

Grace for the Day

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Embryonic Stem Cells

By Rev. Peter Eng

President George W Bush has made his position on cloning clear: no cloning of humans. He reached this decision easily enough. The ramifications are that the scientists dealing with cloning will be making a beeline for countries like Japan and Euroland where cloning has not been banned.

The decision he agonised over was human embryonic stem cells. At 9.00 am (9 August, Singapore time and date), Bush made his long awaited announcement on federal funding for stem cell research.

Stem cells

Stem cells are cells from which other cells can develop. That is to say, a fertilised ovum is only one cell, but it has the capacity of developing into different body parts. The 'ideal' stem cells are those in the embryonic stage. Scientists now want to harvest these human stem cells for research into cures for human diseases. By harvesting and multiplying stem cells, they may be able to cure patients with damaged liver, pancreas, or spinal cord, and produce healthy cells to replace the defective ones.

Stem cell research is not limited to embryonic stem cells. The umbilical cord of neonates and certain adults body parts also possess stem cells. The moral issue is not stem cell research in general, but federal funding of embryonic stem cell. This is because harvesting stem cells from human embryos kills the embryos.

Regardless of how the issue is evaluated, the considerations are: (1) Is a human embryo a human life? (2) Is health as important as life? (3) What monetary loss will the country suffer? (4) Which decision will make him popular?

Life

The key to the morality of this issue is whether a human embryo is a human life.

The embryo is certainly human because it will not develop into a chicken. The embryo is certainly alive, otherwise it is not usable. If it is human and it is alive, there is not reason to say it is human life. This is more than human cells (like skin or hair cells that we shed often).

The fertilised human egg is small. Simply because it is small does not make it less human. Is a teenager worth less than an adult? Is a child worth less than a teenager? Is an infant worth less than a child? Is an unborn child worth less than a born child? In our development, was there at any point when we were not human or alive?

The core of the argument for embryonic stem cell research denies this inconvenient truth.

Emotionally, we may not look at a zygote as human life. But we also cannot deny the facticity of it. Our morality is based on realities, not our feelings.

Health

As Christians, we strongly advocate good health. But it is not health at any price. Life is more than health. That must be a fundamental tenet for all peoples, not just Christians.

If I need a heart transplant, and I can afford to buy it from someone willing to die so he can feed his family, is it right for me to buy his heart so that I can live and he dies? He made that choice on his own accord (personal choice is the misguided justification in modern day morality). But it is still immoral for me to take another man's heart and kill him. Having more money

does not give me more right to live than the person who has less money.

As much as we treasure our health, we need to honour God by honouring other humans who are also created in the image of God. We cannot murder another human being so that we can live.

The promise in embryonic stem cell research is only a scientific conjecture which may or may not result in anything. Let us also be reminded that the moral problem comes only with embryonic stem cell research and the other types of stem cell research have no moral-ethical consideration.

The US decision

President George W Bush decided that there will be no federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research except for existing 60 lines. That is to say, 60 embryos had their stem cells extracted and the embryos are already killed. These 60 stem cells can be multiplied. Is this a right decision? Let us evaluate.

Bush's decision means that federal funds will not kill any more human embryos. This is morally right. Those who support embryonic stem cell research argue that about 100,000 human embryos (IVF leftovers) are frozen and earmarked for destruction anyway, so what is the problem of using them for research?

You may recall my past articles about the morality of IVF. There is no moral issue in the fertilisation of a human ovum outside of the human body. Where fertilisation occurs is a non-issue. The issue is that the procedure produces many leftover human embryos that the couple does not want or need. This is where the heart of the issue lies. In the first place, should we place ourselves in such a situation?

While I will not make the decision for another person, I can share with you from my personal struggle.

My wife and I had difficulties when we tried to have a child. We drew the line that we will not go for IVF because of the moral issue of creating human lives that will be thrown away.

Using excess IVF human embryos is a powerful argument because we should not waste what is already there. That is true only to a point.

If we look at the situation carefully, we will see that the argument is flawed. This is because using the human embryos left over from IVF involves another act of moral culpability—killing the human embryo. It is not like an organ donation of an accident victim who is already dead. It is the taking away of an organ while the victim is still alive!

That is why we say that the crux of the issue lies in our answer to the question: Is a human embryo a human life? Our answer to this affects all other conclusions on this question.

Some criticised Bush for not going far enough and for allowing federal funding for the existing 60 lines. I agree with Bush's decision. It is lamentable that 60 embryos have been destroyed in the name of this frankenscience. But these 60 lines of stem cells are no longer embryos. They have no more potential of life. The embryos are dead. US federal funding to continue this research is like using the organ of a person killed by a drunk driver. The initial act was wrong. But the wrong action opens up a health opportunity which does not involve another wrong act.

Let me illustrate it in another way. During WW2, the Nazis and the Japanese conducted cruel human experiments. These were heinous acts of deep depravity. These experiments produced results that were mostly useless. But some observations may be useful. Is it right to use these results to save lives? I should think so. Using these results does not mean we condone the evil, nor do we do any evil in the process.

Does this course of action cause another human life to be taken? There is moral culpability in creating these 60 lines, but there is no moral culpability in using these 60 lines.

Money and Popularity

But there are two more issues surrounding the stem cell controversy: popularity and money. Polls conducted about stem cell research target what evangelical Christians think. One poll shows that upward of 40% of Christians support stem cell research even at the expense of taking human life. What a sorry statement for those who are called by the name of Jesus Christ!

This suggests Bush's decision is not popular even with evangelical Christians. But is morality determined by popularity?

The money issue comes into play in the same way as cloning. If the US would not fund embryonic stem cell research, the country's brains will go elsewhere and the potential profits will be lost.

This is crass greed and it is hard even to fathom this argument as a justification. Can slavery be justified on the grounds that it is good economics? Can the harvest of human body parts from living people be justified if it produces wealth?

I am not sure if most Christians are ready for a morality that comes at a financial or popularity cost. We know that historically, Christians have often justified their wrong actions. This is where we need to look at Christ.

When we complicate our decisions with many arguments and harbour a desire for things to turn out a certain way, we will not have spiritual clarity.

Some Christians make money through immoral or unethical acts. These Christians have a way of spiritual money laundering. First they testify that God has blessed them. This supposedly gives God the glory. But in reality, it is assigning the wrong method to God's blessing. Next, they tithe scrupulously (which is right), but use it like a commission paid to the money launderer.

Spiritual value has taken a stand against Mammon, the god of this world, and against Self, the god of the individual.

Conclusion

How will history look at us? Will history see human stem cell research no better than the Nazis and Japanese who did human experiments during the WW2? These scientists were tried for crimes against humanity. Should the destruction of human embryos be considered human experimentation?

Should a Christian engage in human embryo destruction? Can we affirm we are made in God's image but despise and destroy it at the same time?

God is not a senile indulgent grandfather in heaven. He is the almighty God, maker of human life. He is a God who takes his stand with the poor, the orphaned, the widows, the defenceless. He is a God who blesses righteousness and curses evil. God holds us accountable. He is watching. He is just.

See article: [Human Hybrids](#)

For the theological discussion on when a person has a soul, see: [Origin of the Soul](#)

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