

Gender, identity and infertility **by Denise Cooper-Clarke**

“Barren” is the way the scriptures describe married women without children. We note men are not described this way. The human biblical writers shared their culture’s assumptions about human reproduction: the man provided the seed (sperm) which contained the whole of the new person to be and the woman was like a field, the ground or soil in which the seed was planted. She made no other contribution- they did not understand as we do now that material from both mother and father combines to form a new individual. If the seed was sown but didn’t develop, it was because the woman had poor soil- she was barren.”Now Sarai was barren: she had no child” (Genesis 11: 30); Rebekah was barren, Elizabeth was barren. One writer says, “*Barren is a term laden with historical weight. It carries negative meanings: unproductive, sterile, bare, empty, stark, deficient, lacking. It is the opposite of fertile, lavish, abounding, productive*”.¹What does it do to woman to think of herself in this way?

“I am sterile, sterile as a hospital, white, tiled, shining, clean... Not a speck of dust, nothing living or which could live. Sterile just like me. Or in plain English, unfruitful. Like a drought ridden field with thick, cracked clods of earth, where nothing grows, nothing flourishes. Sterility- that is a ‘cemetery belly’.... A cemetery belly in which countless possible but defunct children, never to be wakened to life, are buried”.²What does it do to a woman to think of herself in this way?

But these days, we use the word “sterile” (and we still use the term, at least in the medical field) not of the woman alone, but of a couple. Or we might use the rather clinical term “involuntary childlessness”. Two negatives. And in a culture where choice is the highest value, “involuntary” is a very dirty word. It is to be contrasted with being childless by choice. Some couples are childless by choice, but the term “baby hunger” probably better expresses what “involuntary childlessness” means, for many couples. The desire to have a child is a fundamentally human desire:

“The blow of discovering that one is infertile is heavy.. those who are infertile are not only unable to feel and express the emotions that parenthood brings, they are also barred

*from contributing to the continuity of human existence. having a child brings parents a kind of immortality which childless couples may only watch with envy”.*³

The majority of couples with infertility report marital conflict, communication problems, disagreements over medical treatment, and differential investment in the infertility treatment process.⁴ Many infertile people fear rejection by their partner. Some couples, though, report that the crisis of infertility enhances intimacy and improves communication.⁵

35% of infertility is due to a female factor, such as obstruction of the Fallopian tubes, and 35% from a male factor, such as absence of sperm. 20% results from reduced fertility in both members of the couple, and the remaining 10% from unknown factors.⁶

For a long time, women were expected to suffer greater psychological or emotional distress as a result of infertility, and little research was done on the effects on men. However, differences between men and women in relation to responses to infertility have now been studied.⁷

Despite changes in expectations of women's roles in recent years, the primary role for many women continues to be that of wife and mother (and note how often we run those two together-“wifeandmother”). Of course there are exceptions, perhaps most notably our own Prime Minister for example. But her childlessness was the subject of snide remarks, even more than her unmarried state. Although the percentage of women working outside the home has increased, family responsibilities are still often seen as primary for women. Whereas men may be more willing to accept other roles as a substitute for parenting, so most (married) women anticipate motherhood, and infertility prohibits achievement of what is seen as a major goal in life. For a man, though, regardless of his fertility status, his role has traditionally been viewed as that of worker and provider, fatherhood is secondary.

Women have consistently been demonstrated to find infertility a problem of greater significance than men, and to respond with significantly greater levels of distress. Women report a higher degree of anxiety, depression and loss of self esteem. The assumption of guilt and personal responsibility for the infertility seems to be more prevalent among women than men. Whether or not the specific cause of the infertility was found to be a female problem, some women felt that they were being punished for a past mistake. Perhaps this reflects the traditional view that barrenness is a woman's problem.

Women reported that it is more important for them to have a natural child, and are much more likely to experience discomfort in situations that remind them of other's fertility, such as seeing a pregnant woman or being invited to a baby shower. More women than men report feeling jealous of others with children. Some men in this study reported being driven to seek fertility treatment by their wife's desire for a child, but no women reported being driven by the desire of their husband for a child.⁸

But some recent studies suggest that men and women who are having treatment for infertility have similar levels of emotional strain, difficulties in marital adjustment and lower sexual satisfaction.

