

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON INFERTILITY IN BLACK AFRICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

*DR ME Baloyi
Dept of Practical Theology
University of South Africa
Pretoria*

ABSTRACT

A childless marriage in an African context has traditionally had little chance of survival. Marriage and procreation are seen as a unity, and infertility has always been regarded as an affliction or disgrace among Africans. The majority of the childless couples are therefore treated as abnormal and less important in our communities and churches. Some marriages end in divorce while other couples see polygamy as a solution. The theoretical question of the article is: "If people are rejected for their infertility status, in which way can pastoral care play a role to help them regain their dignity in African context?" This question occurred to me through observing the deep distress of childless couples. It is my conviction that pastoral care-givers as well as the entire community have a role to play in helping the infertile people to accept themselves. This article will unmask the view and attitude of African community towards infertile people, and later prove from the biblical point of view that infertility is not a disgrace (in contrast to the traditional African view). People without children must not be mocked, cast out or marginalised, since the Bible does not condemn them for their barrenness.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mugambi (1989:100) says: "Procreation was very important in the African concept of marriage. A marriage in which children were not born was considered to be problematic, and sometimes the bride

might be returned to her parents for such a reason.” In this way, the problems attached to infertility become evident in our Christian communities. According to Mbiti (1991:110) the duty that every normal person should get married and bear children is an obligation. A failure is like committing a crime against the traditional beliefs and practices. The nature of this challenge needs pastoral caregivers to offer their assistance to those who are victims of infertility. It is thus imperative that a research about the issue of infertility amongst the African people is made, so that the stigmatised infertile people can be helped to overcome this type of problem through pastoral help. While some women are divorced, others are forced to accept that their husbands marry second wives for the sake of procreation. The methodology of this research will use African literature and African scholars to formulate the socio-historical background which will explain the treatment of the infertile woman by her in-laws and the whole clan. It will be in the interest of the article to evaluate the issue from the biblical point of view, with an intention of outlining pastoral guidelines on suggesting how, as African Christians, we should view infertile people. The article concludes with an attempt to minimise the problems that infertile people face in the African community and the church.

2 SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to many African cultures, every successful marriage is traditionally expected to produce children, and childless marriages are not considered normal. According to U Kalu (2005:533), procreation is very important in the African concept of marriage. Zinn and Eitzen (1990:288) also remark that marriages are understood and expected to result in children. The primary aim of marriage is procreation and hence the infertile woman is deemed unfit for marriage. Mair (1969:150) emphasises this by saying that procreation is the essential aim of marriage. In other words, marriage without procreation is not only considered incomplete, but is also dissolved. That is why Chigwedere (1982:7) says: “Marriage without children had very slim chances of survival in an African context.”

This view is echoed by Mbiti (1969:133): “If there is not yet a child in the marriage, there is still no guarantee that the marriage will endure.” Kimathi (1994:111) expresses support for Mbiti's opinion

by saying: “We must note the relationship between marriage and procreation in African community: without procreation marriage is incomplete.” The link between marriage and procreation became so strong and unbreakable that every marriage was expected to bear children or otherwise face the curse of the community. Procreation in certain instances became a yardstick by which the normality of people was measured. Kimathi (1994:12) makes the following strongly worded statement: “Every normal person is expected to get married and bear children.”

On the other hand Nyirongo (1997:114) says: “In fact, the right to her fertility overrides the right to her sexuality since in some patrilineal tribes a man may just pay *lobolo* for the children regardless of whether or not he is the genitor and abandon the wife to go to her parents and marry someone else.”

It is important to mention some of the reasons why African people expect every marriage to produce children. The first reason concerns the *lobolo* or bride-price that is paid when one wants to marry. According to Burman (1991:36), “Cattle beget children.” We should note that in former times cattle were used to marry, since money was not very common among African people, but today they use money. In whatever form a man paid the bride-price the intention was that he would receive children in the end.

