

A decorative border composed of various colored squares (red, blue, grey, brown) arranged in a grid-like pattern around the central text area.

FOREWORD BY KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

WALKING
through
INFERTILITY

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL,
AND MORAL COUNSEL FOR
THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING

MATTHEW ARBO

“Infertility is painful. In these pages, Matthew Arbo gives biblical insight and wise counsel, offering both comfort and hope for those on this difficult journey. *Walking through Infertility* goes deeper than the superficial clichés couples often hear, which, though intended to comfort, can hurt. Arbo frames infertility within the biblical narrative, where it is actually quite common and significant—we find we are not alone. Additionally, he helps those navigating some of the complex ethical decisions made possible by modern technology for dealing with infertility—we are not without guidance. Ultimately, he points to our comfort in the community of the church and our hope in the God of life.”

Joshua Ryan Butler, Pastor, Imago Dei Community,
Portland, Oregon; author, *The Skeletons in God's Closet* and
The Pursuing God

“I am glad to commend Matthew Arbo’s *Walking through Infertility* both to couples going down this road and to the friends, family members, and professionals who walk this road with them. It is sensitively done, and full of wisdom and insight about what these couples are facing. It’s a worthwhile resource, which I will often consult.”

Scott B. Rae, Professor of Christian Ethics, Talbot School of
Theology, Biola University

“*Walking through Infertility* is a resource I wish had been available when we walked through our own struggles with infertility. In an age of increasing medical advancement, the options for couples are numerous and often overwhelming. Matthew Arbo has provided a helpful resource for couples as they consider what the Bible has to say about infertility and how God’s Word speaks to the various treatments out there. But Arbo also speaks to church leaders, who are often left wondering how to counsel those under their care. This is a needed book, and I’m glad it’s finally here.”

Courtney Reissig, author, *Glory in the Ordinary* and
The Accidental Feminist

“The challenges of infertility raise serious and substantive pastoral and ethical questions, yet few accessible—much less biblical—volumes exist to address them. Matthew Arbo’s sensitive and careful discussion is alive to the struggles couples face, yet concerned about the ethical temptations that arise within them. This is a helpful volume, with theologically grounded counsel that lay leaders and pastors should weigh carefully.”

Matthew Lee Anderson, Founder, Mere Orthodoxy;
author, *The End of Our Exploring: A Book about Questioning
and the Confidence of Faith*

WALKING
through
INFERTILITY

WALKING *through* INFERTILITY

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL,
AND MORAL COUNSEL FOR
THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING

MATTHEW ARBO

Foreword by Karen Swallow Prior

 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Walking through Infertility: Biblical, Theological, and Moral Counsel for Those Who Are Struggling

Copyright © 2018 by Matthew Arbo

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Micah Lanier

First printing 2018

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5931-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5934-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5932-7

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5933-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Arbo, Matthew, 1981– author.

Title: Walking through infertility : biblical, theological, and moral counsel for those who are struggling / Matthew Arbo.

Description: Wheaton : Crossway, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017057938 (print) | LCCN 2018020306 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433559327 (pdf) |

ISBN 9781433559334 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433559341 (epub) | ISBN 9781433559310 (tp)

Subjects: LCSH: Infertility—Patients—Counseling of—Moral and ethical aspects. | Infertility—Religious aspects. | Infertility—Psychological aspects.

Classification: LCC RC889 (ebook) | LCC RC889 .A67 2018 (print) | DDC 616.6/920651—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017057938>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To Patrick and Jennifer

Contents

Foreword <i>by Karen Swallow Prior</i>	11
Introduction: A Modern Story of Infertility	15
1 Stories of Infertility and God's Abiding Promise	23
2 Christian Discipleship and Human Affection	43
3 The Vitality and Consolation of the Church	61
4 A Moral Appraisal of Infertility Treatment	75
Appendix: Interview with Patrick and Jennifer Arbo	97
Notes	109
General Index	113
Scripture Index	115

Foreword

Karen Swallow Prior

I'll never forget the moment I realized that I hadn't been given the gift of musicality.

As the granddaughter of an accomplished bandmaster and the daughter of a lifelong choir singer, I was six when, immediately upon showing an interest, I was started on piano lessons. For years, I had weekly instruction and practiced daily at home on our old wooden upright.

