in terms of lasting moral or social change is to "live out the reality of the gospel." In Hollinger's terms, this is broad enough to cover relief work, prophetic pronouncements, evangelism, Christian embodiment, and individual impact. When we consider what Christians are called to be and to do, and how we might influence our culture, all of the models discussed above are *possible* actions that Christians can take. Yet these are *essential* for followers of Christ.

They are not even so much strategies or models of influence as a reality and a calling, and yet they carry culture-transforming possibilities that some strategies can only mimic. While Christians can and should be involved in the political process, there are problems with approaching political solutions as the best hope for personal or structural change. First, while it is good and necessary to seek to establish just laws and have unjust laws overturned, changing laws may restrain behavior without effecting personal or lasting change. Second, we may be tempted to blame the culture's moral failings on political opponents and their moral agenda. We may fail to recognize Christian responsibility in our culture's moral decline, by participating without discernment in culture, and by failing to seek after God in prayer, to hunger for the Word of God, and to model moral purity (2 Chron 7:14).<sup>12</sup> For example, Christians have rightly protested the attack on marriage brought on by those seeking to legitimate same-sex unions, and have responded with concerted efforts at legislation. At the same time, Christians have attacked marriage from within through rampant divorce rates that are equal to the surrounding culture. Political solutions are not the only or even primary model needed. Third, pursuing influence through the political process may easily lead to corruption by the love of power and influence as such, which will compromise the essential mission of the church. Fourth, there is little in Jesus' teaching, or in the rest of the New Testament, to indicate that political action is a primary means of engagement with culture, even in one that perpetuates injustice, as was the case for both the Jewish and Roman governments of Jesus' day. Yet the New

Testament is clear that those who follow Christ will embody the gospel, in contrast to those around them, and will influence the culture by doing so (e.g., Matt 5:16; Rom 12:1ff; Eph 4:1ff; 1 Peter).

The influence upon culture outside of the political process may not be easy to predict or even to discern, but that is partly because too often Christians simply do not present a manner of life that contrasts with culture or displays clearly a Christian worldview. Part of the task, then, is for Christians to think carefully together about the issues before us, to discern what appropriate responses will look like, and then to live them out in the midst of our culture. In other words, as we consider who God is and all that He has done for us in Christ, we should not conform to the patterns of the world, but be transformed in our minds in order to know—and do—the will of God (Rom 12:1-2). When Christians establish a pattern of doing this, it acts like salt and light in the world, and as others see Christians living out the reality of the gospel, some will glorify God as a result (Matt 5:16). In other words, it has the effect of transforming culture.

How does all of this apply to particular moral issues? I will discuss the problem of infertility and the ethics of reproductive technology, and try to show the significance of living out the reality of the gospel, especially in terms of *Christian Embodiment* and *Individual Impact*, to use Hollinger's terms.

### **Strange ARTs and Christian Influence**

The array of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) available today offer a challenging test for how Christians ought to seek to exert moral influence

in society. On the one hand, they offer hope that an infertile couple may be able to have a child. On the other hand, they raise a complex set of medical, moral, and legal questions about personhood, rights, marriage and family, and a host of other issues.<sup>13</sup> In addition to “simple” cases such as reparative surgery or Intra-uterine Insemination (IUI) using the husband's sperm, there are very complex and sometimes disturbing techniques used or proposed. The use of donor egg or sperm raises serious questions about the presence of a third party for procreation within the one-flesh union of marriage. Surrogacy, especially commercial surrogacy, provokes questions about the presence of a third party in procreation, as well as the significance of bonding between the gestational mother and child, the commercial use of the human body, and even the question of who the child belongs to. *In vitro* fertilization (IVF) raises serious issues of its own, especially when excess embryos are created and then discarded or frozen, when donor eggs and/or sperm are used, or when single women become pregnant with the help of donor sperm and IVF. Technology has enabled women to carry a child and give birth past sixty years of age. It has enabled “parents” to conceive even after their death by freezing gametes before they die, which a soldier might do before going off to war, for instance. Technology could allow a person who was never born to become a parent, if eggs are obtained from the ovaries of mature aborted fetuses.