This makes *lobolo* and procreation a cause-and-effect system which has become impressed or imprinted on the minds of many African people. The payment of *lobolo* guarantees that children will be born thereafter. It is for that reason that barrenness led to the claiming back of the bride-price and the marriage of another wife (Ward 1970:10). The same view is supported by Kriel (1991:27) in the following statement: “By providing the goods, the groom and his family undertake to care for the woman even after her husband’s death, by accepting the goods the bride’s family undertakes to provide an industrious fertile woman.”

This means that by their acceptance of the bride-price, the girls’ parents are signing a contract that she will bear children and failure in that regard will see them returning the goods to her in-laws. The second reason, according to Turaki (1999:106), is the belief that childbearing has a relationship with life after death. In other words, the ability to procreate has an effect on our future life. Turaki (1999:107) says: “Begetting children guarantees eternal life. Marriage is more than a physical relationship. Not only do children pro-

vide for the reincarnation of ancestors, they also sustain the ancestors through prescribed rituals such as sacrifices and offerings.”

The third reason is based on the belief that womanhood in the African context is strengthened by motherhood. This means that without mothering someone, one cannot be given the title of woman. That is why some mothers are called by their children’s names. This argument is supported by Nhlapo's statement (1991:143) that “African women are expected to become wives at some stage in their lives, and as wives they are required to be, first and foremost, mothers.”

Being a wife is an expectation while motherhood is a requirement. This perception noticeably puts more pressure on the couple, especially on the wives, who become quick to conceive early in their marriages. The fourth reason is that of inheritance and the survival of the lineage. This is where the birth of a son is valued more than that of a daughter. An African father always expects his child or children to inherit his wealth. This idea came from a kingship system, in which the king’s child is always expected to continue with kingship if his father dies. That is what Nhlapo (1991:143) emphasises in the following words: “A man needs many sons to ensure the survival of the lineage and to increase his power in the clan.”

These four reasons, along with others that I did not mention, put the importance of procreation above other things in African marriage. Therefore, for an African marriage to continue and to be accepted by the older generation, a woman must make sure that children are born of her marriage. It is also very important to note the relationship between the African tradition and the Jewish tradition. The issue of seeing childless couples as abnormal and unacceptable began very long ago in the time of the ancient patriarchs.

According to Collins (1998:423), it was not only Sarah who grieved because of her barrenness, but also Rachel (Genesis 30:1), the Shunamite woman (2 Kings 4:14), Elisabeth (Luke 1:7, 25) and others. These women felt disgraced, distressed, and ashamed and were mocked by the people of their times. The well-known story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 is a clear account of the pain and agony of childless people in those times.

3 EVALUATION

The African view of infertile people as discussed in the socio-historical background makes it difficult for many normal persons to accept barrenness, because if every normal person is expected to procreate, then no one expects to be abnormal. The point that Kimathi is trying to emphasise with this issue of normality, is that being normal is determined by the ability to bear children. My argument is that not all normal people are able to bear children. We should not be linking normality and procreation as an indissoluble unit because we can have normal infertile people on the one hand and abnormal fertile people on the other.

To clarify this, the Bible indicates that Hannah was remembered by God in 1 Sam 1:1–12 despite her barrenness. We also need to realise that both the man and the woman in a marriage were created by God, hence marriage was instituted by God before procreation. People need to understand the standards by which God views us to be either normal or abnormal before we draw unfounded conclusions. We cannot use infertility as a yardstick to declare that people are either normal or abnormal.

We also need to understand clearly that the view mentioned above is an African viewpoint, but not God's viewpoint. There are nevertheless some people who argue that God's blessing to humankind included a command to people to multiply and fill the earth, so if one is not fertile, he or she is not going to fulfil the command.

The other thing we need to consider is the context and situation in which God said those words. For instance, there were not as many people on earth then as there are today. When we read about Adam and Eve, the first thing we note is that God married them; procreation only came later as a result of that marriage. Therefore marriage and procreation were not simultaneous and procreation was never put forward as a condition for marriage.

