

To Have and To Hold?

By Dr. Scott Rae

Announcer:

Once again, welcome with me, Dr. Scott Rae.

[Audience applauds]

Scott Rae:

Good morning, I appreciate uh, a number of you had some uh awfully nice things to say about our little chat with Jack Kevorkian uh on Tuesday, and I'm very appreciative of that. I want to shift gears a little bit for a few minutes this morning and talk about bioethics at the beginning of life. Again, these are, these are some of the areas of our program and philosophy that I think most explicitly touch life and touch the pages of the newspaper virtually every day. If you've been uh paying attention to the newspaper and things that are published in some of the science and technology areas, some of the things that I'm going to mention this morning may not come to you as much of a surprise. Though, for many people, not not more than a decade ago, some of the things that we-that we are convinced are forthcoming, and I know are already here, uh would have been a complete surprise. And many people in the general public, I think, have been caught very much off guard, by the way in which families and procreation have been radically changed by the availability of reproductive technologies.

Let me just give you some examples and uh, some of the-like I say, some of these are already here. Some of these will be uh coming in the next few years. But uh this is a little bit about where the-where the field of reproductive technologies and procreation is headed. One of the

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most recent examples in New York City, just in the last year, we have things like designer embryos for sale, where you can come to an infertility clinic and purchase embryos if you're unable to create them yourself. Or you can, for a little bit more money, actually have the clinic do this on a designer basis, where you can choose from a catalog of potential sperm and egg donors, the different traits that you want for your child. Literally these been-these have been up for sale from anywhere from three to fifteen thousand dollars per embryo. That's-that's already here and will be mainstream in the next millennium.

We now have me-a mechanism that enables couples with roughly 80 percent reliability to select the gender of their children. That-that's already here. In fact, you could, you could probably have access to that this afternoon if you wanted to. Uh, we are, what's one of-one of the things that's coming, we-we are almost, almost at the place where we can uh, gestate animals now in artificial wombs. That's coming for human beings within probably within the next 20 to 30 years. Uh, human-human cloning has been we've already really done this for about the last five years with embryos. We've been able to make Xerox copies of embryos since the early 1990s. Now we can-we are getting closer, we've done this with animals, we're getting closer now to being able to take the cells from adults and copy them, implant them in eggs, implant those those uh, uh fer-co-fertilized eggs in a surrogate, and give birth to a genetic duplicate of the adult. That stuff only-a few years ago, that was the stuff of science fiction. But we will probably, we will all-we will see that within our lifetimes.

We have--a little bit closer to home, these were-these are in no particular order, but uh you just get overwhelmed with the cumulative effect of these. We have gay and lesbian couples now who

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are attempting to procreate children using these technologies and become mainstream families. I never thought this would hit so close to home, but literally a stone's throw from my house in my neighborhood, in nice conservative Irvine, of all places. A homosexual couple has uh, has hired a surrogate mother and they have a child that they are raising together, just around the street. I never thought that would happen. We have post-menopausal women have-baring their own children through the use of egg donors and a technology that helps uh renew the lining of the uterus. Here at-the pioneering place has been at USC Medical School. A 62-year-old woman gave birth to a child just in the last year, uh and they're anticipating more and more of this coming into the future.

We have embryos, human embryos, that are being cloned, that is Xerox copied, and-and intentionally created solely for the purpose of performing research on them. Just about this time last year, scientists were in-were for the first time able to isolate what are called the stem cells out of human embryos. Those are the cells that are uh, they have yet to differ-differentiate into specific types of tissue or organs. Uh they have been able to isolate those from human embryos, uh and we're on track to use those to create a wide variety of tissues and organs that are in very short supply. Never mind the fact that the embryos from which they are taken are fatally, fatally impacted by that. And those that are not are thrown down the kitchen sink, literally, when they are finished. We have women today who are carrying litters. I mean, literally, litters of children made available by reproductive technologies. And we have the-the, what I think, the very tragic scenario happening repeatedly, uh where you use these technologies to achieve as many, you know, to achieve the best chance of one pregnancy. And you get pregnant with more children

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than you wish to carry, or can safely carry, and you engage in what is now called selective reduction, the newest euphemism for ending the life of the unborn.