One afternoon, I arrived at my piano teacher's house early and sat in the foyer to await the end of the session of the student ahead of me. The girl was a year older than me, but I knew she'd been taking lessons for less time than I had. Sitting quietly by myself, listening to her play, I noticed a smoothness and gracefulness in her notes I had never heard from my own fingers. In that instant, I recognized for the first time that—not for any lack of trying or desire—I truly lacked musical talent. Suddenly, I felt free. I was but a teenager, but I had figured out on my own what no one else seemed able to see or willing to say.

I quit piano lessons and took up cross country. I've been running ever since.

My journey through infertility replicated this experience in significant ways.

Like most women, I desired from a young age to become a mother someday and assumed that I would. Everyone around me, particularly in our church life, appeared to share this assumption. When my husband and I didn't conceive right away, everyone seemingly assumed we would follow the prescribed course for most infertile couples, partaking of increasingly invasive and risky procedures until pregnancy was achieved. No one advised us to stop and consider that perhaps God simply wasn't going to give us the gift of children. But my husband had the wisdom to apply the brakes. Yes, we desired the gift of children—but we weren't willing to create life in ways that we believe risk harm to that life. Notably, the verse in Psalms that proclaims that children are a gift of the Lord (127:3) is preceded two verses before with the caution, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Not long after we were married, a family member gave me some of her old maternity clothes, baby clothes, and a fold-up stroller. Unquestioningly, I took them home and packed them safely away for someday. Because it was a long time before my husband and I learned that we were infertile, we dutifully lugged these items around for years, from apartment to apartment, where they took up scant closet space, before eventually giving them away to someone who could actually use them. It was even longer before I realized what a burden that baggage had been. And I don't mean the baby supplies. The real baggage was the

presumption that every godly family follows the same course and achieves the same standard outcome.

God's design for the family—the fruitful marriage between a man and a woman, the union of two image bearers that brings forth more image bearers—is mysterious, wonderful, and good. To desire such is good. Both marriage and children are God's good gifts. But to assume that God will give certain gifts is not good. Nor is it good to cultivate within the church the presumption that God is going to give his gifts to everyone—just as surely as I won't be accompanying next week's soloist at the piano.

To have one's longing to marry and have children go unmet is, as with any frustrated desire, disappointing. However, the depth of that disappointment can be increased even beyond what is natural with the additional imposition of expectations—whether others' or our own.

As Matt writes in the following pages, “Every experience of infertility is a storied experience. . . . Through story we situate ourselves and others to help make sense of where we are and how we got here.” The fact is that what we think is the standard story for the family is more culturally influenced than we realize. Indeed, in many chapters of church history, beginning with the apostle Paul, marriage and family have not been the assumed norm for those devoted to lives of service to Christ. The power of the stories we tell ourselves—based on the story given to us by our culture—can be positive, but it can also be destructive. The prevailing narrative within the culture, church culture included, that assumes family life looks a particular way and follows a certain path conditions those who don't adhere to that plot to feel, wrongly, out of place in the story. Recognizing those pressures for what they are will not, of course, eliminate entirely the

sense of suffering and loss that comes when our personal desires are thwarted. However, embracing the understanding that life doesn't always (nor does it have to) look one way in order to please God and be fulfilling can go a long way in guiding our responses to frustrated expectations and desires.

Matt wisely writes that “*the Creator and Redeemer of life has not forsaken the infertile but has instead given them a slightly different way of being family and thus of participating in the life and mission of God.*” Imagine what the church would look like if infertile couples were taught, disciplined, and encouraged in the knowledge that God has other plans for their earthly ministry, and if the church equipped them to find and carry out those plans. Some of these couples might be called to adopt children. Some might be called to devote time to other members of their families. Some might be called to serve the kingdom through church ministry, intentional communities, creative artistry, or secular vocations.

Another part of this picture we might envision is what a church that purposefully makes space for childless women to offer the gifts of their minds, mothering, and time would look like. Not only might infertile women feel a bit less the burden of longing, loss, and shame that often accompany infertility, but the church would be richer in cultivating and receiving the gifts such women have been given. I'm thankful this has been my own experience in the church. But I lament that this experience for infertile women is not universal.

