

Thinking About *IVF*

Is *In Vitro Fertilization* a Biblical Solution to Infertility?



From the Elders of Bear Creek Church

The subject of *In Vitro Fertilization* (IVF) is unclear in most people's minds. Some think of the first test tube baby in the 70's without realizing that IVF is now a commonly used method to help those struggling with infertility. Many also don't realize the serious moral issues associated with IVF, and so they are not equipped to give godly counsel to loved ones who may be considering it.

A very basic goal of every Christian is that we look more and more like Jesus. But what does this look like when we're confronted with the modern-day issue of IVF? When we read the gospels we see the love and compassion of Jesus toward people, and we see him honoring His

Father above all else. So when we become aware of people struggling with infertility our hearts ought to go out to them with compassion and prayer, and with the realization that it is a good and natural desire for a husband and wife to want children of their own. So thinking about IVF from a biblical worldview will enable us to give counsel that is both compassionate to the couple and honoring to the one who is sovereign over life.

The heartache of infertility is not new - it's described throughout biblical history – and it continues in modern times.¹ In fact the likelihood is very great that you know people who struggle with the very private hurt of infertility. With this in mind we need to be aware that IVF is presented as a solution and that there are some serious ethical problems associated with it. We need to be aware so that we can be like Jesus - showing a compassionate love that is grounded in an unshakeable conviction to honor God - ultimately believing that encouraging honor toward God is simultaneously most loving to those we give counsel.

We understand that many of our modern medical advancements are great blessings of God. God is sovereign to heal, or not. He can heal apart from any means, or through the means of medicine and technology. Only God has the ability to create something out of nothing, and so all of the "creations" or inventions of man are rightly seen as originating from the one who gives us knowledge and abilities. So, when a medical breakthrough saves and preserves human life, we give thanks to the Father of lights who is the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

But what do we say when man's God-given knowledge and skill brings about harm to human life? It's clearly wrong when considering atrocities such as abortion, but what about technologies that desire life, yet the very process creates unavoidable casualties? Does the end justify the means? If we truly hold to the sanctity of human life (precious because it uniquely reflects the image of God),² then any good outcome will never justify a means that unavoidably exterminates any human being.

On the one hand we sympathize with a couple seeking answers to the heartache of infertility, but as followers of Christ we must also ask if the means to the end is sinful, and thus dishonoring to God?

If you're unfamiliar with IVF, here is a simple description:

*In Vitro Fertilization is a medical procedure in which mature egg cells are removed from a woman's ovary after she has taken fertility drugs to cause a number of eggs to mature at the same time. Semen is collected from the man, which is joined with the egg in a glass dish where conception then takes place. New life is allowed to develop for some days, and inserted into the uterus of... a woman for normal gestation and birth, or frozen and stored for later use.*³

Even though the intent is completely different, our argument against IVF would be the same as our argument against abortion. Why? Because, both of these arguments hinge on the biblical truth that life begins (is conceived), as soon as the human egg is fertilized. We know that we are dealing with a real person with a real soul because Psalm 51:5 describes David as "sinful (morally accountable to God) from the time my mother conceived me." Psalm 139:16 says that God knew us and all of our days (implying a person with a soul), not when we were formed with a beating heart, or when we were attached to the uterine wall, but when He saw our "unformed substance."

From the moment of fertilization we are a living human being that is unique – with DNA that can be distinguished from both mother and father.⁴ Biblically speaking, we are accountable to God, and He begins to number our days when we are an “*unformed substance*,” that is then knit together into a form we more clearly recognize as human (Psa. 139:13).

Medical textbooks give us example after example of the conception of life being at the moment of fertilization:

“It is the penetration of the ovum by a spermatozoan and resultant mingling of the nuclear material each brings to the union that constitutes the culmination of the process of fertilization and marks the initiation of the life of a new individual.”⁵

We cannot twist truth to fit our desires, even when it is a good desire to bear children. Instead we must submit to the light of God’s Word - avoiding any sin that inconsistently enters into a process that endangers, exterminates, or denies basic human rights.