Turaki's viewpoint (1999:107) on the belief that childbearing has a relationship with life after death cannot stand the test of the Bible. The reasoning there implies that those who do not bear children will not be part of life after death, which is contrary to the biblical message about life after physical death. According to the Bible, life after death is explained in terms of the eschatological expectations and that is through faith in Jesus that we are called God's children and therefore we become the heirs of His Kingdom (John 3:16, 6:47).

4 EFFECTS

4.1 Trial marriages, adultery and fornication

The extreme pressure that is put on couples to bear children causes some young men to get involved in sexual activity before marriage so that they can prove the fertility of the girls before they marry them, so precluding a possible divorce. According to Ward (1970:10), some young people are asking: "If sexual intercourse before marriage is not allowed, how can I tell whether the girl is fertile or not before marrying her?"

Kimathi (1983:28) asks a similar question: "How will I tell that the girl can or will have children before marrying her?" Some young men usually solve this problem by impregnating girls before they marry them. Of course, this cannot be done without the couple being involved in fornication. Fornication is consensual or voluntary sexual intercourse between two persons not married to each other. That is why parents in many of the African churches take their children's part when the church disciplines them for the sin of fornication. Many parents think that fornication becomes sinful only when there is involvement with someone else's wife or husband. According to Baloyi (2001:66), there are many cases where young Christians vanish from the church for a while only to come back as fathers and mothers.

In some instances, adultery may also be condoned by the parents as a result of infertility. Adultery is voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and another person who is not his or her spouse. One of the younger sisters or a close relative of the woman who is unable to conceive a baby is roped in by both sets of parents to bear children with her brother-in-law for her sister. In that way, the man participates in sexual intercourse with someone he is not married to, hence the issue of adultery is relevant to this discussion. That is what Ingoldsby and Smith (1995:147) refer to when they say: "Assume that a man has paid a good price for his wife and she does not bear children, therefore the parents who received the price must provide the man with another wife, with the purpose of bearing children."

4.2 Growing threat to sexual enjoyment

The Bible teaches us that sexual intercourse is a gift from God, made for us to enjoy within wedlock. Nothing should interfere with the enjoyment of this gift. However, many traditional people whose sexual aim is to bear children no longer enjoy sexual excitement as a gift from God. They see it as an obligation to procreate. That is why few childless couples can enjoy this gift. In many cases where I was counselling African Christian couples I found that most of them had a problem showing interest in sexual intercourse. Although other health problems may have been contributory reasons, childlessness was always another reason. Keech (1993:72) is correct in saying: “A growing threat to sexual enjoyment is the effect of infertility problems which appear to be on the increase”.

Regulatory intercourse to fit in with hours of peak fertility naturally robs the couples of the experience of spontaneity. Partners may be left feeling that they are no more than the vehicle for reproduction. In order to help such couples, Keech (1993:73) goes on to say: “Making love just for fun between times of peak fertility and concentrating on other enjoyable activities can be helpful.” The couple needs to know that their relationship is what matters, regardless of whether or not pregnancy is achieved.

4.3 Polygamy

Since the African marriage is traditionally expected to bear children, childless marriages often result in polygamy. That is why U Kalu (2005:533) quoted Mugambi when he said: “Polygamy was potentially allowed by custom, especially if an earlier marriage did not produce children.” It used to be accepted amongst some people in Africa that the parents of a woman whose marriage was infertile were responsible for providing a second wife (*nhlantswa* in Tsonga) for the purpose of procreation. This happened because in many cases where the marriage was childless, the person be perceived to be infertile used to be the woman, even when medical tests had not yet been conducted.

According to Baloyi (2001:69), this tradition was copied from the ancient Biblical tradition – see the case of Abraham and Hagar in Genesis 16. People who like to read the Bible more literally think that they are doing what the Bible teaches because of this case, for-

getting that Abraham's plan to marry a second wife was not in obedience to a command by God. That is why his marriage to Hagar did not last for a long time. That is why Meyer (1996:159) said that though Ishmael was fourteen years old when Isaac (the child of the promise) was born, things did not work out because Ishmael was Sarah and Abraham's work – not God's.