I've been involved in uh, a handful of ethics consults in [unintelligible], these [unintelligible] Catholic hospitals that I consult with, where we've had women who have been pregnant with far more uh unborn children than they can safely carry, and have had to make very painful decisions about what to do. We have, we have thin-things like I mean, even this stuff, this seems way out there. We have unborn children who are being used as egg donors for women who cannot produce eggs themselves. This happened in England not not less than two years ago, where aborted fetuses were having their eggs taken from them and being used as donor eggs, and those were being given to infertile couples. Now, fortunately, the British government, I think they have more sense than ours, had the-had the good sense to stop the practice until there could be some sort of moral assessment done on it. I'm not-I'm not sure actually what that moral assessment might look like, except to say, no, we shouldn't do that.

Some of these-some of these are actually coming into the Christian community as well in ways that you might not expect. Uh, when I was a pastor, this was you know, this was beginning some 10 or 11 years ago, when I was a singles pastor in Newport Beach area. And I had more than one person in the ministry that I was working with who had got-more than one woman who had gotten tired of waiting for Christian men to get with the program and had decided to sort of chart out their own course. And they-they were considering, and some had, gone to infertility clinics to be artificially inseminated with donor sperm so they could have their own children and, quote, "fulfill their dream" of being mothers. Increasingly, Christian, single women who feel their

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biological clock ticking are utilizing this particular option as a way to have a child. And just-just last week, I was talking with uh two women on a radio program and said that uh, I was doing it by phone here, it was being broadcast in San Diego. Two women, one of whom was--both Christian women--one of whom was--had been contracted as a surrogate mother, and the other had actually contracted the services of a surrogate mother.

The host thought this was all a wonderful idea. Uh, and when it--when I said--when I suggested that, you know, the Bible might have something to say that might want us--want to encourage us to put the brakes on that, they looked at me--I mean, I--they thought, you know what, what planet have you come from? I mean, how could you--I mean, how could you be so crass and uncompassionate? In their view, the--utilizing a surrogate mother for a Christian was a totally appropriate way for having children, and the surrogates themselves saw this as a ministry, giving the gift of life to infertile couples. Now, yeah, I mean, in essence, what what we have--where we've come in the last few years through what's called in vitro fertilization, or the test-tube babies, we have--we have been able to accomplish procreation without sexual relations. Hundreds of thousands of couples every year conceive children through these technologies. Once human cloning is perfected, we will be able to have procreation without men, because a woman could clone herself, and then have--and have the uh, the--the clone gestated in another woman's body.

But with artificial wombs, we'll be able to have procreation without women, as well. And the--the whole idea of procreation, families, nature, is being re-evaluated. In fact, one uh molecular biologist has written a very provocative title. His book is called Remaking Eden, and that's precisely what he thinks is science and technology is doing and ought to be doing. Now, we

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could-we could talk at length about genetics. I mean, gen-the whole world of genetic testing and genetic technologies, uh, you know, that's becoming quite a mainstream part of prenatal care for pregnant women. Uh, but we-we know now that there are hundreds of diseases for which we have identified a genetic component, and for which people are being tested today. Uh, many, many things that are where there are direct links to genetic disease, others simply give you a higher risk factor. And when people are tested today or have their children tested in utero, uh there's a wide variety of things that they can find out that their child might be susceptible to. And with the, what I call the abortion assumption, that is inherent in a lot of prenatal genetic testing, which-which essentially says: if you get bad news on your test, you will automatically, without much critical thinking about it, end the pregnancy.

