

“What would Jesus do?” is a popular question many modern Christians ask themselves when attempting to discern God’s will on issues so far removed from the historical reality of Jesus’ time. The historical Jesus preached in an era culturally and scientifically distance from our own. Jesus never would have, for example, preached on the ethics of stem-cell research or other related biomedical concerns. Yet we are left as Christians in our own moment of history to seriously consider such ethical issues in light of our faith.¹ There are ethical norms within Biblical literature that we can apply to our own experiences. Jesus’ mandate to heal the sick, for example, can be used as a guidepost for decision making in this arena. This past fall the National Council of Churches in Christ USA (NCC) attempted to reflect on the ethical issues of human biotechnologies by developing a draft policy statement that draws on diverse Scriptural understandings of what it means to be ethical and Christian in a modern scientific world. Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A Policy on Human Biotechnologies, the NCC document, raises important issues for debate but is (as all ecumenical documents are) a compromise statement that avoids making recommendations on some of this most difficult issues. This paper will critically review the recommendations made in the NCC policy statement, discuss the ethical assumptions used by the authors to draw their conclusions, and will make

¹ A similar point is raised by Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen in their book Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life. Birch and Rasmussen argue that the “Biblical ethics” in Scripture could never have anticipated the modern issues that “Christian ethics” must address. See chapter 1 pages 11-12.

recommendations for how individual Christians might engage issues of medical care through further discernment and advocacy.

The Massachusetts Department of Education defines biotechnology as “any technique that uses living organisms, or parts of organisms, to make or modify products, improve plants or animals, or to develop microorganisms for specific uses.”² Embryonic stem cell research, one such application of biotechnology, has the potential to unlock cures for conditions like “diabetes, spinal cord paralysis, heart disease, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease, cancer, MS [multiple sclerosis], Lou Gehrig's disease and other fatal, debilitating diseases,” says Rep. Jim Ramstad, a Minnesota Republican and proponent of federal funding for such research.³ Opponents of biotechnology worry that such technological advances in medicines could be misused or be made available to only those rich enough to benefit from them. One common fear is that biotechnology could lead down the path to human cloning. Others reject specific forms of biotechnology – such as the benefits of embryonic stem cell research – because of the belief that such results necessitate the destruction of human life.

The NCC policy statement, which was presented at the NCC's General Assembly in October 2005 and will be formally debated and voted on at the next General Assembly in the fall of 2006, makes statements on several related issues: stem cell research, embryonic stem cell research, perception of disability,

² Massachusetts Department of Education, “Science and Technology/Engineering Curriculum Framework”, available from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/scitech/2001/resources/glossary.html>; Internet; accessed January 3, 2006.

³ Congressman Jim Ramstad, “Position Papers”, available from <http://www.house.gov/ramstad/>; Internet; accessed May 25, 2005.

conduct of the biotechnology industry, and the fabric of the commonweal and the future. The authors note that document takes its title “from Psalm 139, verse 14, to reflect our awe and gratitude to the Holy One whose hidden purposes are partly revealed in our incarnate selves. The Psalmist speaks personally: ‘I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,’ and turns both outward to the whole world of wonders and inward to unformed parts ‘knit together in my mother’s womb.’”⁴ It is worth noting that this same Psalm is often used by anti-abortion advocates in their quest to limit medical procedures that terminate pregnancy. Many of the same opponents of abortion (though not all) oppose embryonic stem cell research because they believe here as well life is terminated. Some of the member churches of NCC share this belief. But the authors of this report, which includes members of the Orthodox community, use the paper to caution people not to allow either fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture or total faith in science to limit the debates on the ethics of human biotechnologies:

The member communities of the National Council of Churches join their voices together precisely to help put ethical, as well as theological concerns to the fore. Our churches are united in opposing cloning for human reproduction, and in wanting safeguards for “regenerative” medicine. This policy statement is meant as a guide for our members and as a witness to our values in a complex and fast moving debate.

Our approach must be one of reverence, humility, and deliberation, aware that scientific and social revolutions go hand in hand and that our ecumenical witness must point to cultural as well as to natural wonders in the balance. We resist scientific reductionism and religious fundamentalism, each absolute in its own way.

⁴ National Council of Churches, “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made”, available from <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/BioTechPolicy.pdf>; Internet; accessed December 1, 2005.