In the face of such possibilities, it is reasonable to seek to prohibit some forms of reproductive technology through legislation. Yet, with few exceptions, it is difficult to gather political support to prohibit even the most morally suspect

technologies, because whether to use ARTs is considered a private decision and a matter of *procreative liberty*. No one has argued more forcefully for procreative liberty than John A. Robertson, for whom procreative liberty is the primary framework for evaluating ARTs. He defines procreative liberty as “the freedom either to have children or to avoid having them.” While it is “often expressed or realized in the context of a couple,” he claims that it is “first and foremost an individual interest.”<sup>14</sup> Though an individual may *choose* not to have children, Robertson argues that “being *deprived* of the ability to reproduce prevents one from an experience that is central to individual identity and meaning in life.”<sup>15</sup> Procreative liberty is so strong that Robertson believes the use of ARTs “should be accorded the same high protection granted to coital reproduction.”<sup>16</sup> It may be limited where there is demonstrable harm. However, objections that there is harm (such as the destruction of embryos or the intrusion of a third party in collaborative techniques) grounded in “deontological” principles or based on religious or moral convictions “seldom meet the high standard necessary to limit procreative liberty.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, a couple, or an individual, should be free to pursue virtually any means available.

How should Christians respond to the argument from procreative liberty and, more importantly, how should we seek to influence our culture with respect to the use of ARTs, and an understanding of marriage, procreation and parenthood? Several responses may be in order. First, it may be appropriate to press for legislation that will put certain moral guidelines in place for the use of ARTs, such as pressing for legislation that would protect human embryos, and setting policies that rein-

force the importance of both father and mother in procreative decisions. However, as I have already indicated, legislation is often not the most effective or important way that Christians can exert influence.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly true when seeking to change existing understanding and behavior. Lisa Cahill makes this point, asserting that “outlawing and attempting to eradicate well-entrenched practices is not the only way to advance their moral reconsideration; nor is it usually the most prudent and effective way. Laws and policies usually do not command compliance unless they are met by at least an approximate social consensus in their favor.”<sup>19</sup> Second, then, we ought to respond to the philosophical arguments that are purported to support procreative liberty, and present a compelling case for alternative views, seeking to gain greater social consensus. There are significant weaknesses in Robertson’s case, and they need to be addressed. Though this article will not seek to do that, it can be said that Robertson presents an impoverished view of marriage, procreation and parenthood, and of liberty itself.<sup>20</sup>

Third, as indicated already, Christians may seek to influence our culture as it pertains to the use of ARTs through *Christian Embodiment* and *Individual Impact*, which is part of living out the reality of the gospel in the midst of the culture. It is difficult to make cogent and compelling arguments, and a case for legislation, when Christians themselves reflect the broader culture in the use of ARTs, as seems to be the case. Compelling arguments must be accompanied by a compelling demonstration of the gospel lived out in relation to problems such as infertility and the use of ARTs. It remains, then, to consider a Christian response to the problem of infertility and

the possibility of ARTs in light of the gospel, and its transforming effect on infertile couples, the church, and the culture.

### **Evangelical Reflection on the ART of Procreation<sup>21</sup>**

#### ***The Pain and Suffering of Infertility***

No reflection on the use of ARTs is adequate without taking into account the problem of infertility itself. Proverbs 30:15b-16 (ESV) reads, “Three things are never satisfied; four never say, ‘Enough’: Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, ‘Enough.’” This text is a reminder of unrealized hopes and ongoing suffering that makes infertility a devastating experience for as many as one out of six couples. The suffering of infertility is also attested in the biblical stories of barren women. Hannah “wept bitterly” because she had no child (1 Sam 1:10); Sarah felt wronged and despised (Gen 16:5); Elizabeth experienced disgrace (Luke 1:24). Their suffering because of barrenness is summed up in Rachel’s exclamation to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Gen 30:1).<sup>22</sup> As one modern woman put it, “I was close to losing my faith. I felt God had abandoned and betrayed me. He didn’t protect me from loss when I prayed and pleaded for him to do so.”<sup>23</sup> An understanding of infertility, and a Christian response to it, must reckon with the painful experience of infertile couples.

