

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Technology, Marriage and Children

Reproductive technologies and information technology are re-defining marriage, procreation and are affecting the value we place on both marriage and children. The result is tension, confusion and an uncertainty about almost every social dimension of our culture. Marriage, as an institution, is incredibly fragile and these technologies are not helping to stabilize this foundational institution. Consider these observations:

- Since 1980, for every state in every decade the percentage of women who are married has fallen (except Utah in the 1990s).
- The decline of marriage is apparently universal. According to UN statistics, 87% of the world's population lives in countries with marriage rates that have fallen since the 1980s.
- Lower income Americans have been abandoning marriage for the last two decades. In fact, as Derek Thompson, writing in *The Atlantic*, has observed, the failure to marry dramatically increases the likelihood of poverty and continued economic hardship. The marriage crisis is making income inequality worse. Those who are getting married and staying married are, on average, moving ahead in the American economy. Those who do not are falling behind economically. Thompson: "In a strange twist, marriage has recently become a capstone for the privileged class. The decline of marriage, to the extent that we're seeing it, is happening almost exclusively among the poor. . . This is the marriage crisis behind our inequality crisis. It is not complicated. It requires no regression. It is the simplest math question in the world. It says: Two is more than one."

This sounds hauntingly familiar, does it not? It is the same point Genesis 2:18-25 makes in what I call The Creation Ordinance of God—the foundation stone for marriage from the mouth of our Creator God—the two become one (v. 25). Perhaps He does know better than we do!!

In light of these introductory observations, there are three significant technological developments that, the evidence suggests, seem to be undermining, not enhancing marriage and procreation:

1. Consider the rise of Internet dating. Most of us have seen the barrage of advertisements on television promoting Internet dating. Is this a positive cultural development that enhances the development of stable marriages or does it actually over time hinder marriage as an institution? Since this cultural phenomenon has been growing over the last ten years, we now have some data that enables us to draw some preliminary

conclusions. In 2011, Mark Brooks, an online dating consultant, published the results of a study on the impact of Internet dating. Here are some of the conclusions he cites:

- Internet dating has made people more disposable.
- Internet dating may be partly responsible for a rise in the divorce rate.
- Low quality, unhappy and unsatisfying marriages are being destroyed as people drift to Internet dating sites.
- “The Market is hugely more efficient. . . People expect to—and this will be increasingly the case over time—access people anywhere, anytime, based on complex search requests. . . Such a feeling of access affects our pursuit of love . . . the whole world (versus, say, the city we live in) will, increasingly, feel like the market for our partner(s). Our pickiness will probably increase.”
- Above all, Internet dating has helped people of all ages realize that there’s no need to settle for a mediocre relationship. [Cited in *The Atlantic* (January/February 2013), p. 43.]

The results cited above from the Brooks study seem to indicate that Internet dating fuels the self-centeredness of humans, not an other-centeredness that Scripture insists must be the foundation for a God-honoring marriage. In fact, the article in which the Brooks study was cited has the title, “A Million First Dates: How Online Dating is Threatening Monogamy.”

2. The donor sperm industry has exploded across America, with remarkable unintended consequences. A recently released Hollywood movie, entitled “Delivery Man,” focuses on a sperm donor who has fathered over 500 children. Although the movie is undeniably exaggerated, Yale Sociology professor, Rene Almeling, argues that the “truth is, no one knows. In the US, we do not track how many sperm donors there are, how often they donate, or how many children are born from their donations.” Often, the consequences of this reality are dangerous. For example, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* published one case study of a sperm donor who transmitted a genetic heart condition that affected at least 8 of 22 offspring from his donated sperm, including a toddler who died of heart failure. What began as a small practice in our culture has exploded in a profitable industry. Mass manufacturing is now common. Today the supply of sperm is concentrated in a few large companies that maintain multiple offices around the nation, usually near college campuses. Obviously, these companies are seeking young, virile men who will contribute as a source of added income while they are in college. They normally require men to make regular deposits for months on end, “resulting in large caches of genetic material that can produce tens and perhaps even hundreds of offspring.” [See Almeling’s essay in the *New York Times* (1 December 2013).]
3. Egg freezing by women (called oocyte cryopreservation) is a growing practice among American women. Indeed, Dr. Frederick Liccardi of NYU argues that “Egg freezing is seen as this big revolution now, like the Pill was for reproductive rights, women’s health, and family planning in the 1960s.” Today, egg freezing is being promoted as an extension of choice. But the reality is that it is only for the very rich. At \$7,000 to

\$10,000 for each round, plus the storage fees, only a fraction of adult women can afford this “choice.” But there is also a dichotomy between those women who can afford egg freezing so that they can pursue their careers, and those women in their twenties who may soon be able to sell their eggs for medical research. As Jacoba Urist of *The Atlantic* writes, “They’re seeking a woman’s raw material for scientific work, eggs that (unlike sperm donation) require huge doses of hormone shots and a medical procedure that can result in health complications to harvest. So, while you have privileged, professional women electively freezing their eggs on one end of the spectrum. . . [you have] low-income women and college students under financial pressure [who] will be enticed to sell their eggs for science—on the other.” Egg freezing so that you can get pregnant later in life is not as simple as it is often portrayed. As Urist observes, regardless of the age of a woman’s eggs, “those who get pregnant later in life have a higher risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, pelvic inflammation, placenta previa, miscarriage, and early delivery because of preeclampsia.” Finally, Urist reports on the success and cost issues associated with egg freezing: “Women who froze their eggs between 30 and 35 had a 61 to 72% chance of successfully having a baby, at a cost per live birth of \$34,221 to \$43,408. But egg freezing after 37 or 38 starts to look less compelling . . . with success rates falling to as low as 42%, and the cost per live birth rising dramatically to as high as \$74,564 by age 40.” The technology of egg freezing creates far more unintended consequences than originally thought. It is hardly a panacea as a new option in childbearing for women. [See Urist’s article in www.theatlantic.com (15 May 2013).]

In addition to the articles cited, see Derek Thompson in www.theatlantic.com (1 October 2013) and Philip Cohen in www.theatlantic.com (5 June 2013).