As technology continues to advance rapidly, it has begun to affect the very nature of what it means to be human.

Do we as the church weigh the costs and benefits before participating in these technologies? In Biotechnology and the Human Good (Georgetown University Press, 2007), Trinity Evangelical Divinity School professors Dr. John Kilner and Dr. C. Ben Mitchell join the Chair of the U.S. President's Council on Bioethics Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, University of Chicago professor Dr. Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Biola University Professor Dr. Scott Rae to consider the nature of biotechnology from a Christian perspective and ways in which we can evaluate current trends.

Trinity Magazine: Why did you write this book? Who do you hope will benefit from it?

John Kilner: This project goes back quite a few years, to the 1990s, when it was already clear that biotechnology issues were rapidly becoming as important a part of the bioethics agenda as clinical or medical issues. To help chart the role that The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity could best play in the face of this development, Christopher Hook (a physician and the head of ethics education at Mayo Clinic) and I put together a consultation in the hotel conference center at O'Hare Airport. What ultimately emerged was a grant from a foundation, supplemented by other funding sources, for a project on emerging issues in biotechnology. The purpose of the project was to identify some vitally important parameters for the development of biotechnology so that it would become a great blessing for the human race rather than the cause of humanity's
demeaning or even demise. The work has addressed these matters in biblical-theological terms, as well as in philosophical terms, so that its relevance for the church, as well as for the world at large, would be apparent.

Recognizing the need for a collaborative project involving the wisdom of many people, we assembled a team of Christian authors in which Trinity's Ben Mitchell, Georgetown University's Edmund Pellegrino, the University of Chicago's Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Biola University's Scott Rae joined the two of us. Little did we know that, while writing the book, Dr. Pellegrino would be elevated to the top bioethics policy position in the United States as chair of the U.S. President's Council on Bioethics and that Dr. Elshtain would deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland—thereby significantly enhancing the interest in this book in the public arena.

**TM: What is "biotechnology"?**

**JK:** As we explain in the book, technology is an integral part of human life, from the simplest tools made from plants and stones to our computers, drugs, heart pacemakers, communication media, and forms of transportation. Biotechnology is a set of technologies specifically aimed at manipulating living things, including human beings themselves, arguably for the common good. Some of the most amazing tools of the past fifty years have appeared in the sphere of medical biotechnology, including antibiotics, diagnostic methods, and genetic manipulation.

**TM: Are there benefits to biotechnology, or does this trend primarily engender concern?**

**JK:** Biotechnology can be intended for good or ill—to enhance an appropriate stewardship over the created world or to assert ourselves at the expense of other people or other aspects of the created world. Accordingly, it can be a wonderful gift of God, but it is not necessarily so. This suggests that two outlooks on biotechnology rather common today are off the mark. One (to simplify somewhat) is the view that biotechnology in all of its varied splendor is wonderful and should be encouraged in every way possible. Such a view rightly celebrates the tremendous contributions to life and health that biotechnology makes possible—for example a polio vaccine. But it fails to grasp the destructive potential of powerful tools in the hands of self-serving people—for example, embryo-destructive research. The other view is that which sees biotechnology as a dangerous interference in nature that should be discouraged in every way possible. Such a view fails to recognize the wonderful good that can be accomplished in healing the fallenness of the world through biotechnology. It also is overly pessimistic about the ability of human beings at times to apply good means toward good ends, even if they cannot consistently do so. What's needed today is a balanced (biblically sound) view that takes the creation and redemption mandates—together with sinful human nature—seriously.

**TM: How are people currently "reengineering" what it means to be human?**
Ben Mitchell: First, there is social reengineering of our humanity. For instance, philosophers have made a distinction between human beings and human "persons." Under this rubric, not all human beings are persons. So, today, Princeton philosopher Peter Singer and his colleagues ascribe personhood to primates and other animals. For them, "person" includes any being with conscious awareness (reason, will, and experience, for instance). That means apes are persons, but unborn humans are not. Of course, Christians have a biblical warrant to believe that there are persons who are other than human. There are Trinitarian persons-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and there are other nonhuman persons-angels and demons. For us, however, every human being is a person.

Second, we are on the threshold of biotechnological reengineering. We are already seeing reengineered athletes through steroids and surgery. We will soon be able to modify them genetically to enhance their performance. Interestingly enough, there is already a U.S. law on the books prohibiting so-called gene doping in amateur athletics. But the law does not cover international athletics. Nor does it cover professional athletics. Once genetic enhancement is available for athletes, everyone is going to want it.

Moreover, with the sliding definition of personhood, there is no reason that sophisticated computers, artificial intelligences, and robots could not be included. As long as someone ascribes to them rational capacity, a will, and conscious experience, they would qualify. The point is, our understanding of what it means to be "one of us" will be under significant revision for the foreseeable future. But I want to suggest that the incarnation of God in Christ is a clue to what it means to be human.

TM: Can you paint us a picture of what is on the horizon of biotechnology, improbable though it might seem?

BM: Well, first, there are some wonderful potentials. We might see the cure of many diseases and illnesses through gene therapy. We might see biotech advances that bring sight to the blind, restore limbs to full functioning, and extend human lifespan for a significant number of years. All things being equal, these are hopeful advances. But, as we know, all things are not equal. Biotechnology is a double-edged sword.