For both genders, being the one with the identified physical problem was associated with a greater sense of personal responsibility, and with greater emotional distress. Men with male infertility may suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, self-blame and isolation: "I found it hard to pretend that the pain was not there. My inability to have children consumed my whole life. It was not something that I could share with others". This may be compounded by the fact that women are more likely to seek social support and talk about their infertility problems than men, as reported in some studies.

For men, infertility may be viewed as a reflection on their virility. Knowing that he is, as it is said "shooting blanks" can threaten many men's sense of masculine identity, apart from the question of parenting. It is the powerlessness and inadequacy of infertility that

seems to affect men, rather than the frustration of fruitfulness and fatherhood. Having said that, some men do experience baby hunger and long for children.

It has also been reported that the gender identity of women is negatively affected in women in infertile couples, whether or not the woman is the one with the fertility problem. In other words, when a married or partnered woman cannot have a child for whatever reason, she feels less of a woman. Throughout the world, adult identity for women is normatively organized around the milestone of motherhood, and the norm is particularly strong in non Western developing countries. Psychological theories consider maternity the central milestone in adult female development.⁹ How do women construct gender identities when they cannot be mothers?

And what happens when we add Christian faith into the mix? If people feel to a certain extent viewed with suspicion and that they cannot be open in the wider society, is it easier or harder to talk about in the faith community? Surely, as one writer says. “it is precisely because childlessness is an issue shunned by wider society that the church should be interested, especially given the emphasis of the gospel on the marginalized”? But this is often not the experience of childless couples:

“We have been told many things over the years. One person told us that we had a baby the easy way (adoption). We have been told we are cursed. We don't believe that. ... I have people tell me that they dread telling me that they are pregnant. I really don't want that, yet I understand. ...I can remember my Mom sharing with me when we heard of a horrid story of abuse or something saying that she did not understand why God would give children to them and withhold them from me”.¹⁰

Of course there are the issues of the practices of the church: being involved in a community which often centres on families and children. Family services, baptisms, Mothers' Day Services, Fathers Day Services, and Christmas.

But what about the teaching of the church? Tim has already talked about the biblical material relating to infertility, but now I want to focus on the way we talk about other

material- not directly about infertility, but areas where what we say can have an impact, perhaps unintended, on those who are dealing with infertility or the possibility of it. Specifically, teaching in relation to marriage and teaching about what it means to be a man or a woman. Sometimes I'd have to say, pronouncements in these areas make coming to terms with infertility much harder for people. I've become aware of this recently in relation to our understanding of marriage in two contexts: teaching about contraception and statements about same sex marriage.

Last year I contributed to a lecture on religious attitudes to contraception given to a large class of first year Melbourne Uni. Arts and Science Students (as part of the requirement for a broader social component?). The prominent Roman Catholic bioethicist Nick Tontifilipini (for whom I have a great personal respect) gave the Catholic perspective, and I was asked to talk about Protestant attitudes to contraception. This was interesting, because I guess I had expected him to use a Natural Law argument against contraception, which was the traditional argument ie one of the goals of human existence can be reasonably deduced to be reproduction, and contraception frustrates this goal. However, I was surprised to find that he used an argument based on the teaching of John Paul II about marriage, itself based on Genesis 1:28: that marriage is a primordial sacrament established by God in which man and woman are made for each other to be fruitful and multiply. It is a witness to and a sign of God's love, which is free .. and fruitful. The marriage act is in the image and likeness of God and expresses the love between God and humanity which is both unitive and fruitful. According to this teaching, contraception makes the love of a couple unGodlike by suppressing its fruitfulness and rejecting cooperation with God's design.¹¹

Now we could take issue with this in a number of ways. First, while it sounds plausible that God's love for humanity is fruitful, what does that mean? Not fruitful in a human biological reproductive sense. Second, the scriptures compare the marriage relationship to that between Christ and His Church, not God and humanity. Third, the command to be fruitful and multiply is given to humanity as a whole, not, arguably to every individual.