May this book help make it so.

Introduction

A Modern Story of Infertility

John and Lizzy first met at a student ministry gathering at their college in Colorado. It was serendipitous in the way so many comedic first-meets are. They were crazy for one another from the start. Infatuated. Inseparable. They had everything in common. A short year later, to no one's surprise, they were engaged. He studied engineering; she studied journalism. They married in a small chapel in the Rocky Mountain foothills not many weeks after graduation. Parents wept, friends cheered, and the felicitous couple laughed their way through the first few years of marriage. And although they never really put it to themselves this way, both John and Lizzy felt deep down that everything in life had really gone according to plan. They were on their way together and figured at some point a gaggle of children would soon follow.

Seven years later, childless, John and Lizzy's once raucous joy had stilled, and their hopeful expectations were all but muted by loneliness. When they ceased using contraceptives

shortly after their third anniversary, they naturally assumed conception was imminent. But failing to conceive after six or seven cycles, Lizzy became anxious: was there some biological problem?

She discussed her nervousness with John over the next month or so and decided to schedule an appointment with her obstetrician. She was pleased she did. The OB instructed her to pay even closer attention to her natural cycle and to have intercourse with her husband every day she was at her most fertile. Her doctor also recommended some additional blood and hormonal testing, which to Lizzy's surprise revealed a slight imbalance in estrogen, comparably easy to treat. Things were looking up again. This little imbalance must have been the problem all along. Nevertheless, despite implementing a rigorous sexual itinerary and treatment regimen, ten months later John and Lizzy still hadn't conceived. And everywhere they were reminded of the fact.

The new impasse meant it was John's turn for assessment. He and Lizzy were referred to a well-known fertility specialist and, following a battery of tests, John was given a clean bill of reproductive health. Nothing on John's end seemed to be preventing conception. Results that should have been relieving were, in their case, crushing in their implications. They could not conceive, and the hidden reason had something to do with their bodies. It all felt deeply indicting.

Anxiety was assuaged somewhat by the specialist's immediate rejoinder: there was still hope. It was time to try a new, more involved phase of treatment. Lizzy would undergo a fresh series of scans and screenings. They would get to the bottom of this, he told them. It would be expensive and laborious, but it was the only way forward if they wished to have a biological child.

In Vitro Fertilization: IVE. They had read a bit about the procedure in online forums for couples experiencing infertility. It seemed feasible for them on first glance, and they were certainly ideal candidates. But the sticker shock! They were still paying off college loans. And they had purchased their first home only the year before. The savings just weren't there yet.

Quite apart from the financial concern, they also harbored reservations about the ethics of the procedure itself. Its clinical artificiality and transactional character rubbed their consciences wrong, although they couldn't quite say why. IVF appealed to them, in a way, but they would need some time to evaluate their options. Maybe adoption made more sense for them. Or perhaps embryo adoption, which they'd begun to hear more and more about from random friends online, was something they should consider. Whatever they ultimately decided, they'd need more money, wisdom, and time to make it happen.

Through it all, from the earliest days of subtle worry to the later seasons of empty bedrooms and indelicate conversations at church, John and Lizzy felt the full range of emotions that attend the experience of infertility. Eagerness, worry, hope, disappointment, confidence, despair, embarrassment—they felt it all—and always, everywhere the irrepressible *shame* of not being able to complete the basic human task of reproduction. It was an irrational feeling, they knew, and yet they couldn't fully banish it from their hearts. It had fastened itself to them. Shame dug at them with every opportunity—children bounding loudly on playgrounds, toddlers chuckling in shopping carts, birth announcements arriving in the mail, baby dedications at church—they couldn't escape the reproach.

Inevitably the shame hardened into bitter anger each took out on the other. That's often the nature of infertility, the "fault" is either his or hers. Human beings are pathological about wanting to fix responsibility for a problem. The trouble with this tendency is that fixing responsibility tends in reality to result in *blaming*. John and Lizzy took their turns with each other. Blaming became an almost daily venting ritual. At its worst, they both at different times wondered to themselves whether it would be better to leave and chart a new life with someone else, far away from the hell their life together had descended into. At its best, well, as far as they could tell, there really was no "best."

