

## IN VITRO FERTILIZATION (IVF)

In vitro fertilization is a fertility procedure, which circumvents the difficulty of blocked fallopian tubes. Human eggs are harvested from the woman and incubated with sperm in vitro, lit. *in glass*. If fertilization occurs the embryo begins to develop. After a few days in the laboratory the developing embryo is transferred into the womb for the completion of its development. Because the procedure is expensive and not always successful many eggs are collected, and many embryos produced. Then, the embryos are graded and the best two or three are transferred into the womb, the remainder especially if they do not look healthy may well be discarded, flushed away! If, as frequently happens, the three embryos survive and proceed to develop, a triplet pregnancy is the result. Such a pregnancy is risky for both mother and babies, so some clinics will advocate what is termed *fetal reduction*, or *selective abortion*. Here they selectively abort, or kill the smallest of the fetuses hoping to improve the overall chances of the others. In many cases enough embryos are produced for several treatment cycles. The *spare* embryos are frozen in liquid nitrogen, and can be used if the first treatment cycle is unsuccessful. In fact such frozen embryos can be thawed out and implanted months or years later. At present, in the UK and throughout the world there are literally thousands of frozen embryos stored in freezers. In the UK, because of the difficulty of storage, and legal wrangles as to the ownership of the frozen embryos, legislation is in place which makes the fertility clinic the owner of the embryo after 10 years.

This is a fairly simplistic overview of IVF, but the question is how does all this square with Scripture? We accept that life begins at conception; therefore in the case of IVF life begins outside the body. There are several issues in the IVF treatment procedure that present us with grave difficulties.

**Discarded embryos.** Once an embryo exists it has the full status of any other person. To discard it, is to kill it, and this is unacceptable.

**Fetal reduction.** This is another name for the heinous practice of abortion. God's Law demands that we do all in our power to preserve life.

**Freezing embryos.** Life has begun at conception; those embryos are alive, though frozen at present. What, if on the first treatment the woman finds she is expecting triplets and doesn't want any more children? What happens to her frozen embryos? What happens to the frozen embryos if she dies? There are many thousands of frozen embryos in the United States of America, where no one wants them. Some Christian couples have offered to adopt an embryo, and have it implanted. While these people may be commended, legal difficulties could be formidable. However the practice of producing embryos to freeze them in the first place is where the problem lies.

This said there are some fertility centres in Northern Ireland who have been prepared to enrol infertile couples in their IVF program on the understanding that only two or three embryos will be produced, that they will all be implanted, therefore none will be frozen, and that there will be no question of fetal reduction. In such circumstances it is not uncommon for the fertility clinic to require the prospective parents to sign a declaration that by their restricting of the treatment program in this way, they accept that the success rate of treatment will be significantly reduced.

Before we leave the subject of IVF, the subject of donor eggs and donor sperm should be raised. Because of the nature of the IVF treatment, the use of donor eggs and donor sperm is quite easy, but ease of use or availability are not sufficient grounds to prove morality. With the use of either donor eggs, or sperm, the procreation of children is immediately taken out of the scope of the marriage. Marriage is a pre-fall institution of God for man. Marriage has been ordained of God for one man and one woman, in a life-long relationship based on love, trust and respect. Anything else is an abuse of God's institution. It is within this relationship that the Lord intends children to be born. The use of donor eggs or sperm goes outside of the marriage, and could therefore be described as adultery by proxy. The principles of God's Word cannot be set aside just because it is either possible or convenient.