#### ***How Should We Respond?***

For many couples, ARTs offer the hope that they can have a child together, when previously they could only dream—and pray—for such a thing. Yet, as indicated above, the same techniques have also been put to uses that have raised serious

moral questions. Further, they have led to a view that procreation may be considered not only a blessing, but a right. Indeed, as noted, Robertson sees procreation as fundamentally an “individual interest,” and ARTs should be given the same protection as “coital reproduction.” It is important to recognize that the use of such technologies arises from a particular vision—or perhaps no vision at all—of the family, parenthood, and liberty that is often at odds with the biblical worldview. Thus we are pressed to ask how followers of Christ might engage a culture and embody a different and compelling vision that is shaped by the gospel.

#### ***The Gospel and the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction***

Children are a blessing from the Lord (Ps 127:3). Procreation is a great good and a central purpose of marriage. We rightly receive, celebrate, and even pursue this blessing. But is it something to be pursued by most any means? In the Old Testament, the good of procreation was pursued at times through the practice of polygamy or the use of a maidservant.<sup>24</sup> Such practices continue in some traditional societies. In the African context, for instance, marriage may be considered incomplete or even non-existent without children, and childless couples are often not fully accepted in society or even in the church.<sup>25</sup> With such intense social pressure, remedies such as polygamy, cohabitation, and divorce and remarriage, are practiced in order to have children.<sup>26</sup> In response, Protus Kemdirim argues that such measures are consistent with, or even an implication of, the gospel, for “salvation is clear and meaningful only when it is defined in line with African perspectives and aspirations, namely, the raising of children.”<sup>27</sup>



The desperation to have a child, so forcefully demonstrated here, is felt not only by African couples, but by many Western couples as well. The African solution may not be adequate, in part because it flows from inadequate reflection on marriage and of the gospel itself. We should not be too quick, however, to dismiss their perspective as irrelevant to Western Christian reflection on ARTs. Instead, we ought to recognize that much of the deliberation on ARTs among Christians in the West also flows from inadequate reflection, perhaps simply revealing Western cultural values such as procreative liberty and privacy in moral decisions. The African solutions should cause us to consider seriously the same sense of desperation to have children that is demonstrated in the West by the use of questionable technological means to achieve the same goal.

### *The Case of Donor Gametes*

One such questionable means is the use of donor gametes. It is worth reflecting on this practice in particular, because it is a fairly common technique, with an estimated 25,000–30,000 children born in the U.S. each year by this means, and many more worldwide, and because it draws out some critical moral issues and perspectives on marriage and procreation.<sup>28</sup> Is it possible that this practice is consistent with Christian reflection on marriage and procreation, or may it even be the case that the gospel encourages it? In his important and influential book, *Sexual Ethics*, Stanley Grenz answers in the affirmative.

Grenz considers and dismisses the charge that introducing a third party into the procreative process is adulterous, since “neither the intent to be unfaithful to one’s marital vows nor the act of intercourse

is present.”<sup>29</sup> Such procedures cannot be considered adultery, he argues, unless adultery is defined as “the violation of the assumed right of each spouse to become [a] parent only through the other.” This is not the case, Grenz suggests, since the New Testament encourages a believer not to claim rights, but rather “to give up one’s rights for the sake of another.” Further, based upon Jesus’ sacrificial work on the cross, and thus the gospel itself, he argues that “a case [can] be made for practices involving donor sperm or egg within the context of marriage.” He explains, “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.”<sup>30</sup>

Grenz acknowledges certain potential problems with the use of third parties in procreation, such as difficulties for the child that is born, psychological problems that may affect the marriage, or possible legal issues that may be raised. Yet they are not “insurmountable” problems so much as issues that the parents would do well to consider in advance. It seems that the good of having a child that is biologically related to at least one parent overrides such concerns.

### *Reflection on Marriage, Procreation and Parenthood in Light of the Gospel*<sup>31</sup>

How may we assess these views? First, the problem with Grenz’s assessment of donor gametes is not unlike the ultimate problem with Kemdirim’s conclusions on marriage in the African setting. The good of procreation within marriage is either overemphasized or privatized,

with the result that almost any solution to the problem of infertility is welcomed and given the benefit of the doubt, and even defended as an implication of the gospel.

