Sex and Desire: The Role of Parental Aspiration in Sex Selection (Podcast)

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?Is it a boy or a girl??

Whether after a sonogram or a new birth, the first question we have about a child is almost always about the sex of the child. For millennia parents have anxiously awaited the answer to a question that underscores the mystery and uniqueness of being created male and female. But what happens when the outcome can be decided before the child even enters the mother?s womb?

Although rarely discussed, reproductive technologies have made it possible for parents to have complete control over the sex of their child. The most common method requires only a prenatal diagnosis (either through a sonogram or amniocentesis) followed by abortion of fetuses of the unwanted sex. A more advanced means involves a preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) followed by selective implantation based on the desired sex. An even more rare, and less certain technique, entails the pre-fertilization separation of X- and Y-bearing sperm followed by selective in vitro transfer. The first two techniques select post-conception, while the last seeks to determine sex before human life begins.¹

In a country that prides both consumerism and the unquestionable right to abortion, it?s not surprising that the two have melded together, providing would-be parents with the means to control the sex of their offspring. ?These are grown-up people expressing their reproductive choices,? said Jeffrey Steinberg, director of the Fertility Institutes, which offers the service at clinics in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. ?We cherish that in the United States.?² Indeed, we value
the concept of freedom of choice more than we do equality. While countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, India, Japan, and Switzerland all ban such procedures for non-medical use, in America it is gaining greater acceptance. Though relatively few IVF facilities currently offer the services, research continues in order that the techniques might be perfected.

Until parents are able to gain a 100% assurance that they get the boy or girl of their choice, though, abortion always remains a viable option. If you ask couples coming in what they will do if they get the wrong sex, these couples say very frankly they will terminate the pregnancy, said Mark V. Sauer, director of the division of reproductive endocrinology at Columbia University. I don't want to be a party to that.3

Because sex plays such a fundamental role in the development of character and personality, it is understandable that some parents might have a preference either for a boy or for a girl. But it is precisely because the sex of a human is so intrinsic to his or her being that it should not be left to the whim of parental desire. Reliance on questionable or unethical reproductive technologies strips away the sense of mystery that surrounds the creation of new life. Instead of accepting children as created in the image of God, we attempt to make them in our own image. Even our language exposes our attitude of control over the process. In Toward a More Natural Science, Leon Kass wrote, The premodern Christian English-speaking world, impressed with the world as a given by a Creator, used the term pro-creation. We, impressed with the machine and the gross national product (our own work of creation), employ a metaphor of the factory, re-production.4

While sex control may cause social problems such as lopsided sex ratios or contribute to stereotyping and discrimination, the most troubling aspect may be in what it says about our expression of love toward children. In his book Faith, Hope, Love, the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper explores the various meanings and connections between the concepts we use to describe love. What, he asks, is the recurrent identity underlying the countless forms of love?

My tentative answer to this question runs as follows: In every conceivable case love signifies much the same as approval. This is first of all to be taken in the literal sense of the word's root: loving someone or something means finding him or its probes, the Latin word for good. It is a way of turning to him or it and saying, It's good that you exist; it's good that you are in the world! 5

Parents who choose the sex of their child, however, are expressing a contingent form of love: It's good that you exist if you're a boy? or ?It's good that you exist if you're a girl. The very process of sex selection makes the parent's love conditional. Children that do not meet the criteria simply are not chosen; they are discarded In essence, they are being told that since they cannot be created in the way the parents desire, it's not good that you exist; it's good that you are not in the world!

Every child, though, deserves to be loved in the way that God intended parental love to be given, the way he gives it to his own children?unconditionally. Even if technology provides the means we should not usurp God's role. The question Is it a boy or a girl?? is one that should only be decided by our Creator.
References


3 Ibid.


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