



WHAT ABOUT *Embryo Adoption?*

by Michael Schuermann
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He is a child. One sperm fertilizes one egg in a petri dish, and a human life begins. He has 23 pairs of chromosomes. He has his own genetic traits and family history. He is a human being for whom Jesus Christ died, just like you and me. He is a gift to his parents from the Lord. “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward” (PS. 127:3).

Yet he has been conceived outside of his mother’s womb, without the one-flesh union of man and woman, by a lab technician manipulating sperm and egg. A 2011 Frozen Embryo Census estimates there are 600,000-plus children currently stored in fertility clinics and cryostorage facilities. The same census found that this number increased by over 50 percent between 2003 and 2011.

Why are there so many? The in vitro fertilization (IVF) industry in the United States is largely unregulated, and in the U.S., the standard practice in IVF is to create extra children, often for the sake of less-expensive future implantation attempts.

Of these 600,000-plus frozen children, some will be used by their parents to attempt another implantation. However, many of these children are never implanted. Some will be donated to medical research. Some will be thawed and discarded. Both of these are death sentences.

What do we do about these frozen children, the orphans of the IVF industry? Discarding or donating to research are not moral or ethical choices for anyone, let alone Christians. “You shall not murder” (EX. 20:13).

In the 1990s, a new option was proposed: Why not allow for the adoption of these frozen children? This would provide them a chance at life, and it could provide opportunities for barren couples to adopt a child and have the pregnancy experience. In 1997, the first embryo adoption program began in the United States. The first “snowflake baby” (the term for a child born through the embryo adoption process) was born in 1998.

Embryo adoption begins with the transfer of property from donor parents to the adoptive parents. After various tests and medicines prepare the mother’s body for pregnancy, a Frozen Embryo Transfer (FET) takes place. One or more children are thawed. If they have survived the freezing and thawing processes, then they are implanted in the mother’s womb.

There is a strong argument for Christians pursuing adoption, be it embryo or otherwise: These children need a father and mother to raise them, care for them, and love them. Yet there are also concerns about embryo adoption. Will the pursuit of it encourage expansion of the IVF industry, creating a market for frozen children? Because frozen children are considered to be property, not persons, does this further treat them as a commodity? Is embryo adoption a form of surrogacy, a practice that wrongly introduces a third or fourth party into the two-party, one-flesh union of marriage?

Prominent Lutheran bioethicists Gilbert Meilaender, Richard Eyer and Robert Weise, as well as bioethicists from other Christian confessions, have weighed in on embryo adoption: for, against or with questions that leave them presently unsure.

All this is to say that we should proceed with caution, thinking through the implications before embracing embryo adoption. Christian married couples who are curious about it should spend significant time discussing the matter with their pastor before proceeding.

In the meantime, what can Christians certainly do? We can advocate against the IVF industry, which is irresponsibly creating these embryos. We can encourage, and even financially support, parents in rescuing their own children. We can adopt these children after birth. We can encourage the Church to examine this issue much more deeply. We can pray for these children and their families.

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