Uh, and I've-I'm familiar with pregnancies that have been ended for things I would consider to be as insignificant as a cleft palate, and other types of things. I think we wrote-we run the risk of couples using this kind of genetic testing uh as a preemptive way to abort children who are not genetically perfect, and has a funny way of undermining unconditional love, which we ought to be showing for children. It's as though we are saying to our children in utero, I will love you unconditionally and accept you, if you pass all the genetic tests that you are supposed to. Uh, it has a funny way of, uh it has a funny way of undercutting our desire to love our children unconditionally. Now, that's-that's a lot of sp-you know, a lot of speculation about what will become mainstream. All of these things are, or most of them are, except for human cloning, are being done today. And we have the capacity to do all of these things. But what I-what I think is more pressing, and what I'd like to spend the rest of our time on today, of greatest concern to

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those of you who are heading to a local church for ministry or some other type of uh vocational ministry, is a scenario, something like this.

An infertile couple comes to your office. They have been trying to have a child for--on their own, for the last three years. They've tried every, you know, they've tried all the old wives tales, solutions for infertility. And nothing has worked. They've been to their doctor. They found that uh, you know, all the systems are functioning like they're supposed to. Uh the physicians are baffled as to why they can't have a child. And they've just been to their in-to their local infertility clinic, and be-have been presented with a dizzying array of options that are now available to them technologically, all the way from things that are fairly simple, like artificial insemination, to things that are very complex and very expensive, such as the use of surrogate mothers. These clinics don't-I mean, they just sort of throw the options out there. They throw the success rates out there, and the amount of money that it costs. But that's all they-that's all they tell them. And as far as the clinic goes, all of these options are morally acceptable.

Yet they have this sort of uneasy feeling as they come into your office and they want to know what you think the Bible teaches about the use of these technologies. Which ones, if any of them, are appropriate. Now, think about-think about what you might tell a couple who is sitting across the desk from you wanting your advice, and they're going-they're going back to the infertility clinic in a few days to make decisions about what they ought to do. And they-they're looking to you to provide them some parameters from scripture about what's appropriate. That-that's what's coming into the local church. And that's what I think we need to be prepared for as men and women who are not only concerned about the cause of Christ, but compassionate for these

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infertile couples. Because in the-in the general population of couples who are of child-bearing age, one in six fits the definition of infertility. So the chances are, that in the church that you attend, or the church that you-in which you minister, you know, there are more than a handful of couples who are wrestling at present with infertility.

You see, my wife and I had this conversation with a member of our pastoral staff, because we had tried for three years to have a child without any success. Our physician was completely baffled as to the reason why. And we had, you know this is before I started thinking about a lot of this, and we had no clue as to what might be appropriate. And you know what? Neither did our pastor. And my wife actually, as a result of this, started doing so-leading some support groups for infertile couples. And what she found, was that the vast majority of Christian couples, who were looking for inf-some help in infertility, cared only about two things: success rate and the cost. They weren't even asking these questions. They weren't even talking about some of the moral and theological things that they needed to be thinking about. Okay, so what would--what would you tell this couple? They're sitting across the table from you. What--would you say something like this? "Well, um, you know, God-God is the one who opens and closes the womb. And your-your only option is to either continue trying naturally, or adopt, or accept childlessness as God's gift."

Alright, now I think the average infertile couple, that would be a big adjustment to see childlessness as a gift, at-at least at this point, that would take some work to be able to see that uh, for where-for what it is. What-what you may-what you may not realize and I think what-what most pastors don't realize, what they didn't when they were talking to us, is how deeply infertility

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strikes at the-at the heart of your identity as a man and as a woman. I had never, I had never, never caught a gru-grip of this. And I realized that people who have not experienced infertility generally don't have any idea how painful it is. My wife and I quit-we quit going to church on uh Mother's Day and Father's Day and, you know, Thanksgiving, and Christmas holidays, because it was just too painful to be around those family celebrations. When we des-we desperately wanted to be family, but biology wasn't cooperating. And we quit-we quit rejoice-we quit being able to rejoice with our friends, who seemed at that time to be multiplying like rabbits.