Our humility must extend as well to our own limited knowledge of God's infinite design. Human frailties have allowed us too often to be glib about what constitutes "normal" or "whole" or "able-bodied" life. In doing so we relegate many of our sisters and brothers to the status of "other", seeing only their differences, which we call disabilities," rather than seeing them as those who manifest, like us, reflections of the imago dei.⁵

Science and Christianity have often found themselves to be in some tension. There are those concerned that science attempts to remove God from the formula of Creation (such as opponents of Darwinian evolutionary theory) and those that believe that science usurps God's role by providing humans with the capacity to create or destroy human life (through instruments of war or genetics). The Rev. Dr. Audrey Chapman, a United Church of Christ minister who serves as the director of the program of dialogue on science, ethics, and religion at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, has written that "the genetic revolution offers both a challenge and an opportunity to religious communities and thinkers. To respond adequately will require addressing a central question, 'What is God enabling and requiring us to be and to do' with our newfound abilities to intervene within and reshape nature."⁶

Stem cell research has been, as the authors of the NCC paper note⁷, perhaps the most explosive and divisive of the issues raised by recent advances in human biotechnologies. Churches are so divided on this issue that the NCC notes more than two decades ago the church council "resolved to forgo an

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Audrey R. Chapman, The Contributions and Limitations of Christian Ethics to Understand the Religious Implications of the Genetic Revolution, published in *God, Life and the Cosmos: Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, edited by Ted Peters, Muzzaffar and Syed Nomanhul Nag, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002. essay, p. 4.

⁷ NCC, p. 12.

ecumenical statement on the issue.”⁸ New research dealing specifically with the field of embryonic stem cell research has further polarized the debate. ‘As a result of a lack of clear consensus, the National Council of Churches neither endorses nor condemns experimentation on human embryos, and takes no position on the use of human embryonic stem cells for research purposes.’⁹

Last year a bi-partisan group in the US House of Representatives passed legislation to expand public funding for embryonic stem cell research. The president immediately threatened to veto the legislation. The religious right has declared that such research is in opposition to Christian values.¹⁰ But that pronouncement is not shared by all Christians. In fact, the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution in 2001 in favor of federal funding of embryonic stem cell research under the rationale that “Jesus set an example, by his ministry of healing and caring for the sick and disabled, challenging us to follow his example by supporting the healing and caring ministry in our own day.”¹¹ No one is talking about growing embryonic stem cells simply for research. The legislation adopted by the House – which is in line with the ethical guidelines adopted by the UCC – “allows federally funded research on stem cell lines that were derived ethically from donated embryos determined to be in excess,” says Republican Delaware congressman Mike Castle.¹² Christians – despite the different opinions held by members communions of the UCC - can confidently and morally support

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰ Family Research Council, “House Ignores the Snowflakes”, available from <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=WU05E18>; Internet; accessed May 25, 2005.

¹¹ United Church of Christ, “Support for federally funded research on embryonic stem cells”, available at <http://www.ucc.org/synod/resolutions/res30.htm>; Internet; accessed May 25, 2005.

¹² Congressman Mike Castle, “website”, available at <http://www.house.gov/castle/>; Internet; accessed May 25, 2005.

embryonic stem cell research. We are called to support a healing and caring ministry in our own day and this research can help meet that goal. It is reasonable, however, for NCC to decline to take a position on this issue for the sake of unity within the council. But it is also worth noting that the council was in their paper able to come to some shared conclusions related to the overall issue of stem cell research:

- they strongly support legislation that would prohibit the sale or purchase of human embryos;
- oppose the creation of chimeras, or any experimentation that might lead to an intermediary human/animal species. Should future scientific investigation into minimal gene transfers between species result in clear evidence of realizable medical benefits, we strongly favor a thorough public debate, including input from religious leaders, which leads to formulation of an informed consensus and governmental regulation;
- call on all private and public institutions that carry out experiments with stem cells to establish publicly available guidelines, and to provide rigorously independent public oversight in the absence of governmental oversight;
- while acknowledging that some of our members object strongly to experimentation with human embryonic stem cells, we nevertheless recognize the persistence of the practice; and, therefore call for a clear, comprehensive system of national and international regulatory oversight and accountability, including provisions that take into account moral, ethical, cultural and religious sensitivities, including clear limits on the stage to which experimental organisms are allowed to develop;
- support regulatory schema that represent the values of a broad community of stakeholders, including persons who may benefit from the medical progress made possible by the research in question, young persons who will live with the consequences of this research, as well as members of marginalized communities who have traditionally been under-represented in decision making processes, and persons representing the broad range of religious backgrounds in our society.¹³

¹³ NCC, p. 14.