Second, while Grenz properly questions the focus on rights, surely it would be more consistent with the gospel to conclude that the fertile spouse ought not to “demand” a right to have a child, especially apart from their one-flesh union, requiring the infertile spouse to consent to the use of a third party. In addition, Grenz’s call to sacrifice is misdirected, for Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is reflected by the strong on behalf of the weak. In the case of infertility, it is the infertile spouse who is in a more vulnerable and weak position. Not wanting to deprive his or her spouse of the opportunity to have their own child, an infertile spouse may consent (often with subtle spousal or cultural coercion) to the use of a third party, only to experience serious difficulties as a result—potential problems that Grenz himself notes.<sup>32</sup>

If the views offered by Kemdirim and Grenz are unsatisfactory, it is because they are incomplete. While they underscore the importance of procreation, they do not provide adequate theological reflection on the significance of the gospel for the experience of infertility and its possible remedies. In particular, they do not provide a sense of salvation history and an eschatological expectation, and, thus, some qualification on the good of procreation and the purposes of marriage. Indeed, without further reflection, such accounts may be reduced to an affirmation of “nature” and the goodness of procreation, or an account of procreative liberty and the right to bear children.

In order to broaden our reflection,

and to offer some points of deliberation on infertility and ARTs, some comments about a few additional themes in relation to the gospel may be helpful. When considering the possibility of using ARTs, these themes may lead us to conclude either “do not use” or “use well.”

### **Themes for Deliberation on ARTs** *On Resisting the Technological Imperative*

Faced with the painful reality of infertility, it is easy to treat reproductive technology as an almost unqualified good, and children may be seen as something other than the fruit of marital love that is received as a blessing from God. Oliver O’Donovan and Gilbert Meilaender are among those who express concern about the way in which the use of ARTs may subtly change our understanding of procreation from one in which children are received as a gift to one in which they become a project of our making.<sup>33</sup> O’Donovan, for instance, argues that “it is precisely the integration of fertilization into the general demands of an administrative system [i.e., the control and efficiency demanded in the laboratory] that more than anything else confirms its status as an act of ‘making’ rather than ‘begetting.’”<sup>34</sup>

Further, the very availability and offer of ARTs can exert coercion, causing infertile couples to feel pressured to make use of them in the pursuit of the good of children. It needs to be said that there is no necessity for a married couple to make use of even those ARTs that are morally acceptable, for marriage has an integrity of its own and may be fruitful even without the existence of children. The gospel can relieve couples of the burden of thinking that they must pursue procreation by virtually any means available. The

following themes encourage infertile couples to resist a technological imperative, and the church to walk with them in the struggle.

### *On Sacrifice*

Returning to the issue of sacrifice, we ought to resist the notion that an infertile spouse should sacrifice so that the desire of the fertile spouse for a child can be fulfilled apart from their one-flesh union. A Christian understanding of sacrifice is better exemplified when a fertile spouse sets aside the “right” to have a child of his or her own, for the sake of the infertile spouse. By refusing to have children by some means other than through his or her spouse, the fertile spouse may express the depth of love represented in marriage, where in weakness and in strength they share together the difficulty of not realizing their dreams.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, even to speak of the “fertile” and “infertile” spouse in the way that we are led to do is problematic, for we ought to speak simply of an infertile couple.

### *On Marriage and Parenthood*

There is a growing tendency to understand marriage to be primarily about self-fulfillment, and to fit spousal relationships and procreation into such a framework.<sup>36</sup> It is clearly inadequate. In Genesis 1 and 2, we see something of God’s intention for the relationship of male and female in marriage. Procreation is a blessing and a central purpose of marriage, which highlights the void created by infertility. Yet marriage is also a partnership in a common purpose and calling that is to be marked by covenant faithfulness in a permanent and exclusive one-flesh union (cf. Matt 19:4-6; Eph 5:31). Attention to these aspects may at least put childlessness into

proper perspective.