[Audience laughs]

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And we were simply uh-we simply were unable to rejoice with them. And it broke our heart. But it was, it was just too painful to be around that. And pe-I think in general, the first thing that I'd want to-want to encourage an infertile couple with is to admit a knowledge that the pain of infertility is real. I mean, in the biblical accounts of infertility, it is this, I mean, it's this emotionally gut-wrenching thing that women dealt with primarily. Well, we don't hear a lot about is how this affects men, too. And it affects men very deeply. So what-wha-would you tell this couple that uh their, really their only options are non-technological. To stay--so you would say, in essence, to stay away from the clinic, you know, cancel your next appointment, and uh simply continue trying naturally, adopt, or accept voluntary childlessness. That's that's certainly an option. And this is-this is what I tend to call the Catholic option, uh because most, you know, Roman-Roman Catholics have thought very deeply about this, suggest that essentially that's what an infertile couple ought to do, that God set the process of procreation up at creation, it's natural because God ordained it that way, and therefore you ought not tamper with that process.

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But does the scripture support that? Does-does the scripture give us some alternatives that might involve technology? And I think generally, they do. I think the scripture opens the door for couples who are in our position to go a step further technologically. And I think it's based on this sort of theological underpinning. It's very clear, it seems to me, that uh as a part of God's giving human beings dominion over the creation, that He gave us the tools to help us best accomplish that. Specifically, through general revelation and through common grace, God has-God has invested in human beings the gifts, the tools, the intelligence, the creativity in order to best subdue the creation. And clearly, a part of that is doing what human beings can do to help, if not reverse, temporarily alleviate, the effects of the entrance of sin into the world. And generally speaking, I think we can make a good case that technology that helps human beings do that, that generally improves the lot of the human race, and specifically helps, at least temporarily alleviate the effects of the entrance of sin, can be seen as a part of God's general revelation, and a part of God's good gift, enabling human beings to further subdue and have dominion over the creation.

Now, if that's-if that's true, and I think medical technology particularly fits this category, that God has given human beings wonderful gifts to alleviate heart disease, to stop uh kidney failure, to do--I mean, to do all kinds of things from which one hundred years ago people died routinely. That's not--the fact that human beings have developed this technology from from a theological perspective is not an accident. It's not a coincidence, and God's not up there, you know, somehow biting His nails thinking, "Goodness, what are you-what are they going to think of next?" No, God has invested human beings, as a part of general revelation as a part of

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the creation mandate, with the tools and the skills necessary to develop these technologies. Now, of course, all uses of these technologies needs biblical and moral assessment, no doubt. But I don't think-I don't think we can say that we uh we ought not go down the technological road in order to alleviate infertility. It seems to me that uh if we're gonna be consistent with that, then when you have a heart attack, you ought not go to a cardiologist. Or that if you have uh, you know, if you have kidney disease, you ought not see a nephrologist.

Or if you have a uh, a broken bone, you ought not go get it put in a cast. Uh and if we're going to be consistent with that. It seems to me we ought to be Christian Scientists about the use of medical technology. So, I mean, I think that, I think theologically there's an open door, to use technology, in general. Alright? Now that's not a bull-and that's not a blanket endorsement. Um, but I think as, you know, as the technological train keeps moving, I think it's appropriate for us to jump on. The question is, where do we jump off? And in-if we accept the use of some of these technologies in general for procreation, then that raises, I think, a much more complicated question. And that is, what about the-what about using technologies that require, what I call, third party contributors to procreation, such as sperm donors, egg donors, or womb donors, which we generally call surrogate mothers? Okay, that's a little tougher question. Let me-let's think, let's think about that for just-for just a moment.

I think what was clear from the Genesis account of creation, is that--if we had a little bit more time, we'd go-we'd go sort of verse by verse through that--but I think, you know, we give-sketch the outlines of this and we can talk further if you have some questions on that. But I think in general, the Genesis account of creation sets up the command to procreate children within the

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context of God establishing heterosexual marriage. Mean, I think if you look at the broad panorama account of creation in Genesis one, and the more specific complementary account of creation in Genesis two, it's very clear that the command to procreate follows the creation of male and female, and what I would view as the formal institution of marriage in Genesis 2:24. So it seems to me that God has clearly set procreation in the context of monogamous, stable, heterosexual marriage. You can't just say in the context of marriage today, unfortunately you need to qualify it a little bit more than that. Now that-that being said, that-that doesn't rule out things like adoption, per say, because adoption is clear-would clearly be a violation of that, of that model.