Indeed, since the Catholic Church has a strong tradition of affirming celibacy, this seems to be recognized at least for single people.

The effect of this teaching that marriage is to fruitful if it is to really express the love God intends, is surely to imply that childless marriages are second best. Further, the implication is that being childless is somehow being disobedient to God's command- adding to the sense of guilt and blame that many infertile couples feel. This can only be exacerbated in the Roman Catholic context by the accompanying condemnation of the use of any artificial insemination (IVF) techniques. These are condemned, not, primarily, for the same reason that a number of conservative protestants give, ie concerns about destruction of embryos in the process, but because they cause "a complete separation between procreation and the conjugal act". But the effect of this is that a major avenue , (perhaps the only one) you have for being obedient to the command to have children and thus have a fruitful marriage which expresses the image of God, is forbidden to you.

b) And this idea that marriage is all about parenting has come to the fore in the midst of discussion about another issue very recently in Australia- the issue of same sex marriage. One of the arguments that has been put, when reduced to a sound bite is that marriage is all about children, so since gay/lesbian couples can't have children in the natural way, they can't be "married". Now the actual argument is more sophisticated and nuanced than that, but the effect is unfortunately to seem to imply that any marriage which is naturally incapable of producing children is not really a marriage This is not the intended effect, but it follows from making too strong a connection between marriage and procreation.

But critical to Protestant rethinking of the morality of contraception and the purposes of marriage is the work of Karl Barth (1886-1968), who argued in " Parents and Children" (1945) as part of his major work *Church Dogmatics* (III/4) that the command of Genesis 1:28 for humans to "be fruitful and multiply" is in fact not a timeless instruction for all people, or even a command at all. It would be a strange command that some people could not possibly fulfill - the infertile and those who are single and celibate, such as the Apostle Paul, or Jesus himself. Are these people to be understood as disobedient to God?

Barth also argued that the end or purpose of human life should not be understood as procreation, but in living for God in Christ. This reflects Jesus' teaching which shifts the primary allegiance of his followers from the biological family to the community of the church, the family of God:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:37).

Then (Jesus') his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you". But he said to them, "My mother and my brother are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8: 19).

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first (Matthew 19:29)

Paul repeatedly addresses believers as brothers and sisters in Christ- members of God's family, the family of faith (eg Gal. 1:2, Gal. 6:10) and 1 Pet. 2:17, the family of believers).

The Reformers paved the way for Barth's new understanding of the permissibility of contraception through their reflections on the purposes of marriage understood from scripture. Augustine had argued that the God-given purpose of marriage and intercourse is the procreation of children, without procreation, sexual intercourse is not 'good' on its own: sex and procreation must always go together. But Calvin concluded that procreation was not the primary purpose of marriage. First, he acknowledged in a very unromantic but down to earth way that marriage provided the means for sexual fulfillment for those who did not have the gift of celibacy, citing Paul's instruction that "if people cannot exercise self-control they should marry" Second, he taught that the

human condition is to long not just for physical but for emotional intimacy. The account of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2 shows that men and women are created for mutual love, support and companionship. (But Calvin also had a very positive view of the raising of children within marriage, seeing them as a blessing and a gift from God to be received with gratitude, which for him ruled out any deliberate decision to frustrate God 's giving of the gift of children – he opposed contraception.)¹²

Like Calvin, Barth thought of marriage as primarily about relationship. He strongly repudiated what he called a relapse into an Old Testament mode of thinking that might imply that infertile couples have incomplete or abnormal marriages. Further, he strongly emphasised that for Christians, hope for the future is about eternal life, not in perpetuating generations of your own genetic offspring.

Next we turn to various strands in Christian teaching about identity. What shapes our primary identity?. And what about gender identity? What does it mean to be a man or to be a woman? There are strands in Christian teaching which reinforce the social expectation that motherhood is the norm and the primary role for women.

In Catholic thought, it seems there are only two possible callings for women: virgin or mother. Mary is presented as the model woman and she is both virgin and mother. A married woman without children is neither.