There is also a tendency to be consumed with having a child who is biologically related, at least to one parent, as Gilbert Meilaender has forcefully argued in his essay, “A Child of One’s Own.”<sup>37</sup> This desire ought not to be minimized, and certain techniques that allow a married couple to have a child that is biologically related to both of them may be welcomed. Nevertheless, left unchecked, the drive to have a biological child leads to morally dubious practices. The use of donor gametes highlights this problem, for the pursuit of a biological child transcends even the marriage union, which results in a child of “his own” or “her own” rather than “their own.” As an alternative, Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that Christians have good reason to understand parenthood in more than biological terms.<sup>38</sup> He argues that Christians are guided by “a moral portrayal of parenting that cannot be biologically derived.”<sup>39</sup> An understanding of parenting may begin with the biological. Yet it is expanded through adoption, and further through “parental” roles that can be assumed, for example, by teachers and others who provide a simple yet profound contribution of additional adult influence upon children, especially those whose own parents fail to provide the care that children need.<sup>40</sup>

### *On Childlessness*

A childless marriage is missing something *significant*, for marriage is intended to be procreative. As such, it may be unfulfilled in some way, underscoring the void and pain left by childlessness. Yet it is not for that reason missing something *essential* to marriage. Nevertheless, for some couples, the option of appropriate medical treatment for infertility will be received

as a blessing, and such treatments may be consistent with the gospel, and especially with Jesus' ministry of physical healing. For others, childlessness itself may present possibilities that a couple would not have initially sought or embraced, which are derived from an understanding of the gospel. A childless couple, like the single person, may come to see their situation as an opportunity for "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor 7:35; cf. Matt 19:12). Since "the appointed time has grown very short" and "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29, 31), childlessness may allow a couple to fill one of the parental roles described above, or to be detached from the usual patterns of life for a unique investment of service in the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul exemplifies these points, for while he did not have physical children, he nevertheless testifies that he begat many children in Christ, becoming their father through the gospel (1 Cor 4:15).

### *On Hope in God*

It must be said that ultimate hope is not founded upon having children, but upon a relationship with God. The barren woman in Isaiah 54 is exhorted to shout for joy despite the fact that she has borne no child because (1) her fruitfulness will be greater than those who have had children (54:1-3); (2) her shame and humiliation will be forgotten (v. 4); (3) she has been redeemed and belongs to God, her Maker (v. 5); (4) the Lord has called her (v. 6); and (5) God has shown His compassion on her (vv. 7ff). Likewise, the eunuch in Isaiah 56 can rejoice because he need not be a "dry tree" (56:3), for if he is obedient to God he will have a name that is better than sons and daughters (v. 5). In the desire or quest for a child, Christians dare not lose

sight of where true hope, peace, and joy are to be found.

### *On the Community of Believers*

There may be an opportunity, even if unwelcome at first, to experience the grace of God and the community of believers that is not experienced as deeply by those who are invested in their own children (cf. Mark 10:29-30; Matt 12:46-50). Perhaps the childless couple will find a family—if the church is faithful to respond—that will share their burden, and discover a true fellowship of "brothers," "sisters," "mothers," "fathers," and "children" that compensates for—though it does not replace—a biological family. By the grace of God, the church is called to be a place of consolation and encouragement for the childless, so that infertility may turn out to be not meaningless suffering, but an opportunity to receive and to be an agent of God's grace (2 Cor 1:3ff).

### *On the Gift of Life*

While this point requires additional reflection on the status of the embryo and what it means to be human than is possible here, it is important to say something, since it is central to the debate about ARTs. Children are a gift from God. The desire to experience the beauty of pregnancy and childbirth, and to welcome new life as an extension of the love of marriage, ought not to be pursued in the context of the destruction of human life. Thus, we ought to resist procedures that involve great risk to or destruction of human embryos, and instead affirm and protect the dignity of human life at its earliest stages.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to recognize that the Bible does not minimize, but resonates

with the sorrow experienced by those who are unable to have children. Proverbs 30:15-16 declares that the barren womb is never satisfied. It is no wonder, then, that those who are infertile may seek to have children by virtually any means, some of which are morally objectionable and represent harm to marriage and family, human life, and even the common good.

In response, legislation may seem to be the most effective way to prevent such practices and to seek to influence culture with Christian moral values, on this as well as other issues. Yet, while an attempt to defend Christian moral convictions using the political process may be a possibility, and in some cases a necessity, it is often not the best way. The early church did not “turn the world upside down” (Act 17:6) through the political process, but through evangelism, preaching, and living out the reality of the gospel. Whether other means of influence may or may not be possible, these are essential for followers of Christ.