Adoption is seen throughout the scripture as an emergency rescue situation that clearly is not the norm. Okay? So that's, I don't think, a problem. But if you look, interestingly, if you look at the Old Testament, though, I think we have to admit that there are some pretty novel ways of having children. Right? And there-there are some things that God allows in the Old Testament that are clear deviations from this model that was set up at creation. Right? For, for example, surrogate motherhood, we see in both in Genesis 16 and Genesis 30, I think we can make a good case that when it's-when uh Abraham goes to Hagar, that's a disaster of unprecedented proportions, which we are living with to this day. Uh, and I think-I think you could probably make a good case that simply the outcome is all we needed to make a negative judgment about the practice. But you don't see the same disastrous outcome when Jacob empl-quote "employs" a surrogate in Genesis 30. That seems to be treated in a much more matter of fact and more neutral way. Alright?

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You also see divorce allowed. Divorce is clearly a violation of that creation norm. But divorce, as we know, is allowed for re-for reasons that uh in the Old Testament may not be entirely clear, uh but that-that seems to be allowed. [Unintelligible] marriage was a, you know, sort of an unusual way to procreate children in the Old Testament. So, I mean, what are-what are we to make of that? Well, clearly, just because you have something that appears historically in the text that, you know, that's not you know, that's just a historical appearance. It's not hermeneutically anything that establishes a norm or anything like that. But it is, it is interesting that you have this model for marriage, family, and procreation set up in Genesis one and two, yet there are-there do seem to be some exceptions to the general rule that God allowed in the Old Testament. Alright? Now, whether God continues to allow exceptions to the general rule today, I think is a different question. And without explain-without more explicit biblical authority for that, I'd be very reluctant to-to expand the category of uh exceptions to the general rule, that some of these reproductive technologies might involve.

But if you look at the New Testament, I think you find a very serious and sober treatment uh of the-of the model that God set at the creation. Think about all the times that the New Testament authors appeal to Genesis one and two to support their argument. In virtually all of those cases, they consider appeal to the norm of creation enough to end the discussion. For-for example, when Paul, when Paul appeals to creation uh in Genesis--or in Romans 1 in his discussion of homosexuality, that's real--I mean, he does talk about some of the negative consequences that come from that. But that's essentially all the-all the, the data that was needed to support the idea that homosexuality was wrong. It violated the norm that God set up in creation. End of discussion. Likewise, in first Timothy chapter two, when Paul is addressing the issue of women

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and their role in the church, and-and however you understand uh, Paul's notion of Genesis one, which I don't want to get into here, I think that the point is--the point I want to make seems clear that Paul considered appeal to Genesis one and two to be the trump card in his discussion of the place of women in the church. There was really no--there was no other discussion that was necessary.

So, it ste-it seems to me that the new-the New Testament authors take the model of creation very, very seriously. And it-and they place great weight on it. And it seems to me that in our discussion of reproductive technologies, we ought to place similar weight on the norms set at the creation as opposed to these exceptions to the general rule. We are to see those as as as what they are, simply exceptions to the general rule, the reasons for which may not be entirely clear. But exceptions nonetheless. So it-the upshot of this is that I think you can make a good case that when the Bible talks about procreation, what they intend, what the-what the biblical author's intend, is that procreation take place within the setting of heterosexual marriage. That is, children are procreated into stable heterosexual marriages, and children are procreated out of the genetic materials of husband and wife. I think that the biblical data suggests that we ought to be very skeptical about using any kind of third-party contributors to procreation, so that any technology that involves the genetic material of husband and wife would seem to be morally acceptable.