Another form of polygamy was encountered when the husband died young. The widow was expected to choose another husband from among the members (even amongst those already married) of the family as a replacement for her late husband "with the main aim of fulfilling the procreation", according to Hartman and Boonzaaier (1994:80–81). She was allowed to choose not only from among young unmarried men, but also from among married men as a second or third wife. Hence polygamy became a practice. The argument is that if she chose one of the married men, then polygamy resulted. Therefore, the African marriage did not see polygamy as a threat to marriage if it could solve the problem of a woman's infertility.

4.4 Divorces

I have already discussed the importance of procreation in African marriage. For that reason, Mbiti (1969:133) is correct in saying: "Childlessness marriage in African context had little chance of survival. Only when the child was born, the marriage was regarded as successful." Divorce, with the full support of the parents, was one of the possible solutions to the problem of childlessness. That is what U Kalu (2005:533) means by saying that the bride might be returned to her parents on account of barrenness because marriage without children was considered to be problematic. Even though the African tribes did not accept divorce, an exception to the rule applied in the case of barrenness, since the marriage was regarded as a good marriage only when children were born.

5 GUIDELINES DERIVED FROM BIBLICAL DATA

5.1 Even an infertile person is an image of God

The first question to ask is whether the biblical teaching about the image of God can help us to argue against those who think that infer-

tility is a disgrace sent by God. The words “image” and “likeness” are used synonymously and interchangeably, and therefore do not refer to two different things. In Genesis 1:26 both words are used, but in the twenty-seventh verse only the first. In Genesis 5:1 only the word “likeness” occurs, but in the third verse of the same chapter both terms occur together.

Genesis 9:6 has the word “image” alone as a complete expression of the idea. In the New Testament we find “image” and “glory” used in 1 Corinthians 11:7, “image” alone in Colossians 3:10, and “likeness” only in James 3:9. According to Berkhof (1988:203), the fact that these two words are used interchangeably, naturally implies that man and woman are also created in the likeness of God, and that this likeness is not something with which he or she is endowed with later. Borreson (1986:28) says: “According to Genesis, human nature as such has been made in the image of God, a nature which exists in both sexes.”

The above statement does not tell us anything about fertility or infertility when explaining what Borreson means by “image of God”. In other words, being an image of God has got nothing to do with childbearing or infertility. It is important to remember that God firstly created man (humanity) in His image, but later created marriage and childbearing blessings. There are certain things that qualify one to be an image of God. That is what Anderson (1982:78) means by saying: “Human persons cannot be complete without glorifying or enjoying God, for that is their nature and their destiny as created in the image of God. Being in the image of God entails freedom, independence, responsibility and hearing.”

The qualities discussed above are not only reflected when one is fertile or infertile. God gives them to people when they are saved by Jesus Christ. Of course, these qualities were given to humankind during creation, but they were lost when humankind fell into sin, and now only through the redemptive work of Jesus can these qualities be reinstated.

These arguments reinforce my opinion that even before the children were born, man and woman were created as true images of God, right from the beginning. In other words, the fact is that we do not reflect God when we have children, but when we have the qualities that God expects us to have.

5.2 Bearing children is not the only reason for marriage, other reasons are also important

It is not only wrong, but also dangerous to think that marriage is only meant for procreation. If the main aim of marriage is undermined or overlooked because of procreation, marriage will be meaningless. Witte's (1997:96) opinion is that there are three main reasons for marriage, which are: (1) Mutual love and support, (2) Protection of both parties from sexual sin, and (3) Mutual procreation.

The Bible tells us about many marriages which succeeded without procreation. The other marital obligations were being catered for even though the couple did not beget children. We can take a look at marriages like that of Sarah and Abraham, which lasted for many years, until they were old enough to have been grandparents, but without a child of their own. Rebecca and Isaac also stayed in their marriage for a long time without children. Before a woman was created in Genesis 2:18 God indicated that it was important for a man to have a companion. This passage reads: "It is not good for a man to be alone, I will make a suitable helper for him."

