
EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

The debate over embryonic stem cell research is one of those engagement moments when, rather than drawing lines in the sand, the Church has an opportunity to engage society in meaningful dialog. Despite our desire to evangelize the world, it will be tempting for the church-at-large to miss this incredible opportunity to re-engage in meaningful dialog with post-Christian society. Having had our world-view rebuffed by secularist society, believers can too easily fall prey to self-righteous, snobbish pseudo-ethics (“*We warned about the troubles you’d have!*”) that scold and shame any who might come to us for wisdom—a marked contrast with God who gives wisdom, “*generously and without reproach*” to any seeker (James 1:5).

Yes, the world has broken off its moral underpinnings and finds itself leaning unsteadily, like a wall grown too high for its supporting base. But it is looking for guidance, not condemnation, as techno-scientific capabilities outpace its ethics. We have a responsibility to proclaim a grace-filled message of reconciliation with God to all people, regardless of their current perspectives. And in the long run, we’re supposed to be missionaries—looking for common ground with our society, rather than always pointing out its ills, and pounding out an alienating cadence on tautly drawn religious drums.

Let’s quit stoking the fiery rhetoric of “*us vs. them*” religionists, and remember that lost sheep are rarely helped to find their way by being vilified. We have common ground to explore. With the rapid development of technology, especially in biomedical arenas, sincere people in the world are increasingly confronted with complicated moral issues that force them to articulate their beliefs in language and in controversial subjects for which there is no clear-cut, orthodox vocabulary or perspective. We believers in Jesus find ourselves in exactly the same predicament.

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Stem cell research, or more particularly, embryonic (as opposed to adult) stem cell research pushes many moral/ethical boundaries and requires believers in the 21st Century to consider issues that have not existed—at least not so blatantly—prior to the amazing advances in medicine and

technology of this era. The subject stirs every manner of question: Will embryos be “*harvested*” for stem cells? Will abortion clinics find a new funding source in selling aborted babies? Will people create surrogate children as insurance against their own mortality? How can we preserve the sanctity of human life? Can this cure Parkinson’s disease and reverse paralysis due to spinal injuries? Etc.

Those who advocate Federal funding for research on embryonic stem cells point out the advantages to the living; opponents focus on the unacceptable cost paid by the dying embryos. But to be more specific, the debate is NOT over research per se; nor does the controversy center on whether or not to use embryonic stem cells for research that may lead to cures for many diseases. This is because embryonic stem cells are already being used for research funded by the Federal government.

The Federal government authorized funding for research that uses embryonic stem cell lines, derived from embryos that had been discarded or destroyed prior to 2001 when President Bush outlined his policy. Unfortunately, the 78 lines of stem cells thought to be available at that time have been, because of various complications, reduced to a mere 22—and there is serious concern over the future utility of those lines because they were grown on mouse feeder-cells (as opposed to what is possible today—growing them on human cells) which might not work well for clinical testing in humans.

Contrary to what was understood at the time when the President limited research to existing lines of stem cells, scientists have now discovered that stem cells are not infinitely reproducible. As stem cells replicate over many generations, they start making genetic mistakes, and they tend to degenerate. Hence, a fresh source is periodically needed.

Additionally, large numbers of privately funded embryonic stem cell research are already underway in this country and around the world, and since that research does not get money from NIH, it is not subject to the restrictions and oversight afforded to government-aided research. Consequently, even if the believing community succeeds in stemming the expansion of embryonic stem cell research that takes place under governmental auspices, the private sector will race ahead without moral/spiritual guidance—unless we help frame a public conversation that shapes public opinion and offers an alternative paradigm.

Though there are no existing instances wherein embryonic stem cells have been successfully coaxed to grow into entire organs, their unique properties most likely will enable that incredible breakthrough in the near future. This is one of the main differences between embryonic and adult stem cells; embryonic stem cells are “*pluripotent*” while adult stem cells are not; that is, embryonic stem cells can become heart muscle, liver tissue, etc. That is why the medical community and the public are so excited about research with stem cells. They offer potential cures for conditions that require tissue and organs to regenerate—like spinal cord injuries or diabetes.

All this is theory—and unproven in any lab across the globe. But the possibilities are huge. So, where's the controversy over something that offers so much possibility for life-saving good?