Right now, though, I'm going to put some other guidelines on this in just a moment. Any technologies--and this is what I would tell if I were talking to an infertile couple. Any technology that involves uh, use of third-party contributors, I would be-I would be very careful about using those. And I think the scripture is very skeptical about using those. What about those that involve

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just the genetic materials of husband and wife? Now that-they aren't exempt from problems either, and I think in general, when we-when we are involved creating embryos in a laboratory for use, implanting in infertile couples, we ought to have as a general principle that there are no- no embryos are destroyed in the process. If you, through in vitro fertilization, uh have eight embryos created and you implant three and get pregnant with triplets, your childbearing days are clearly over. You have five left. Uh, it is morally unconscionable, and the equivalent of abortion, to destroy those embryos, as is routinely done in infertility clinics throughout the country. That's- -what's really important about this, is that when we talk to infertile couples and we think about these technologies, to think it through before we get involved using these.

Uh, most couples don't do that. In fact, most couples end up like some very close friends of ours who came to us after they had given birth to triplets. And after the infertility clinic had called them, asking them if they wanted to continue paying to have their remaining embryos stay in cold storage. They had no interest in having any more children. And they sort-they they said, you know, could you tell us what we ought to do? And I, this-this-this uh gentleman is a very dear friend, he's an elder in our church. He--and I, I chided him for not having known better um, but they just hadn't thought about it. They got caught up in having a baby, and didn't think about some of these other complicating factors. They said, what are our options here? I said, well, you have six embryos left in storage. Alright? What-what-what are your choices? He says well, here's what he-what he wanted to do, was actually to discard them. But he knew he couldn't because that's the equivalent of abortion.

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Well, the other option was to allow them to die a natural death, which I said is okay, that's okay to do in some cases, if you can't do anything to save someone, then to allow someone to die when you, when saving them is actually quite a simple proposition is unconscionable. The other option was to put them up for adoption. And he he wasn't wild about that idea, as he put it uh, "You know, I don't want my progeny running around all over America without my knowledge."

[Audience laughs]

Scott Rae:

And I don't blame him, for that. But of the options that he had left, that was the best. And there are now embryo adoption agencies that have sprung up. There are two or three of them here in Southern California that place embryos that would be headed for destruction with Christian couples, ensuring that they not only get implanted and a chance to be born, but also get a good home. And I said that, you know, that's you know, that may not be the best option, or the one that you're the happiest with. But of all the ones that he had left, that clearly was the most acceptable one. Now what, what I think all of these bioethics issues raise is a need to be theologically informed, but also to be informed about what the issues are that people in the general public are dealing with. You know, this-this is-this is not an area where we can simply preach to the choir uh, and hope that we'll continue to have an impact. I mean, these are things that we desperately need to be engaged in, a secular-with our secular culture in, and answer, I mean, there are specific questions that our brothers and sisters will continue to have because of these technologies that we need to be equipped to answer.

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But also, we need to be equipped to give an answer to where these trends are headed in the general culture. And I commend you for your interest in some of these areas. These are very gray, they're very difficult. They don't admit well of black and white answers. And if you, you know, if you have a personality that has a high need for closure, or you love black and white kinds of things, I'd encourage you to give that up before entering entering this field.

[Audience laughs]

Scott Rae:

Alright. Let's say-let's pray together. Lord, we could go on all day with this and still barely scratched the surface. We're so grateful that You've given us the opportunity to reflect on some of these issues that are, I admit, are very complicated. I'm grateful that uh this, despite all of the technological advances we've made at the beginning of life, that what-what You gave us in the Psalms is still true, that the womb is still the secret place over which You have ultimate sovereignty. Lord, we confess that this morning. We acknowledged that despite all of our technological advances, there's still a great deal of what takes place in procreation that is a huge mystery. And so we come, acknowledging that before You are awesome, God and the creator of life. Thank You for the time we've had to reflect on this. We ask that You would continue to use us to equip each other, to be more faithful to Your word, more faithful to the theological principles, and also more faithful in bringing a Christian ethic to an increasingly secular culture. And we trust You to that end, in Jesus' name, amen.