Man's loneliness was the main factor that worried God to such an extent that He created woman. In other words, God does not want to see the man (male) in solitude lacking companionship. We must not forget that this happened before there was any plan to bless people with children. According to Scriptures, after He had created everything, God looked at His creation and He saw that everything was good. But Genesis 1:31 says that one thing which God was not happy about was man's solitude.

That is why the author supports Matthews (1996:213) when he says:

This helpmate is not merely for sexual purposes, but it involves sharing spiritual, intellectual and emotional dimensions. The woman is deemed by the divine mind a suitable helper for him. Man and woman share in the human sameness that could not be found elsewhere in the creation amongst the beasts.

This very important union formed by God cannot be overshadowed by the consideration of having children. It is very important that

people should learn to honour and respect their marriage vows instead of thinking about the childbearing factor.

God did not create people and marriage with procreation as the only aim; other aims are also important. People should not just single out procreation and take it for granted that every marriage must produce children. They should understand children as something that God blesses other (not all) marriages with.

6 PASTORAL GUIDELINES

6.1 Patience and prayer

Prayer and patience should be the first recourse if someone finds out that he or she is not fertile. The Bible indicates in many ways that we should ask God for things that we want, as He is the Provider and the Giver. A very good example is that of Hannah, the wife of Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1:9–23. Christian counsellors should see it as a challenge to teach people about this message. The important content of this prayer is that Hannah's aim of having a child was that she would in return give him back for God's service. My argument is that I wish to emphasise that children are gifts from God, hence we need to pray and ask from God (who might decide whether to give or not), instead of pointing fingers at each other while in need of children.

This element teaches us that when we pray we should not simply ask God to provide our needs for our own benefit, but for His service. Secondly, this prayer is specific and while generalities might cover a wide area, they have little effect. Lundell (2001:118) says: "Specific prayers focus attention and faith on the subject, and they are much more likely to endure an answer than generalized prayers."

Hannah was also a patient woman in prayer. 1 Samuel 1:3 tells us that this prayer was done yearly and Hannah did not tire in it. In Luke 18:1–8 we find an account of the parable of the persistent widow. God is looking for people who are persistent in prayer. That is why I support Lundell's opinion (2001:118) when he says the following: "If there were a club for those who were tired of waiting on God, it might have a chapter in every church."

The Bible contains accounts of many people who practiced patience when waiting on God, Sarah the wife of Abraham being one of them. It is within the responsibility of every pastoral counsellor to instil hope into the hopeless through prayer and trust that God will

provide in their need, including their need for children. It sometimes takes a pastor to teach people that children are gifts from God.

6.2 Medical tests

It is advisable for a couple who have not been able to have children to visit a medical doctor. This does not detract from the fact that God answers our prayers, but we should understand that God also uses medical doctors as His agents for other solutions in our lives. People need to be encouraged to understand that physicians are also people sent by God to help us. Pastors and counsellors need to understand that it is not a sin to refer someone for medical tests.

I counselled a woman who could not conceive until I referred the couple for medical attention. It was later discovered that the woman needed an operation to remove a growth in her womb, after which she conceived and gave birth to a baby girl. Prayers were offered but at the same time she was admitted to the hospital. Pastors should understand that doctors need them as much as they need doctors to help the community of God.

6.3 Adoption

Paul uses the word “adoption” in Galatians 4:5 and Ephesians 1:5. This practice was followed by the Romans, but not the Hebrews. Paul uses the word to refer to Christians who are allowed to become God’s children through faith in Jesus Christ. In a more roundabout way, this concept is used when a child is placed in the care of someone who is not its biological parent. This practice became common in Western circles, where people can adopt children regardless of biological relationship.

The need to nurture children can be satisfied by the adoption of children. There are many poor, young children and orphans who need to be under parental guidance. The issue was also used by Africans in the context of African communalism. That is why Waruta and Kinoti (2000:114) say that there were no street children or homeless children in traditional African society, as all children belonged to a particular family and community. Pastors and counsellors may advise childless couples who need children to adopt children with the cooperation of social workers.