ORIGIN OF EMBRYONIC STEM CELLS

The debate is mostly about how embryonic stem cells end up being studied in a lab. How were they derived? In order to obtain embryonic stem cells, the life of the embryos themselves must be ended. Stem cells cannot be extracted from a fetus without destroying it. In that regard, embryonic stem cells are like vital organs: the heart or lungs cannot be transplanted into a patient without ending the life of the donor.

Taking a donor's heart before the donor is dead is called murder, and is condemned by all, regardless of their political or spiritual perspective. Conversely, if the recipient of the heart is in no way responsible for the donor's death, all applauds the transplant operation. Thus, the ethical question for embryonic stem cell research is primarily about the origin of the stem cell lines that become available for study. From whom did they come—and under what circumstances?

Those of us who believe that a child's life begins at conception cannot condone such children being sacrificed for research—however promising that research may be in saving or extending others' lives. To save one life by taking another is unjustifiable in any context—except as in the case where a person chooses to lay down their life for the sake of another (as Jesus did for us)!

Nevertheless, the issue becomes far murkier once a fetus is already dead. If an adult's life is suddenly taken by a tragic accident or murder, that cause of death is not cause enough to reject the donation of the dead person's organs. The manner of death does NOT figure into the moral implications of how the dead are used to advance life and knowledge in our society.

Our culture has already accepted the notion of donors: we know that medical students dissect cadavers to advance their knowledge as practicing doctors; most of us have driver's licenses that indicate which organs we have chosen to donate if we die in an accident; we idealize Hippocrates, the "*Father of Medicine*" and celebrate the Hippocratic Oath—even though he also claimed that war [with its dead and dying soldiers] was the best school for a physician.

Consequently, the Church will not successfully debate embryonic stem cell research on the basis of whether or not such research ought to be conducted on once-living beings. This is NOT an abortion issue because even if we were to convince everyone in America that a 1-day-old fetus is a human being, deserving all rights of personhood, the existing secular paradigm will simply shift stem cells into the same category as adult kidneys; embryos will be viewed as tiny cadavers once the fetus is dead—by whatever means. A person's age is not a matter of moral concern to a donor-

cognizant culture: “If adult tissue can be used for scientific and medical study, why can’t the tissue of an unborn child be used as well?” they will reason.

SPARE BODY PARTS

The Church can more effectively shape the debate on embryonic stem cell research by staying focused on preventing the creation of life for the sole purpose of taking that life. Though no responsible scientist is even hinting at the suggestion, what looms ahead is the very real possibility of human-parts manufacture—children created to be harvested for their cells and their organs.

Most people in our society—whether pro-life or pro-choice—are repulsed at the thought of anyone intentionally creating life to destroy it. Very few people think of abortion as a first-line defense against “unwanted” or “unplanned” pregnancy, and the primary justification for abortion comes from the well-meaning desire to protect a woman from being forced to live with the unintentional result of intercourse. No one “wants” an abortion—unless they believe it is their only viable option to prevent a life-long consequence. Anyone who has had an abortion would have preferred not to be pregnant in the first place.

Pro-choice declares that a woman ought to have the right over her own body, deciding whether or not she wants to host the unintended or regretted fruit of *having-been-with-a-man*. The “choice” has never been defended as a woman’s right to intentionally get pregnant so that she can destroy the fetus. Such a thought is abhorrent to our society, at least for now. In this particular about the as-yet-unborn, we have common ground with even the fiercest abortion rights advocates.

Whether the embryo has been created through sperm/egg connection or by cloning a cell from an existing person—it must never be created—to be exploited. The premeditated creation of life with the singular intent of harvesting and pillaging that life for benefits to any cause, to any individual, or to society as a whole must be banned and prohibited with such finality that society never seeks to open that door again. The time is ripe for the Church to call for such a complete ban on the intentional production of human embryos for the purpose of using/destroying any part of their being.

If we can help create a societal norm to prohibit and punish fetal harvesting, long before the technology might make it possible to mass produce embryos to act as tiny warehouses holding replacement parts for aging adults, we can then concentrate our discussions on subjects that afford us less common ground with society. Are there other battles for the Church to wage? Yes, but they are other battles, and should not be confused with this opportunity for a truce that will save countless little ones in the decades to come.