Where We're Going

John and Lizzy's story will pick up again in the next chapter. Even though their story is not characteristic of every infertile couple's experience, or even yours, it nevertheless is the story of tens of thousands of infertile couples. It is the story of your friends and family. Our stories have their own variations, of course—different characters, plot points, settings, responses, and conclusions. Not everyone responds to infertility in the same way as John and Lizzy. Each couple facing infertility responds to specific turns of events in their own way. It's better to think of infertility as having no one type, but as sitting somewhere on a spectrum, or range of possible events and reactions.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates approximately 7 to 10 percent of all couples experience some form of reproductive infertility. For some of these couples surgical intervention or other less invasive treatments fix the problem, and they are subsequently able to conceive. For others, however, infertility is an untreatable biological fact. Infertile couples often begin

with the expectation that their condition is reparable, that some medical solution will resolve the problems preventing conception or gestation. The confidence of that assumption weakens over time. The longer infertility is protracted, the more likely a couple will resort to extrabodily (i.e., artificial) treatments to ensure the birth of a biological child. For some couples, prolonged reproductive treatment is entirely cost prohibitive.

Infertility is often a profoundly wounding experience for many couples. The temptation is for husband or wife to become intensely self-critical and to view themselves as somehow responsible for their plight. As a result, they feel hurt or perhaps even ashamed by their infertility. They blame God. They do not know exactly what to say to others. Even when they do, the response from friends and family, however well-meaning, is often timid and ignorant. Couples sometimes assume their fertile peers look down upon them. And if childlessness itself were not enough, the social castigation, even if unreal and imagined by the couple, often carries significant emotional trauma.

The purpose of this book is to address biblical, theological, and moral questions surrounding infertility. The aim is to instruct and inspire the church, especially those couples with personal experience with infertility. If you're reading this, chances are you've thought about some of these questions. But I want to do more than instruct you—I want to encourage you. I want you to hear and receive the truth, and I want to extend some words of hope and consolation: *God is present to you*. His grace is sufficient.

We'll begin first by rehearsing some the Bible's infertility narratives. The purpose of these stories is not necessarily to illustrate the hardship of infertility or to promise God's certain

answer. It is more complicated than that. These narratives do, however, reveal that God cares about fertility, and we'll want to discern what his caring means for the Christian and for the church.

These biblical cases will serve as a useful backdrop for the second chapter on Christian discipleship and the importance of human affection. How might understanding discipleship illumine our thinking—and feeling—about infertility? That's the question we want to grapple with. Formulating a response will lead us into chapter 3, which explores the vitality and consoling support of the church.

With these biblical and theological themes in place, the final chapter will offer a brief, accessible moral assessment of a few reproductive therapies and treatments sometimes commended to couples experiencing infertility. The moral (and theological) implications of such treatments are not always clear, and medical practitioners do not always unpack those implications transparently for patients. The ethics of reproductive treatment can be inordinately complex. So, moving forward, my aim is to make the moral issues at stake as clear and understandable as possible.

Here's the central idea of this book: *the Creator and Redeemer of life has not forsaken the infertile but has instead given them a slightly different way of being family, and thus of participating in the life and mission of God.* In God is life. He is the only final source of human consolation, for fertile and infertile alike. God is infinitely good. He is wise. We worship an almighty God.

If God does not gift a couple with children of their own progeny, the task for Christian couples is to wait upon the Lord

in faith and obedience. This waiting differs dramatically from fatalistic resignation. *Waiting* in Scripture is akin to eager receptivity to God and his Word. It is precisely this waiting that enables the Christian couple to interpret their situation rightly and also to form wise assessments of complex fertility treatments. The moral rightness or wrongness of a treatment, on the Christian theological account, will depend entirely upon whether the treatment corresponds to who God is and to what God has said about the making and taking of life. Sometimes that's just not altogether obvious to us, so we'll need to pray and think and discern a course of action with God's help.