So from both a medical and biblical standpoint we conclude that human life begins at the moment of fertilization. Whether this occurs inside or outside of the mother does not change this reality, though it definitely may have an effect on the number of days granted to these human lives... and this is why we must wrestle with the moral implications of IVF.

The typical process of IVF involves fertility drugs to produce multiple eggs that are then harvested from the woman, and fertilized by the man’s sperm in a Petri dish. Multiple embryos are created because it is unlikely for a successful pregnancy to occur upon the first transfer of (typically 2-3) embryos into the uterus. Producing multiple embryos by this process is much more cost-effective, and is encouraged because it is also less taxing on the woman. The morally compromising issue is that this process creates embryos that do not survive, and when there is a successful pregnancy there are typically a number of remaining embryos that are either discarded (resulting in death) or they are frozen with the hope of being thawed at a later time and implanted in the mother, or even in another woman who desires to adopt one of these frozen embryos.

Fertility doctors might reassure couples with statistics of natural miscarriages occurring in similar numbers to that of the IVF process. Concerning this, Randy Alcorn writes:

“Some are quick to justify [the miscarriages that take place in the IVF process] on the basis that there is also a high rate of miscarriages in the natural reproductive process. But the difference is profound. What God does is up to Him, but we are not God. We do not have his prerogatives over human life and death. Spontaneous miscarriages are not our responsibility. What is our responsibility is child deaths caused by the overproduction of embryos in the hopes of a single implantation.”⁶

There is also the moral dilemma of suspending human life in a frozen state in which some do not survive the freezing/thawing process. Does any person have the right to deny the God-given rights of those who cannot speak for themselves? Each embryo has the right to be born, and each parent is obligated by God to steward these lives in a way that protects and nurtures life. No parent has the right to deny or suspend birth, and to do so is to sin against both the unborn, and against God who commands us to “bring [our children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

So, clearly we should not have anything to do with a process that leads us into sin, and we believe sin is unavoidable in the typical method of IVF. Either there is sin in the extermination of human life, or there is sin in the denial of their God-given right to be born – placing them on hold with the presumption of an eventual birth. If Scripture warns us not to presume upon *our* days, saying, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit,” - concluding that it is arrogant, and evil boasting because only the Lord knows what tomorrow will bring⁷ – then how much *more* should we avoid a scenario that presumes upon the life of another?

With both the warnings of Scripture, and the knowledge of how seriously our Lord spoke about the protection of children (Matt. 18:5-6), it seems clear that we should never enter into the typical process of IVF, and that we should lovingly counsel others to avoid it.⁸

What If You Have Already Done, Or Are In the Process of Doing IVF?

The point of this article is not to heap guilt and shame on anyone, but to lovingly encourage the avoidance of sin, and to prioritize honoring God by humbly trusting Him to meet your every need. So, if you’ve already done IVF without the realization of sin, it is still important that you confess your sin, knowing that He is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse you. Sin out of ignorance is still sin for which we must confess and realize God’s forgiveness. God is gracious to all who are in Christ Jesus, and by His grace He has made you aware of this sin. Keep in mind that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.⁹

If you are in the middle of IVF and now realize that sin is unavoidable, we would counsel you to likewise seek the Lord, as well as to do everything possible to bring about the births of every life for which you are responsible. You should consider these embryos as your children, but never as your property. That is, they have the God-given right to be born, and you have the God-given responsibility to care for those who ultimately belong to God ¹⁰. So if a snowflake adoption ¹¹ enables a more timely birth, you should view this as both a priority and an obligation before God.

Also, we would add that if God blesses you with a pregnancy, life should always be celebrated. Confessing your sin will free you to move forward with joy and celebration of the precious life within you.

How Should We Respond to Those Who Have Participated in IVF?