Another serious issue considered by the paper is the “perception of disability.” “Our reflection causes us to challenge the assumptions that everything needs to be ‘fixed’ or ‘improved’ and that we know how best to do this; and that just because something can be done does not mean it ought to be done,” states the NCC paper.¹⁴ What happens to the human race if through genetic counseling we are able to learn about potential disabilities before the birth of a child and then decide to terminate that life? In some extreme cases of malformation that might be the appropriate course of action (an example of this would be when it is clear that child would not be able to survive outside of the womb). But would we terminate a pregnancy if we knew a child might have a less severe disability? Or be prone to alcoholism? Or be gay (a condition some term a disability – though I would not)? “The possibility of a new eugenics fueled by social values, market forces, and personal choice, rather than official policy, becomes quite real,” states the paper.¹⁵ The appropriate conclusion drawn by the paper is that “the use of new genetic discoveries, techniques and practices (should be) strictly regulated to avoid discrimination and protect fully, and in all circumstances, the human rights of disabled people.”¹⁶

The entire debate of human biotechnologies is, of course, a “first-world” debate. Such research and access to treatment is high expensive and those that live in nations without advanced health care systems will benefit little if at all from this field. Even in nations with advanced health care systems there are great disparities between those who are rich and those who are poor. In the United

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

States there are at least 40 million people who live without health insurance and millions for who are underinsured.¹⁷ All of this begs the question: Who benefits from all of the financial resources being poured into the field of biotechnologies? This is a particularly important question for Christians called to protect “the least of these” (Matthew 25) to consider. The authors of the NCC paper note this concern in a section of the paper dealing with the conduct of the biotechnology industry:

Recent decades have seen the unprecedented growth and development of biotechnology companies. Large amounts of venture capital are daily invested in biotechnology pharmaceutical start-ups and other forms of merchandizing scientific advance. Without the business dimensions of the industry few breakthroughs in science would ever find expression in therapeutic settings. Yet, the rapid advance in science coupled with a vigorous and well-financed corporate infrastructure has outstripped governmental capacity for adequate regulation.

Our North American context provides challenges, both cultural and socio-economic, that threaten our identity as Christians and believers. Potent forces are at play that competes to shape Christian identity and faithfulness. On the cultural side, the danger of materialism is a denial of the social mandate of our faith rooted in God’s gracious and generous love for all of God’s children. Our materialistic culture leads to consumerism, which fosters a primary understanding of ourselves as that of “buyers”, and distorts our vision so that we consume to fill our emptiness, and obscure our powerlessness and despair. In addition, unhealthy exaggerated concepts of self-reliance, independence and personal privacy labeled as individualism stand in opposition to biblical concepts of covenant community, responsibility for one another, and care for the neighbor/stranger. Finally, hedonism and its pursuit of pleasure as the sole purpose of life follows individualism’s focus on personal fulfillment and jeopardizes the stewardship of resources for the good of all of God’s children.¹⁸

¹⁷Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics - Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford Press, 2001), p. 240.

¹⁸NCC, p. 16.

Few businesses would see themselves as part of a covenant community. Christian ethicists remind us, however, that the notion of covenant is a basic building block on which our faith is founded. The Rev. Dr. Enoch H. Oglesby notes in his book Ethical Issues That Matter: A New Method of Moral Discourse In Church Life that covenant is important because “individuals are called by God to be in relationship, and accountable to one another as moral agents.”¹⁹

Covenant is more than a contract; it is a call to community. Covenant is the power of the holy spirit that transforms the Church of Jesus Christ and calls it to faithfulness and accountability. Covenant is shalom. Covenant is love. Covenant is the fullness of God’s mercy, without the absence of God’s justice. Covenant is God’s righteousness making right what sinful men have made wrong!²⁰

“Health care for the needy in former eras was handled through institutions, such as charity hospitals,” write Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress in Principles of Biomedical Ethics. “But in the era of high technology and commensurately high costs, virtues of charity and moral ideals have proved inadequate to the task of meeting many health care needs.”²¹ The National Council of Churches – separate from their paper on human biotechnologies – has decided the best way to address the lack of covenantal relationships in the health care field is to advocate for increased access to health services through the implementation of a universal health care plan. In the meantime, their paper calls for governments to adopt public policies that “maximize access to beneficial technologies.”²² They also write:

¹⁹ E. Hammond Oglesby, *Ethical Issues That Matter* (New York: University Press of America, 2002), p. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²¹ *Principles*, p. 241.

²² NCC, p. 16.

The United States and the Church exist in a global context that demands a global analysis with a commitment for equitable allocation of medical resources and funding for research. In a world of poverty, wars, and hunger, a wise balancing and use of limited resources for basic necessities of life must temper our advancement of research and consumption of newly available biotechnologies. Our identity as a people and our faithfulness as a church must be conserved and lived with integrity.²³

As was noted in the introduction, the field of human biotechnologies is new and forces the Church to discern God's will on issues not mentioned in the Bible. The questions this new technology forces on us as a people of faith will help us to "articulate new understandings of what it means to be human, God's own, and stewards of God's creation." As always, there are issues (such as embryonic stem cell research) that will divide Christians. But the NCC paper also documents that there is much Christians can unite around. There is great value in the NCC's undertaking of this issue. Not only are uniting ethical principles identified for Christians to rally around in the field of human biotechnologies but the paper also presents with sensitivity those issues that divide. The paper provides a starting point for advocacy and on-going conversations among Christians about what it means to be a people of God in this new century.

²³ NCC, p. 16.