Fear not, I will do everything I can to avoid confusing you or deepening any of your already painful wounds. I'm attempting to be sensitive to the personal experiences of couples who have faced the terrible adversity of infertility. I did not write this book to rebuke you or to remind you all over again of what isn't possible. Nor did I write it simply to give you checklist criteria for evaluating all your medical options. No, this book was written *to help you see and understand that God is the Giver of life*. You are *his* child. He cares deeply about you. When you hurt, he hurts with you.

This book is for infertile couples at all stages, from first worry to full acceptance, and for anyone who wishes to better understand the experience of infertility and to minister to those in the midst of pain. I can't address every discreet variation or every unique eventuality infertile couples may encounter, but I can address some of the general stages and connect them to the purposes of the book. My hope is to offer a picture you can see yourself or others fitting into—a message of hope found in Jesus Christ you can hear and resonate with. So, this book is

Introduction

for infertile couples, for their friends and family, pastors, counselors, or really any Christian who wants to better understand infertility in light of who God is and what he's done. After all, "he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). He is life.

Stories of Infertility and God's Abiding Promise

John and Lizzy's frustrations were not restricted to each other, to their marriage, or to their infertility. The few people they let in on their secret often said things that tended to do more harm than good. They were well-meaning, of course. Touched by John or Lizzy's vulnerability, they felt impressed to "speak into their lives," only it scarcely felt to John or Lizzy like words of consolation or counsel, but rather of denial or naiveté. It struck them not as wisdom, but platitudes. "It will happen!" friends would say. "The moment you stop trying so hard, you're sure to get pregnant." Or, "You know, adopting is one of the best fertility treatments, because the pressure of having a child is alleviated and then just like that—a bun in the oven!"

The fact is most people want to help by talking first and talking often. Simply being there for others is much harder. Christians are often no better at "weeping with those who weep" than

they are of “rejoicing with those who rejoice” (Rom. 12:15). When John and Lizzy disclosed their experience to others, they were given all varieties of advice—all of it more or less reducible to “cheer up, it’ll happen in time.” After a few years of this dismissive reassurance, John and Lizzy couldn’t help but feel this sort of response was really just an indelicate way of avoiding the real hardship of bearing with someone through the pain of infertility and childlessness.

Throughout their infertility, but especially early on, the ribbing provocation of friends and family discouraged them most. “So, when are you two going to have a baby?” “What are you waiting on?” “Your parents really deserve a grand-baby.” “Better while you’re young!” Even less empathetic remarks were offered on a semiregular basis. On every occasion they felt an implicit judgment: they do not have children, and should. How were they supposed to respond to such thoughtlessness? They defaulted to their usual politeness, absorbing the rebuke. People just didn’t understand what they were saying. Better to keep peace.

John and Lizzy wanted children but could not conceive. That was the problem, not preference or expectation management. They learned gradually the importance of discretion. Not everyone was trustworthy. Not everyone sincerely cared about their experience. They also learned over time how to rest in the peace of Christ. They could do only their part, after all; that which was beyond their power they left to Jesus. They asked him for the virtues and affections needed to persevere. When the words of others were hollow or hurtful, they cleaved to the words of their Savior. He alone was their hope and consolation. In him was *life*.

Where We're Going

Every experience of infertility is a storied experience. Each story has its own characters, setting, and plot. We need stories. Through story we situate ourselves and others to help make sense of where we are and how we got here. It is crucial to our self-understanding that we encounter the stories of others. Hearing others' stories reminds us we are not alone. This is particularly important when it comes to the experience of infertility, as it so naturally fosters a kind of solipsism, where couples feel they are the only ones who struggle with it.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the reproductive obligations the Bible may, on some readings, impose on couples, and then to explore several of the more prominent infertility narratives in Scripture. It will become clear as we proceed that the gospel speaks to the experience of infertility and childlessness. God's Word is life-giving. His gospel is restorative and liberating, incorporating and commissioning. Jesus is the desire of the nations, the Creator and ruler of all. In him is life.

The Propagation Mandate

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). So goes God's command to our first parents, Adam and Eve. The earth needed more human inhabitants. God repeats this imperative to Noah and his family following the flood, telling them to go and repopulate the earth (Gen. 9:7). A human presence on the earth matters to God. He made man with breath and dust, and he directs man to procreate in turn. As issued in Genesis, there isn't an option as to whether the command should be obeyed. The command was normative. It was also expedient. In the ancient world, having children was often a matter of life and death, of

producing enough food or defending the tribe from aggressors. Failure to procreate was essentially a neglect of duty.