For example, in his recent volume The Singularity Is Near, scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil argues that by the year 2045 humans and machines will merge and a new species will have evolved. Computational speed and power will have reached the point, he says, where computers are at least as "smart" as the human brain. At that point, "the singularity," as he calls it, will be reached.

Robotics professor Kevin Warwick of Reading University in England claims to be the first cyborg. Professor Warwick argues that "the potential for humans, if we stick to our present physical form, is pretty limited.... The opportunity for me to become a cyborg is extremely exciting. I can't wait to get on with it." He has already had computer chips inserted into his upper arm and wrist. As soon as he gets approval he wants one in his brain—thus uniting the human and the machine.
Scenario-building has become both an art and a science. I believe it is safe to say today that if we can think it, we may someday be able to do it. So, from the human perspective at least, the future is malleable. And so are human beings.

**TM: How does this book help us think about biotechnology?**

**JK:** In its seven chapters, this book endeavors to help us in seven ways. The first chapter gives us the understanding of the field we need in order to appreciate both its wonderful and its dangerous potentials. The second chapter helps us distinguish between competing "stories" about what technology is all about so that we may recognize and reject misleading stories in favor of a narrative of morally responsible stewardship. The third chapter assesses three hugely influential but competing worldviews in terms of their ability to provide a healthy way forward for biotechnology, finding all of them wanting except biblically based theism. The fourth chapter develops an understanding of human dignity that can provide a constructive way forward as a concern widely acknowledged in religious and nonreligious contexts alike. The fifth chapter critiques our contemporary love of self—i.e., "autonomy"—and commends an approach to biotechnology more attentive to matters of community. The sixth chapter considers the impact of biotechnology on the practice of medicine and explains some of the special concerns that arise when the goal is not healing but reengineering human beings to be superhuman or ultimately beyond-human. The seventh chapter ties everything together by providing an overall framework intended to encourage the development of biotechnology while keeping it honest.

**TM: How is this trend already affecting Christians and the church?**

**BM:** Like the rest of the culture, the rich Western church, especially in the northern hemisphere, is immersed in a consumerist society. We want what we want when we want it. No one can deny us the next big thing. The American church is also a technology-saturated society. We haven't met a technology we didn't like. It's no surprise, then, that significant numbers of church members now check their email during worship services. Finally, church leadership is largely composed of Baby Boomers—the largest population of adults the world has ever known—and they are aging. And the experience of aging is not going down well with them. So, with the convergence of these three impulses, I would say that the church is exquisitely susceptible to the snake oil technology salesmen. The church will naively embrace any technology that promises to satisfy our desires, help us get things done faster and easier, and extend our lives as long as technologically possible. All the while, we are slowly losing our humanity.

**TM: How do you hope the church will respond?**

**BM:** First, the church has to awaken to what's going on. The average church member has little or no awareness of the technological revolution taking place, and the average church isn't helping them to become educated. Someone said long ago that a faithful biblical preacher should have a
Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Today, he needs more hands. He also must know what’s happening in the fastest growing sector of contemporary society—the technology sector. Churches must become sensitized to the ethical, legal, and social implications of these technologies.

Second, the church must become more discriminating consumers. As difficult as it may be, the church is going to have to prepare itself to reject certain technologies for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of community. For instance, as helpful as PowerPoint is (and I use it frequently in my own teaching), using it routinely runs the risk of creating what I call "evangelical attention deficit syndrome." Because of the entertainment culture in which we are situated, we have convinced ourselves that in order to hold the attention of the "consumers" (a.k.a. church attenders), we have to keep the worship service moving at breakneck speed, with lots of electronic bells and whistles, and, above all, a "wow" factor. What better surprise than rolling out a new audiovisual tool on Sunday morning? The simplicity of worship is lost, the gospel is truncated, and people are titillated without being transformed. The future is only going to become more challenging, and the church needs to be discerning.

Third, individual Christians are going to have to determine whether they want to contribute to a technologically mediated life or whether they want to be truly human. That is, we must recover what philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann calls "focal practices." Focal practices are those activities that form our conceptions of ourselves and our communities. For instance, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are crucial focal practices for the church. Through baptism we are taught that Christ himself is our life and that we have been redeemed to live a new kind of life—a life identified with him and his values. Through "communion" we are taught that our community is with those embodied humans who share in the life of the incarnate Christ. Thus, embodied humanity, eating and drinking together, gathered in community is an important reminder of what it means to be one of us.

I’ve been challenging myself to stop talking about what it means to be human at the same time as I am living a very inhuman lifestyle. We must discipline ourselves to unplug and take a technological Sabbath. We need to create more space for human-to-human, non-technologically-mediated interaction with our family, friends, and neighbors. We need person-to-person community. There’s a reason God became human flesh in Christ. There’s a reason Jesus of Nazareth spent three years of his life in community with twelve human beings. There’s a reason he was raised from the dead in bodily form. Attention to these formative aspects of the gospel message may help us recover our humanity, theological education, and the church, the body of Christ.

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