If we are to be like Jesus we should be full of grace and truth, and so we should communicate the truth of God's Word in a gracious and loving way. Many Christians avoid confrontation because of a wrong interpretation of "judge not, lest ye be judged," but the reality of our responsibility is that we are to use the Word of God to teach and rebuke and correct...

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17

In order to care for and rightly love others we need to desire their righteousness, and so if you know someone who has participated in IVF, you should lovingly present them with the truth. ¹² You might share this article, and some other helpful ones listed below. The hope for all who have sinned in this way is to humbly recognize it, and be free of any guilt or shame because of the forgiveness that belongs to all who are in Christ.

Also, we would encourage you to be especially gracious because even though we recognize the unavoidable sin of IVF, we also recognize that those who enter into it are usually unaware (or were given inconsistent counsel), and simply had a good desire to have a baby of their own.

Life is to be cherished and celebrated, so as a member of the family of God, we celebrate pregnancies because of the precious lives that are being knit together in the image of God. We celebrate life, and it's our heart's desire to encourage all children to come to Jesus, and love His church.

But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." - Luke 18:15-16

Recommended Reading:

1. See footnotes for articles and where they can be found online.
2. Eternal Perspectives Ministry – go to: www.epm.org and search "IVF."
3. *Is It Okay To Do In Vitro Fertilization?* A helpful FAQ section and video at: <http://www.watermark.org/blog/is-it-okay-to-do-in-vitro-fertilization>
4. *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 4th edition by John Jefferson Davis, P&R Publishing

Footnotes:

1. In a survey of married women, the CDC found that 1.5 million women in the US (6%) are infertile (*Source: National Survey of Family Growth, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2006-2010*).
2. See Gen. 1:26-27 and James 3:9
3. *What Should be Our Stance on In Vitro Fertilization*, Rev. Cornelius Sonneveld, <http://www.reformedprolifer.com/articles-papers/item/what-should-be-our-stance-on-in-vitro-fertilization>
4. *In the Womb*, National Geographic, 2005 (Prenatal Development Video): "The two cells gradually and gracefully become one. This is the moment of conception, when an individual's unique set of DNA is created, a human signature that never existed before and will never be repeated."
5. *Human Embryology*, 3rd ed. Bradley M. Patten, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 43 - Also see <http://www.epm.org/resources/2011/Apr/27/when-does-life-begin-quotes-many-sources/> for this and many other quotes from scientists, geneticists, and embryologists concerning the beginning of

human life from a medical standpoint.

6. *Are Frozen Embryos Persons Worthy of Protection*, Randy Alcorn

<http://www.epm.org/resources/2010/Jan/18/are-frozen-embryos-persons-worthy-protection/>

7. See James 4:13-17

8. The **typical** way in which IVF is done is to use fertility drugs that result in the creation of multiple embryos. An unavoidable consequence is the extermination of human life, the risking of human life through freezing, and the denial of the child's rights, which is a dereliction of a parent's God-given obligation to steward and cherish those whom God has entrusted to them. We use the word "typical" because there is a method that avoids the creation of multiple embryos. By fertilizing only the number of eggs that can be safely transferred for a pregnancy, the sinful dilemma associated with leftover embryos is avoided. One way to accomplish this is through the freezing of unfertilized eggs. When pregnancy is being attempted, a safe number of eggs are thawed, fertilized, and then all are immediately transferred into the mother's uterus. Apparently the technology for successfully freezing eggs has developed to the point of this being a viable option. For an example go to: <http://fertilityinstitutesa-px.rtrk.com/our-services/fertility-treatment/fertility-preservation/egg-freezing/>

9. James 4:6

10. Ezekiel 18:4

11. An adoption of a frozen embryo to be thawed and then transferred into the adoptive mother's uterus with the hope of a resulting pregnancy and birth.

12. See Gal. 6:1-2 and Eph. 4:1-3