This particular scriptural command is sometimes referred to as a *propagation mandate*. Having children is something a wedded couple *must* do. The fact that it is an obligation means that a couple either upholds or does not uphold their procreative responsibility. Responsibility just works that way—we do it or we don’t. Recognizing this is crucial, because what happens next is sometimes less than obvious to us. We associate upholding or not upholding our obligation as either a success or failure. And when we fail at doing what God commands us to do, we naturally begin to assume that we have displeased God and fallen under his judgment. If it cannot be God’s fault, we say to ourselves, then it must be mine (or ours).

Let me offer an important point of clarification here. Couples who are open to having children and who do what they can to conceive but who have not (yet) succeeded in conceiving are *not* violating God’s command. Conceiving is not a condition for upholding the command. It is a matter of the heart. The couple intends to have children, wants children, and so also wants to keep the command, but for whatever reason children have not yet come. It isn’t that the couple tries to have children *in order* to keep the command either—let us not forget our freedom in Christ under the new covenant—but that in attempting to have children it also happens that they’re tracking with the heart of God for humanity.

As people of the new covenant, united this side of Christ’s death and resurrection, the duty to procreate has a slightly different purpose and rationale. It has moral and theological force, not legal. Here’s what I mean. The Christian couple does

not procreate simply to comply with God's requirement, but to bring into the world another recipient of grace, a servant to Christ's body, a worshiper of the Lord Most High. Christian parents bring children into the world so that they, too, might receive and enjoy God's grace. The gift of life is, theologically speaking, also a gift *to the child*. Having children just to comply with an obligation is an example of the legalism Paul warns against throughout his letters.

Procreation is a good and beautiful thing to do, but it is not the only purpose of Christian marriage. Debate over the ends of Christian marriage, how to enumerate and rank them, are perennial for the church, particularly between Catholics and Protestants. According to Catholic social teaching, the principal purpose of marriage is procreation. The natural law written into creation itself establishes a definite, inarguable purpose for marriage; indeed, it is the only holy purpose in sexual intercourse. To elevate any other purpose above it violates God's law. This is why, for example, artificial contraception is impermissible for Catholic couples.

Protestants have tended to understand the purposes of marriage a bit differently. Procreation is a good purpose for sex within Christian marriage, but so too is pleasure, intimacy, and friendship. Sex is instrumentalized only if pleasure is made the highest or exclusive purpose in sex, and that is the Catholic worry. But Protestants have understood sex as being for the higher purpose of intimacy and fidelity, and for which pleasure plays only a part.

The Protestant view was not an invention of the Reformation. As Oliver O'Donovan has argued, Christians of the earliest centuries understood friendship to be the highest purpose in

marriage.¹ Marital sex may strengthen the bonds of intimacy, loyalty, and friendship, or it may not. The temptation to misuse or exaggerate the capacity of sex to bridge every gap of intimacy is in our time everywhere on display.

Taking the stress point off of procreation in marital sex and subordinating it to the higher good of friendship has tremendous implications for how we think about infertility. If the purpose of marriage is procreation, then it follows that infertile couples cannot satisfy their highest conjugal purpose. Whether simply *intending* to procreate satisfies their purpose is of little consequence, for if they cannot satisfy their purpose materially by having children, then lesser purposes aspired to will always seem to infertile couples, and to others, as inferior, resulting in moral stratification.

If, on the other hand, procreation is subordinated to the higher good of friendship in Christian marriage, then infertility isn't a failure, but merely a factor of their relationship. Marriage is about more than having children. Indeed, it is about much more than friendship, too. The purpose of Christian marriage, as Paul understood, is mission. Christian marriage bears witness to the good news in Jesus Christ, to the love he extends to his bride, the church. Any children or friendship in marriage are understood in light of *that* purpose, and in turn receive their real meaning.