But this is not only an issue for Catholics. Within evangelicalism there is also teaching that women's God-ordained role is the domestic sphere, centred on child raising. Now I realise I'm entering controversial territory here. I am an egalitarian, I don't believe in the subordination of women to men. And the writer I'm about to cite, Andreas Kostenberger, is a complementarian. But this is not about that argument. Not all complementarians would agree with Kostenberger on this matter . It's one thing to say that the role of wives is to be subordinate to their husbands, quite another to claim that the God –ordained role for every woman is in the domestic sphere. So where does Kostenberger derive this claim from? From a very difficult verse at the end of a very much disputed passage of the

New Testament: “Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Timothy 2:15).

Kostenberger acknowledges that this passage has puzzled commentators throughout Christian history and that there is no consensus as to its meaning.¹³ A variety of translations exist, ranging from “women will find their salvation in motherhood” (TCNT) to “women will get safely through childbirth” (Moffat), to “she shall be preserved through the bearing of children” (NASB). The interpretation of this passage even cuts across partisan lines on the “women’s issue”. He admits it might be impossible task to come up with a definitive meaning, but says he felt justified in the attempt “when the topic is as significant as that addressed by the present passage, i.e., women’s God-ordained roles. It should also be acknowledged that this issue, like few others, has enormous implications on the educational, social, and political domain”. So Kostenbegrer comes to this passage with the assumption that it has something to say about women’s God-ordained roles. And he’s right that if he is correct in his interpretation, it does have enormous implications for women in the educational, social and political domain. And I would add in the domain of understanding and coming to terms with infertility, although Kostenberger does not consider that.

The sheer number and variety of interpretations that have been offered of this passage alerts us to the fact that its meaning is not straightforward. Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335/6-395 interprets the reference to “children” metaphorically as relating to good works, defending the spiritual superiority of virginity, and Augustine, provides a similar figurative interpretation.

A more problematic interpretation is that of Chrysostom (AD 347- 407), who said: “Ye women, be not cast down, because your sex has incurred blame. God has granted you another opportunity of salvation, by the bringing up of children, so that you are saved, not by yourselves, but by others. ... “ This interpretation appears to be echoed by Jerome (AD 345-420). Women’s salvation may be contingent on their physical children’s perseverance in (Since the verse says she (the woman) will be saved through childbearing, provided they (her

children) they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty”. Single women and those who are unable to have children will no doubt be relieved to know that few today hold to this interpretation. As indeed will all mothers.

Martin Luther concluded that the bearing of children is to be an outgrowth of a woman’s faith:”It is a very great comfort that a woman can be saved by bearing children, etc. That is, she has an honorable and salutary status in life if she keeps busy having children. ..”

Kostenberger commends John Calvin’s interpretation: he summarizes the message of 1 Tim 2:15 as follows: “Let us who know to what end we are made learn to bear the yoke God has laid upon us, i.e., let everyone of us follow his vocation.”And for women, this vocation *contra* the Papists, is childbearing.. “Let us learn therefore that if a woman be among her household and be busied about her children... if she bears it patiently, knowing that it is God’s good appointment,... this is a sweet smelling sacrifice to him. Let the nuns therefore tarry still in their convents and cloisters and in their brothel houses of Satan...

So Luther and Calvin move away from an allegorical to a more literal rendering of the passage. However, this does not of itself solve the problem, since the appearance of teaching salvation by works, i.e., the bearing of children, remains: “While it is thus ruled out that the passage means what it appears to mean since it cannot mean that on grounds of systematic theology, this hardly is a constructive interpretation or explanation of the passage on its own terms.”¹⁴

There is considerable diversity in the interpretation of the present passage in recent times. Some detect in this passage a reference to Messianic typology. It is taken to mean that women will be saved by the childbirth, i.e., Mary’s giving birth to Jesus the Messiah, thus reversing the consequences of Eve’s fall into deception. The problem with this is that it is not only women who are saved through the birth of the Messiah.

