2. ESCR and the First Commandment

In reference to the 1st Commandment, Martin Luther writes in his Large Catechism, “Do you have the kind of heart that expects from Him nothing but good, especially in distress and want, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God? Then you have the one true God. On the contrary, does your heart cling to something else, from which it hopes to receive more good and help than from God, and does it flee not to Him but from Him when things go wrong? Then you have an idol, another god.”

With God-given abilities, mankind has devised many wonderful ways to avoid and cure disease. We should use these as blessings from God to enhance our lives. Nevertheless, it is possible to go too far and use the abilities that God gives in ways that do not honor Him. In ESCR we are putting our trust in something ungodly, the death and exploitation of an innocent human being, to rescue us from our problems. We are clinging to something from which we hope to receive more good and help than from God. That is idolatry.

No one would deny the heartache and struggle of having an incurable, chronic disease. It is devastating for the individual and the family. It is understandable that the strong desire for a cure may lead to placing trust and hope in things like ESCR. But trust in the one true God means expecting nothing but good especially in distress and want.” God has shown His love for us on the cross, not in the absence of disease. The cross also assures us that God can and does work through suffering to produce great good.

3. Other Sources of Stem Cells

Christians do not have to oppose all forms of stem cell research, however. There is no need to destroy an embryo to obtain stem cells. Stem cells are found in bone marrow, blood, the brain, the spinal cord, skeletal muscle, the skin, fat cells, the liver, and the pancreas. Another rich source is the blood within umbilical cords and placentas no longer needed by newborn babies.

Proponents of embryonic stem cell research have downplayed adult stem cell research because adult stem cells do not normally have the capability of becoming other cell types as do embryonic stem cells. However, a variety of recent studies are showing that they do. Here are some examples:

- According to a paper published in Biochemical and Biophysical Research Communications, researchers have been able to turn fat stem cells into nerve cells that they hope will be able to treat brain and spinal cord injuries. (UPI 05/31/02)
- In January 2002, the New Scientist reported that Catherine Verfaille and coworkers at the University of Minnesota had found stem cells in human bone marrow that as an outside researcher put it, “differentiate into pretty much everything that an embryonic stem cell can differentiate into.”
- The University of Florida has transformed rat liver stem cells into insulin-producing pancreatic cells that may open a new door in the treatment of diabetes. (Unisci Daily News Service 06/04/02)
- To date no human beings have been successfully treated with embryonic stem cells. This is not true, however, with regard to adult stem cells. If you want further information on this, a listing of current clinical applications of adult stem cells may be found at www.stemcellresearch.org.

Since obtaining adult stem cells does not involve the destruction of human life, we may support and encourage adult stem cell research.

Conclusion

God has blessed people with many wonderful gifts and abilities. The advances in biotechnology can be seen as gifts that God has given to enhance and extend our lives. As with all gifts, however, we can use them in ways God did not intend. God does not intend that we destroy tiny human beings in order to obtain their stem cells for research. A Christian cannot support such research no matter what promise it may hold for treating disease. God is opening doors for research using stem cells from sources other than human embryos. These we may and should pursue for the betterment of God’s wonderful gift of life.

(Lutherans For Life)

2 Moore and Persaud, p. 2.
It is important for the Christian to understand that God’s Word does have something to say about embryonic stem cell research (ESCR). To understand how God’s Word applies to this controversial issue, however, a basic understanding of the biology involved is necessary first. So welcome to Embryonic Stem Cell Biology 101!

Let’s discuss the following simple diagram. (Pretend it’s you!)

At the moment of conception, a new and unique human organism is formed (you!). You are called an embryo from this point until the 8th week. After 4-5 days of development, you are also referred to as a blastocyst. You consist of a single layer of cells forming a hollow sphere with a mass of cells inside the sphere toward the top. The single layer of cells on the outside of the sphere will eventually form your placenta and umbilical cord.

The mass of cells inside the sphere are referred to as stem cells. All of the rest of you will “stem” from these cells. They will form your heart, liver, brain, pancreas, skin, bones, etc. At this point, however, these cells have not “decided” what to become. Each has the potential to become any kind of cell of the body.

That is what makes these embryonic stem cells so attractive to researchers. For example, if they could become brain cells, they could be used to treat people with brain diseases like Parkinson’s disease. If they could become pancreas cells, they could be used to treat people with diabetes.

There is a problem, however. Here is another simple diagram that shows how embryonic stem cells are obtained.

The blastocyst is destroyed when the stems cells are taken. More precisely, a tiny, unique human being is destroyed when embryonic stem cells are obtained. This is a problem for the Christian as we will now discuss.

1. ESCR and the 5th Commandment
When Does Life Begin?
Dr. Dianne Irving, biochemist/biologist and co-author of two books on human embryological development, stated the following at a symposium at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis on May 4, 2002: “The question as to when the physical material dimension of a human being begins via sexual reproduction is strictly a scientific question, and fundamentally should be answered by human embryologists—not by philosophers, bioethicists, theologians, politicians, x-ray technicians, movie stars, or obstetricians and gynecologists.” So what do the embryologists say?

- Zygote: This cell results from the union of an oocyte and a sperm. A zygote is the beginning of a new human being (i.e. an embryo). “” (Emphasis added.)
- It is the consensus of nomina embryologica, an international board that determines the correct terminology to be used in human embryology textbooks, that human life begins at conception.

It is then an established biological fact that at the moment of conception it is not a potential human being, but a unique human being with potential.

The testimony of the Scripture affirms this fact, and it is clear that human life begins at conception and is a gift from God. “Lo, children are an inheritance of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Ps. 127:3). By definition, an inheritance is a gift whose recipients are dictated solely by the giver. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me (Ps. 51:5). Since we are sinful from the moment of conception, then we must be human beings at the moment of conception.

These biological and Biblical facts of the beginning of life hold true whether that conception takes place in a fallopian tube or in a petri dish. An embryo is a human life whether it is residing in a womb or is in frozen storage or is the result of cloning. Therefore, we must oppose stem cell research on embryonic stem cells because it necessarily involves the intentional destruction of a human being and violates the 5th Commandment.

Helping and Befriending
In his explanation of the 5th Commandment, Martin Luther writes, “We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.” ESCR also violates the 5th commandment in terms of not “helping and befriending.” Since life begins at conception, then he or she is our neighbor from that moment. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Dr. Gilbert Meilaender from Valporasio University stated before the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, “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.” An embryo is part of the human community and one of its most vulnerable and weakest members who needs to be helped and befriended.