While on the subject, can't we also identify good and faithful Christian reasons for a couple to delay or refrain (for a time) from having children? It isn't difficult to imagine circumstances arising that might make the sudden arrival of children a physical, financial, or even spiritual hardship. Conception cannot always be perfectly timed or managed, of course, but if it is

within a couple's faithful, prudent discretion to postpone having children, then there cannot also be an opposite obligation to have children whenever or however possible.

The exact reasons for delay are crucial. It is one thing, for example, to delay until a couple has saved enough money to pay for a hospital delivery and associated expenses, say, or to work through some sort of personal crisis. But it is quite another thing to delay having children until financial success is achieved, or because children are inconvenient, or some other unconvincing reason. A couple should therefore seek to discern the just, charitable, and prudent conditions for having children. Not, I should stress, the *ideal* conditions. Ideal conditions for having children do not exist! That's a destructive myth. Ignore ideals, and focus instead on God's gracious leading.

It's better to think of having children as a good thing to do, rather than an obligatory thing to do. No one is displeasing God by being unable to conceive. Humans can't be held responsible for not doing what isn't even possible for them to do. All any Christian couple can do is put themselves at God's disposal: to live as disciples, together, receptive to his Word and open to his grace.

With all that said, however, and speaking for a moment to infertile readers, my guess is that infertility isn't hard for you because of some unfulfilled obligation you might feel toward God or society or family or spouse. It is hard because you long so deeply for a child of your own. It is hard because you long to bring a new one into the world you can parent and befriend. It is hard because you imagine a story for yourself—and your family—that includes more characters than you and your spouse. It is hard because becoming a parent seems as though it

will redefine your place in the world. It is hard because you want to love a child through to adulthood. It is hard because you want to *be* a mom or dad. It is hard because the absence of a child means you may miss out on profound and enriching experiences reserved only for parent and child. It is hard because you want to hear children laughing, to console their sobs, to share meals with them, to tell them stories. It is hard because you want to fit in, and because you despair at being seen as deficient or less than human. It is hard because you love your spouse and want this for him or her, too. Even if some of these don't quite correspond to your own hopes and disappointments, you can undoubtedly supply your own that do.

It is hard, you realize, both for good and bad reasons. Sometimes you feel rage, and sometimes you feel hopeless. At your lowest, perhaps, you feel alone and confused and forsaken. But may I offer you some reassurance? You are not alone. You are not alone in your experience, nor are you alone when you *feel* alone. A great many other couples have experienced infertility. Infertility is a recurring theme in the book of Genesis, actually. In examining a few of the narratives I want you to keep the following truth in mind: because God is our Father we can be assured that he cares for his children and cares in turn for the childless.

Biblical Narratives

Now that we've given some contours to God's creation and to the command "be fruitful," let's turn our attention to a few biblical narratives that capture the experience of infertility and God's response to that experience. The stories are unique but share some discreet similarities, one of which will prove striking: *God cares for the childless.*

“This book was written to help you see and understand that God is the Giver of life. You are his child. He cares deeply about you. When you hurt, he hurts with you.”

—from the Introduction

Infertility is the profoundly wounding experience of many couples, often leading to feelings of despair and shame as they grapple with shattered dreams and unanswered questions. But God does not leave them alone in their pain. The Creator and Redeemer of life has not forsaken the infertile, but has called and equipped them to participate in his church, kingdom, and mission.

Overflowing with warmth and sensitivity, this book explores what the Bible says about infertility, helping the church walk alongside couples struggling with infertility and assessing the ethical issues surrounding common fertility treatments and reproductive technologies.

“Arbo’s sensitive and careful discussion is alive to the struggles couples face, yet concerned about the ethical temptations that arise within them. This is a helpful volume, with theologically grounded counsel that lay leaders and pastors should weigh carefully.”

Matthew Lee Anderson, Founder, *Mere Orthodoxy*; author, *The End of Our Exploring*

“*Walking through Infertility* is a resource I wish had been available when we walked through our own struggles with infertility.”

Courtney Reissig, author, *Glory in the Ordinary* and *The Accidental Feminist*

MATTHEW ARBO (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is assistant professor of theological studies and director of the Center for Faith and Public Life at Oklahoma Baptist University. Matthew and his family are members of Frontline Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where he also serves as an elder.

INFERTILITY