6.4 Other pastoral guidelines

Working through pastors and leaders, the church can also help couples to avoid the agony of childlessness by preparing them before marriage. During premarital counselling it is important to show couples beforehand the dangers that can arise if they become victims of this kind of mindset and to help them to plan what they would do if they should find themselves in that situation. That is why the author fully supports the argument of Warunta and Kinoti (2000:116) when they say: “The church may assist by providing environment upon which young persons may not only find their marriage partners, but also guiding them to discover each other and also to discover the possible disappointments and problems related to marriage.”

Forums for honest discussion of the issue of childlessness may be formed where special groups such as childless couples and single-parent families can be encouraged to face the issues that concern them openly and honestly. The community, through the services of the church, should be educated to accept and embrace childless people without condemning them. The empowerment structures should also view this problem as a serious one and help those who are stigmatised. Rita Bennett (1974:176) in her book entitled *I am glad you asked that*, says that she also has not borne a child, but she is sure of her salvation and draws comfort from the words of Isaiah 54:1–3a:

Sing, O barren, thou that dist not bear: break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that dist not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord. Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes: For thou shalt break forth on the right hand on the left.

She takes the spiritual interpretation of this to mean that even if you do not have your own flesh and blood children, God promises that you can have spiritual children by leading souls to Jesus. This is echoed by Paul, who called people like Timothy “my son” although he was not his biological father but a spiritual one. Christian counselors need to instil this type of understanding and belief in childless people. They need to be encouraged to accept their condition as a

blessing of a different kind. Lastly, people need to understand the reality that life cannot always give us what we expect. Some days are darker while others are lighter, but we need to embrace life responsibly. Those who have children cannot claim to have everything needed for this life, in the same way that those who lack children cannot claim to lack everything they need for life. Above all, children are not everything and everything is not children.

6.5 Artificial insemination

Some infertile people who need children may opt for artificial insemination under the supervision of their medical advisers. This is a process by which the sperm is placed in the reproductive tract of a female for the purpose of impregnating the female by using means other than sexual intercourse. This method was initially developed for the dairy cattle industry, but modern techniques also use it to assist human beings who are infertile to bear children. The techniques most commonly used for insemination are intrauterine and intra-cervical insemination in order to benefit men who are unable to impregnate women as well as women who are unable to conceive a baby. These techniques also help couples with unexplained infertility problems (cf<http://www.ivf-infertility.com/insemination/index.php>).

Pastors and church leaders could opt to help and encourage infertile people to undergo this process through medical advice in order to relieve them of the problems of infertility. It should also be noted that couples could undergo artificial insemination under the medical advice of their family doctors. There is also the issue of surrogate motherhood, which is closely related to insemination, but the discussion of that would require another article with a different focus. It is another method of reproduction whereby a woman agrees to become pregnant and deliver a child for a contracted party.

7 CONCLUSION

Since bearing children is not the only reason for marriage according to Scripture, childless couples should understand this and accept counselling which encourages them to continue enjoying their marriage. Through prayers and hope they should be strengthened to engage in mutual support of each other. They need to fight all forms of

discouragement by standing together in every situation that threatens their marriage (Witte 1997:96).

The fact that people like Sarah, Rebecca and others grieved over their condition of barrenness does not mean that those who are in the same situation should feel disgraced or worthless. The desire to have children is not the only reason to get married: marriage has more than one essential aim. People who get married, especially Christians, should learn that they can still enjoy their marriage with or without children. Even if the couple fail in attempts to adopt a child, their togetherness and companionship are still matters of importance.

The communities that treat childless people as abnormal or a disgrace need to be educated pastorally to embrace these people and love them. The author's personal opinion is that whoever judges other people and mocks them on the basis of childlessness is also judging and undermining the Giver Himself. Lastly, infertile people are children of God who were also created in his image and they should be respected as such.

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