

# **Stem Cell Research: Theology**

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In November 1998, the journal, *Science*, published that extracted cells from human embryos and aborted fetuses grow into cell lines capable of developing into any tissue type or organ for transplantation and therapy for genetic disorders. This brought a flood of responses to newspapers, magazines and scientific journals. It appears that a new "Tower of Babel" type technology has been built that could result in creating humans for spare organ parts, and most certainly, cause the death of thousands of embryos. Is this a "medical miracle" or a "medical nightmare"? Is this God's will?

As members of the Christian community, the body of Christ, we should not stand by regarding the debate of stem cell research because it seems so technical and complicated. We also should avoid the unreasonable approach that this is science for scientists and not for public debate. We have been given the cross of Jesus Christ to lift high on behalf of all life, including the tiny human embryos used in stem cell research to generate spare organ parts.

Human Embryonic Stem Cells [ESC] are cells that are derived from the inner 100 cell mass of a blastocyst embryo. This is the developmental stage of an embryo that is approximately six to seven days old and ready for implantation into the uterine wall of a woman. To remove the ESC for further specialization into tissues and organs, the embryo must be destroyed before implantation.

Stem cells are capable of renewing themselves over and over again, hence the term 'stem.' This can be demonstrated by skin "stem cells" which constantly replace damaged or missing skin cells, hair stem cells which constantly renew, in most cases, damaged or missing hair cells and liver stem cells which constantly replace damaged or missing liver cells. The goal of using ESC is to produce not only a line of each specific stem cell (heart, lungs, liver, spleen, kidney, stomach, skin, eyes, brain, muscle, blood, etc.) that will be able to renew or replace itself so that organs can be generated for transplantation, but also the development of medical therapies which may assist in the recovery of damaged or lost tissues and organs.

According to the September 1999 Report and Recommendations of the National Bioethics Advisory Commission [NBAC] titled ETHICAL ISSUES IN HUMAN STEM CELL RESEARCH, Executive Summary, the main source of ESC should come" . . . from Embryos Remaining After Infertility Treatments."

According to the NBAC recommendations, if a prospective donor chooses to discard embryos remaining after fertility treatment, the option of donating to research may then be presented. The person seeking the donation should:

- a. disclose that the ES cell research is not intended to provide medical benefit to embryo donors;

- b. make clear that consenting or refusing to donate embryos to research will not affect the quality of any future care provided to prospective donors;
- c. describe the general area of the research to be carried out with the embryos and the specific research protocol, if known;
- d. disclose the source of funding and expected commercial benefits of the research with the embryos, if known;
- e. make clear that embryos used in research will not be transferred to any woman's uterus; and
- f. make clear that the research will involve the destruction of the embryos.

The Commission adds, "Any suggestion of personal benefit to the donor or to an individual known to the donor would be untenable and possibly coercive."

The medical potential of human embryonic stem cells notwithstanding, serious ethical issues with theological implications should be considered: (1) a revisit to the moral, legal, scientific, and Scriptural view of "what does it mean to be human?"; (2) the destruction of human embryos as a means to an end; (3) the source of stem cells from donated, as well as unwanted and abandoned frozen embryos; (4) the issue of complicity as it relates to others who use and destroy embryos donated by infertile couples; (5) the relationship of ESC research to elective abortions; (6) the Scriptural view of procreation and parenting within the context of marriage.

Professor Gilbert Meilaender of Valparaiso University in his testimony on stem cell research before NBAC puts stem cell research into perspective. He says, "The embryo is, I believe, the weakest and least advantaged of our fellow human beings, and no community is really strong if it will not carry its weakest members." Against the background of such a question, we reflect upon the significance of stem cell research as it relates to caring for the weakest members of the body of Christ, the human embryo.

The use of human embryos for stem cell research violates the doctrine of Trinitarian faith that is committed to addressing all human beings as embodied persons. It takes not only the life of a human being, but also demeans and dehumanizes the meaning of "child" given to a husband and wife as a blessing and gift from the Lord. It defines the meaning of human life in terms of outcome/best interest, not in terms of gift/preservation of life.