To live out the reality of the gospel, through *Christian Embodiment* and *Individual Impact*, is to present a compelling alternative vision of the meaning of marriage and procreation, and the significance of infertility, to the “vision” represented by some forms of reproductive technology. It means that Christian couples who are childless can demonstrate where true hope and peace is found, and resist the temptation to pursue procreation by any means. At the same time, those who do consider using reproductive technology may use it well by safeguarding marriage, honoring one another, and protecting human life at its earliest stages.

We also need to be reminded that the gospel involves a response not only from infertile couples, but from the church as

well, as a place of comfort and encouragement, where those who are childless are reminded that they are nevertheless objects of God’s love and grace. The fellowship of believers may present a powerful witness to the redeeming grace of God. Together we weep, but not as those who are without hope. Together we may model a different understanding of marriage, procreation, and the suffering of infertility from what our culture knows. Together it is possible to have a significant impact on the surrounding culture through an embodiment of Christian faith and hope in the midst of great personal difficulty. Therefore, not only infertile couples, but the church as a whole, is challenged to embody the reality of the gospel and to have an impact on the culture. Will the church take up the challenge?

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>That is, political groups organized by Christians around principles grounded in a Christian worldview. While these groups have not been uniform in their theological commitments, there has been a notable presence of conservative Christians. Compare and contrast groups such as The Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, Family Research Council, The Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission, and Evangelicals for Social Action, among others.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 256-72.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 257.

<sup>4</sup>See *ibid.*, 258-68, for a fuller description. There are many ways that such models could be categorized and described. Hollinger will be used here because his paradigm arises clearly within a Christian moral framework.

<sup>5</sup>On evangelism and social change, see also Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University, 1982), 109ff.

<sup>6</sup>Summarizing points from A Joint Publication of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment* (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1982), 21-23; cited in Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, 260.

<sup>7</sup>Contrary to the accusation—sometimes deserved—that was common with the social gospel movement, and is often repeated today, that “conservative” Christians only address people’s spiritual condition while its adherents care for people’s physical needs, and thus the whole person. Among books that challenge this misapprehension of Christianity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with ongoing relevance, are Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 1996); and Norris A. Magnuson, *Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work, 1865-1920* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1977). See also Timothy Lawrence Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980).

<sup>8</sup>Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, 261.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 264-65.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>12</sup>On this point, see, for instance,

a recent commentary by Chuck Colson, “The Drought: A Message From God?” BreakPoint Commentary, 12 December 2007 [cited 12 December 2007]. Online: <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=7307>.

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of some of the possibilities and a moral framework for evaluating those possibilities, see Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham, and W. David Hager, eds. *The Reproduction Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of Sexuality, Reproductive Technologies, and The Family* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Rae, Scott B. *Brave New Families: Biblical Ethics and Reproductive Technologies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 253-303.

<sup>14</sup>John A. Robertson, *Children of Choice: Freedom and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994), 22.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 24 (emphasis mine). Given the focus on the individual’s choice whether to have children or not, this “identity and meaning” for Robertson is not derived from procreation itself, but rather from the ability to choose whether or not to procreate. Procreation itself is secondary to individual goals and choices. Yet he does point to some kind of meaning, wherever it comes from.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>For a sharp contrast in views concerning the need to promote legislation to guide the use of IVF, see the

testimonies of Paul Ramsey and Stanley Hauerwas before the Ethics Advisory Board, Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Ramsey’s testimony, in which he argues that IVF should not be allowed by public policy in the United States, is reprinted as “On *In Vitro* Fertilization” in Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 339-45; Hauerwas questions the wisdom of using IVF, but asserts that what he has to say from a Christian perspective on marriage and procreation should not be the basis for public policy. His testimony is reprinted as “Theological Reflection on *In Vitro* Fertilization” in Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986), 142-156.

<sup>19</sup>Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University, 1996), 250.

<sup>20</sup>Many have undertaken to offer significant responses to Robertson’s arguments. Helpful responses include Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible*, 253-303; and Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Body, Soul, and Bioethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 62ff.

