Human cloning may soon become an accepted means of producing human embryonic stem cells for use in medical therapies. The Donaldson Report, released in August by a government advisory commission headed by Britain's Chief Medical Officer Liam Donaldson, sanctions the destruction of just such a practice if passed by Parliament. Britain would likely become the first country in the world to explicitly permit the cloning of human embryos. The Report endorses only what is being called therapeutic cloning—cloning in which the therapeutic benefits are bestowed upon patients in need of treatments developed from the cloned embryo's stem cells. While this may be therapeutic benefits to the patient, it is critical to recognize that no therapy whatsoever is bestowed upon the cloned embryo as-much as the stem cells necessary for his or her death. In fact, the Donaldson Report ensures that no cloned embryo survives by requiring the destruction of all such embryos after 14 days as a means of preventing the development of cloned fetuses and babies—a process which has been termed "reproductive cloning." To prohibit human cloning is a good thing—but not if such prohibition demands the unnecessary destruction of a human being who has already been cloned for the expressed benefit of someone else. Those who support the Donaldson Report, as well as many who favor human embryonic stem cell research in the U.S., have succumbed to the utilitarian drive to maximize the ends without considering the means.

Named the Breakthrough of the Year for 1999 by the prestigious scientific journal Science, human embryonic stem cell research may indeed have the potential to benefit many people who suffer from serious debilitating conditions. Because embryonic stem cells can develop into many different types of tissues, researchers hope that these cells can be converted into parental cells that whose function has been lost or compromised as a result of injury or disease. For example, someone with diabetes—given replacement pancreatic cells that produce insulin might be developed for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.

The British interest in cloning arises largely in response to a chief obstacle encountered by scientists doing research on embryonic stem cells—how to transplant cells that result from an embryo into a patient without that patient rejecting the implanted material. Obtaining cells from an embryo which has been cloned by inserting a patient's own DNA into an egg cell devoid of genetic material circumvents the risk of tissue rejection which would likely be posed if stem cells were derived from non-cloned embryos who do not have the patient's genetic identifiers. For example, a patient suffering from severe burns could have embryos cloned using genetic material derived from his or her own cells. If the stem cells obtained from these embryos could be coaxed into becoming skin cells, they would be genetically identical to the patient and would pose no risk of rejection.

The Council of Europe affirmed as much when the preamble to its 1998 Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. Article 11 of the Protocol on Prohibition of Human Cloning Humans declared that "the instrumentalisation of human beings through the deliberate creation of genetically identical human beings is contrary to human dignity as such." While the creation of human embryos for research purposes is prohibited, "it is for the political right in Germany declared that "the UK has now left the European community in terms of moral values."

While the recently released NIH guidelines for federally funding destructive human embryonic stem cell research stop short of sanctioning human cloning as a means of producing embryonic stem cells, government sanctioning of embryo destruction is still not commendable—regardless of whether cloning is employed by those who promote both of these intrinsically objectionable practices. At their core, these acts are violations of human dignity.

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CLONING AND STEM CELL RESEARCH (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3)

It is indeed difficult to accept the disability or premature death of any human being because such tragedy marks the loss of potential. Who might this person become? What might he or she have accomplished? Yet precisely the same potential is lost when a human embryo, closed or not, is torn apart to supply stem cells for the benefit of another. Who would these embryonic beings have become, if only they had been protected and nurtured? Instead of sanctioning their sacrifice, those who brought these embryos into being should act as caretakers, nurturing and protecting these tiny human lives. In that way, they act as faithful images of God, reflecting His character to the world. Endorsing the destruction of human embryos falls miserably to reach this end, as it makes it ever easier for society to abandon the responsibility to abide by the will of God at all stages of development. Policies which promote human cloning and research on stem cells derived from human embryos reflect ominously on the state of a society and the values which characterize it.

Research published a study demonstrating that stem cells taken from adult bone marrow had been transformed into nerve cells. This was previously believed to be impossible. Other long-held beliefs, such as the idea that the brain was incapable of regeneration, are being overturned because of research on stem cells derived from embryonic sources. With each passing month, research with these stem cells is revealing the huge potential of this area. The hopes of alleviating many devastating illnesses may be achieved via methods which are not dependent upon embryonic stem cells and which therefore do not require the destruction of embryos. As Christians, we should wholly affirm the desire to develop new treatments for diseases and should vigorously support research into adult stem cells and other non-embryonic sources.

The stem cell/cloning controversy raises, once again, the fundamental issue of personhood and the ensuing considerations of human dignity. Unabashedly treated, unfortunately, Christians cannot turn to the Bible for a specific verse to tell us if the embryo has the same rights as other humans. However, when Scripture accredits the soul to its being created in the image of God. If we ask “Who is an image of God?”, we might receive no easy answer. But Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbor?”

His reply with the parable of the Good Samaritan redirects the question (Luke 10:30-37) and emphasizes our responsibility to care for all human beings in whatever ways we can. Are we acting as good neighbors to these embryos? Do we reflect the image of God when we endorse the destruction of other human beings? Hardly.

Research continues to unfold the distinctiveness of the human person in ever more surprising and awe-inspiring ways. These moral and biological decisions are ontologically central to who we are as human beings. Christians, therefore, must advocate for policies that protect the dignity and worth of all human beings. To do otherwise is to act as if we are not created in the image of God.