In another interpretation, the term “saved” is sometimes taken in its literal meaning and applied to women’s physical preservation through (during) childbirth. This avoids teaching that women’s (spiritual) salvation is through the bearing of children. But many

Christian women have died during childbirth and thus were not physically preserved during it. The pangs and dangers of childbirth are a result of the Fall and we do not expect these to be completely reversed in this life.

After detailed analysis, Kostenberger's conclusion is that 1 Tim 2:15 may best be rendered as: "She (i.e., the woman) escapes (or is preserved [from Satan] by way of procreation (i.e., having a family)." In line with 1 Tim 5:14, Kostenberger says that one should view procreation as merely the core of the woman's responsibility that also entails, not merely the bearing, but also the raising of children, as well as managing the home.¹⁵

According to Kostenberger, the underlying norm of this passage is of permanent validity: women's central domain, as established by creation and confirmed negatively by the fall, is to be found in her involvement in the domestic and procreative sphere, in the natural household. Passages such as the present one appear to indicate that it is precisely by participating in her role pertaining to the family that women fulfill their central calling. Kostenberger does not consider the implications of this interpretation for childless women. He does have one sentence, more or less *en passant* to single women: "Moreover, if the reference to "childbearing" should indeed be understood as a *synekdoche*, even unmarried women are to retain a focus on the domestic sphere and all that it entails".¹⁶

Now this is my quarrel with Kostenberger. Not so much that I disagree with him that the domestic and procreative sphere is the God-ordained role of women (excluding them from other roles and spheres), though I do. But my problem is with his assumption that childbearing is central to this God-ordained role. And this **is** his assumption. He cannot say childbearing is a *synekdoche* or figure of speech meaning simultaneous understanding for "the domestic sphere" and include women without children, whether single or infertile. Childbearing cannot mean or stand for or be a figure of speech for a domestic role which does not even include childbearing.

So we are left with childbearing being central to women's role and identity. In this way some Christian teaching reinforces, indeed baptises social expectations of women and it seems to me adds immeasurably to the pain and guilt which often accompany infertility.

Single women and married women who cannot bear children must construct gender identities around something other than motherhood. Our primary identity, women and men, is to be found in Christ, in being a disciple of Christ and a child of God. Jesus had a very telling response to a woman of his day who thought that women's identity was bound up in their procreative role. *While Jesus was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!". But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it"* (Luke 11: 27-28).

¹ Elizabeth Tyler May, cited in Frame TR. *Children on Demand: The Ethics of Defying Nature*. Sydney: UNSW Press; 2008, p.13.

² Andrea Belk-Schmehle, cited in Frame, p.13.

³ Robert Winston, cited in Frame, p.13-14.

⁴ Berg BJ, Wilson JF. Psychological Functioning across stages of treatment in infertility. *J. Behav. Med.* 1991; 14: 11-26.

⁵ Burns LH, Covington SN.(eds) *Infertility Counselling: A Comprehensive Handbook for Clinicians*. New York: Parthenon;1999.

⁶ Berg BJ, Wilson JF. Psychological Sequelae of Infertility Treatment: The Role of Gender and Sex-role Identification. *Soc.Sci. Med.*1991; 33 (9): 1071-1080, p.1079.

⁷ Berg and Wilson, 1999.

⁸ Berg and Wilson, 1999.

⁹ Ireland MS. *Reconceiving women: separating motherhood from female identity*. New York: The Guildford Press; 1993

¹⁰ <http://amazinggrazefarm.blogspot.com.au/2008/08/children-are-blessing.html>

¹¹ Tonti-Filippini N. *Contemporary Catholic Teaching on Contraception*. Lecture; 2010.

¹² Blanchard KD. The Gift of Contraception: Calvin, Barth, and a Lost Protestant Conversation. *JSCE*. 2007; 27 (1): 225-249.

¹³ Kostenberger AJ. Ascertaining Women's God-Ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15. *Bulletin For Biblical Research*.1997; 7: 107-144.

¹⁴ Kostenberger, p. 115.

¹⁵ Kostenberger, p. 142.

¹⁶ Kostenberger, p. 143.