<sup>21</sup>Here “evangelical” is being used not so much to indicate a particular segment of Christianity, but to draw attention to moral reflection in light of the gospel.

<sup>22</sup>Other stories of barren women in Scripture include Rebekah (Gen

25:21), Rachel (Gen 29:31), Leah (Gen 29:35), and the wife of Manoah (Judg 13:2).

<sup>23</sup>Cited in Sandra L. Glahn and William R. Cutrer, *The Infertility Companion: Hope and Help for Couples Facing Infertility* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 50.

<sup>24</sup>Most notably with Abram, Sarai, and Hagar (Genesis 16); Jacob with Rachel and Bilhah (Genesis 30) and Jacob with Leah and Zilpah (Genesis 30); and Elkanah with Hannah and Pininnah (1 Samuel 1).

<sup>25</sup>Protus O. Kemdirim, "A Call to the Church in Africa to Address the Plight of Childless Couples," *African Ecclesial Review* 38, no. 4 (Aug 1996), 238.

<sup>26</sup>Michael Kpakula Francis, "Marriage Problems and the Local Churches," *African Ecclesial Review* 23, nos. 1/2 (Feb/Apr 1981), 96.

<sup>27</sup>Kemdirim, "A Call to the Church in Africa," 244. A different perspective within the African context is provided by Francis Cardinal Arinze, formerly the Archbishop in Nigeria. He recognizes the importance of procreation, yet argues that childlessness is not a valid cause for the dissolution of marriage. He writes, "A fact to be brought constantly to the attention of childless couples is that marriage is essentially a covenant of love which the contracting parties entered into under God." Francis A. Arinze, "Polygamy and Childlessness," *African Ecclesial Review* 23, nos. 1/2 (Feb/Apr 1981), 99.

<sup>28</sup>Teresa Iglesias, "Using Donor Eggs and Sperm," in *The Reproduction Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of*

*Sexuality, Reproductive Technologies, and the Family* (ed. John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham, and W. David Hager; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 98.

<sup>29</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 172.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>31</sup>Among recent Christian ethicists, Stanley Hauerwas, as well as Gilbert Meilaender to some degree, have attempted to show the significance of the gospel for moral reflection on infertility and ARTs. Karl Barth is perhaps most explicit, in his *Church Dogmatics* (5 vols.; ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), III.4.265-68.

<sup>32</sup>For case studies and examples of some of the problems, from an author who ultimately supports procreative liberty, see Lynda Beck Fenwick, *Private Choices, Public Consequences: Reproductive Technology and the New Ethics of Conception, Pregnancy, and Family* (New York: Dutton, 1998), esp. 258, 260, 285. Fenwick also cites, among other sources, Annett Baran and Reuben Pannor, *Lethal Secrets: The Shocking Consequences and Unsolved Problems of Artificial Insemination* (New York: Warner, 1989); and William Tuohy, "Fertilization Method Controversial," *Charlotte Observer*, 3 January 1994, 2A.

<sup>33</sup>O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 12, 71, 73; Meilaender, "A Child of One's Own: At What Price?" in *The Reproduction Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of Sexuality, Reproductive*

*Technologies, and the Family* (ed. John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham and W. David Hager; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 36, 42.

<sup>34</sup>O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 73.

<sup>35</sup>Augustine, who saw the primary purpose of marriage and the only completely licit aim of intercourse within marriage to be procreation, argued as much when he marveled at the strength of the bond of even a childless marriage, which "although it be tied for the sake of begetting children, not even for the sake of begetting children is it loosed." Augustine, "On the Good of Marriage" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (trans. C. Cornish; ed. P. Schaff; first series; vol. 3; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 402; cf. 400. Turning to a third party to procure a child may be considered one form of "loosing" the bond of marriage. Doesn't Grenz's view also reinforce the idea that a childless marriage is incomplete and that the good of procreation justifies desperate means to have children?

<sup>36</sup>For some development and a critique of this tendency, see Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2003).

<sup>37</sup>Meilaender, "A Child of One's Own", 36-45.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, "Theological Reflection on *In Vitro* Fertilization," 145.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.4.267-68.