The human embryo must be destroyed to "get to" the stem cells that will produce various tissues and organs. These cells are the actual cells of a developing human being that have been compromised and set apart for research. When these stem cells are removed from the embryo, the embryo dies.

The use of biotechnology as a "means to an end" places embryo research above the First Commandment [You shall have no other gods before Me. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.] rather than placing the use of this technology in service to the Word of God.

For Christians who believe that the embryo, regardless of its stage of development, is a human being, body and rational soul, any research that results in its death is forbidden because it results in murdering a human being that is created in the image of God. The Lord says, "You will not murder." This is not based on pious opinion but the very Word of God who gives us technology to sustain and care for human life, not to kill it as a means to an end.

The human embryo is created in the image and likeness of God. This image was lost by Adam and Eve in the fall into sin, but restored and renewed for humankind by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is the image of God (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). Therefore, we do not kill, but help, befriend, and support the unborn embryo in every bodily need. Viewing the destructive use of stem cell research on human embryos through the cross of Jesus, all human life, from the zygote [fertilized egg] to the embryo to the fetus to the newborn to the older adult belongs to the Lord, its Creator and Redeemer (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

The Scriptures teach that the unborn is a human being. "Here, I am speaking about the unborn... being a person and not about the unborn as a being. . . having personhood" (G. Meilaender, *Body, Soul and Bioethics*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). The latter definition requires that a human being possess specific characteristics or attributes, such as hobbies and sentience (conscience awareness) to be "classified" as a person. Thus, since the embryo doesn't fit this definition or possess certain characteristics or attributes, it can't be a human person, only a human being that will become a person sometime after birth. I reject this capacity-based notion because it separates the doctrine of created man as a body and rational soul. The person is a part of that embodied created human. Therefore, the embryo is a human being with a body and a rational soul.

Exodus 21:22 assists us in our understanding that the unborn are a human being. It reads: "And if men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage, yet there is no further injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him; and he shall pay as the judges decide." According to Russell Fuller, the Hebrew word for "child," (*yeledah*) is the Hebrew word that describes unborn (Exodus 21:22), newborn (Exodus 1:18), teenager (Genesis 21:15; 37:30), and middle-aged adults STEM CELL RESEARCH: THEOLOGY PART II (Continued from page 3.) (2 Chronicles 10:8, 10, 14). Fuller concludes: ". . . *yeled*, at least for biblical prose, suggested or hinted at the personhood of the fetus since the same term could apply to persons. Hence, whereas Exodus 21:22 does not directly address the personhood of the fetus, the passage does intimate, by using *yeled* instead of *golem* (Psalm 139:16) and *nepel* (Psalm 58:9), that the fetus is more than parental property. It is a *yeled*, a human being, a child, a fetus with personhood" (Exodus 21:22-23: *The Miscarriage Interpretation and the Personhood of the Fetus*, JETS 37[2]).

Stem cell research on spare defrosted human embryos is contrary to the Word of God. It trivializes not only the doctrine of the incarnation, but also views parenting as "producing children" as products or commodities.

This abandoning of human embryos to stem cell research contradicts the parents' role to raise their children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1-3). These embryonic children are the work of God given to parents in order to love, nurture, and cherish to His glory.

As Dr. Gilbert Meilaender wrote, "To the extent that we moderns have understood the family as a problem to be mastered, and not a mystery to be explored faithfully, we have quite naturally come to adopt a certain attitude toward our children...Parents are not reproducing themselves; they are giving birth to another human being, equal to them in dignity and bound to them in ties of kinship, but not created for their satisfaction. . . . Biological parenthood does not confer possession of children... Self-giving, therefore, not self-fulfillment, lies at the heart of the parents' vocation" (*The 9 Lives of Population Control*, Eerdmans, 1995).

Christians are neighbors to the unborn embryo. Because we are forgiven by His grace through faith, the relationship that God has with us and we with our neighbor is based on this covenant love. As St. Paul writes in Romans 13:9-10, "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." Therefore, our love to the children that are conceived is unconditional and long-suffering—it brings neither harm nor death to the created human embryo, newborn, or older adult.

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