

Dignity

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Inside:

Biotechnology's Brave New World

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If Immanuel Kant was awakened from his dogmatic slumbers by reading Hume, I have been awakened from my cultural malaise by investigating some of the present medical advances that could radically affect our children and grandchildren. My cursory and all too brief study has made me conclude that ethical issues raised by biotechnology are among the most important to be considered. We stand today at a crossroads where quite literally the future of the human race is at stake. I do not mean the *survival* of the human race, but something more sinister: the altering of the very concept of *what it means to be human*. The issue is not whether future generations shall live; the issue is what future people—if we call them such—shall be like. We must face the possibility of Huxley's *Brave New World* and ask: Is there something we can do to prevent the possibility of a profoundly tragic future from occurring?

When Christians propose limiting the use of biotechnology, they typically face formidable opposition from the non-religious community. Secularists often argue that the Church has always been opposed to scientific progress. Think, for example, of official Christendom opposing Galileo and of religious opposition to the smallpox vaccine on the grounds that the disease was a judgment from God with which we ought not interfere. The Church has often been opposed to scientific progress and can be faulted for lagging behind in its vision of the good that science can do. But having heard the secularist argument, we must counter by affirming that we are *not* opposed to scientific and medical progress but instead enthusiastically encourage it. We must also,

however, refuse to accept the premise that whatever human beings *can* do scientifically *should* be done, especially if the identity of the human species is at stake. Indeed, some of the biotech issues that are now front and center—stem cell research, cloning, *in vitro* fertilization, and the like—could dramatically change our understanding of what it means to be human.

It goes without saying that the Church has often been too late in responding to cultural and moral challenges. In matters of biotechnology, we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past but must instead direct the cultural trends and public opinion rather than reacting to them. We have often heard that we must reclaim God's world, and this certainly involves reclaiming what it means to be human. In this article I will raise some foundational issues that I think are critical to the biotech and bioethics discussion.

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The Nature of Being Human

Christian theology holds that human beings are created with not just a body, but also with a soul that will exist eternally. Since Christians also believe that at death a believer's soul goes to heaven while his body remains on earth, it follows that the soul is separable from the body. While we reject Cartesian dualism, which holds to such a radical distinction between the soul and the body that one cannot affect the other, we nevertheless assert that the soul is separate enough to exist without the body.

The soul and the body make up the *imago Dei*, the image of God in human beings. The

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Bible nowhere tells us precisely what the image of God is; but the image clearly entails our capacity to relate to God, others, and creation as moral beings who know innately that we are accountable for our actions.

Secularists have never had a satisfactory explanation for the human soul. The reductionism of Hobbes and other materialists, for example, is wholly unsatisfactory, while the biblical data confirms human observation and experience. While there is mystery both in understanding the origin of the soul and its relationship to the body, the fact that we can't give precise answers to some questions does not mean that we must surrender scripture's affirmation of the unique nature of humankind. Indeed everything we know about human beings—their ability to think conceptually, their volition, and sense of responsibility—confirms the biblical data.

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Regardless of the origin of the soul and its relationship to the body, each human being is unique and possesses innate human dignity. To experiment with creating a human being according to our liking is to tamper with that which is most sacred, that which is second only to God Himself. We must preserve the integrity of humanity; we dare not reconfigure human beings according to our whims and purposes.

Issues of Morality

In the Genesis account of the fall, Adam and Eve reached out to eat the forbidden fruit, lured by the promise, "You shall be like God, knowing good and evil." The desire to be like God has always expressed itself in the tyranny of human over human, the notion that we can exploit the highest and grandest of God's creation.

Back then, God graciously put limits on human ability. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden for a specific reason: "he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever" (Gen. 3:22). God did not intend that we live indefinitely in this decaying body, infested with sin.

Biotechnology, when taken too far, would give us the illusion that we can eat from that tree indefinitely. A company called Alcor specializes in deep-freezing human beings at death for possible revival in the future. The assumption is that a long life and a good life are one and the same. However, Scripture teaches that there is more to life than simply seeking to extend it by whatever means possible. As Christians, we must challenge the notion that "longer equals better" and that longevity should be pursued regardless of the costs involved.

In speaking to bioethical issues, Christians must also challenge the notion that whatever can be done should be done, as well as the notion that scientific breakthroughs will always be used for good ends and never for evil.

Implications for the Family

God intended that children result from intimate sexual union and be reared by both a father and a mother. As genetic and reproductive technologies progress, children will increasingly be produced according to the skill of biologists and the personal whims and desires of whoever might wish to become parents.

Children conceived in petri dishes and born with the help of artificial insemination, surrogacy, or other techniques often face formidable obstacles in developing a sense of identity, and children who are cloned might face even greater struggles. As Dr. Leon Kass has eloquently asked, "The family is rapidly becoming the only institution in an increasingly impersonal world where each person is loved not for what he does or makes, but simply because he is. Can our humanity survive the family's destruction?"¹

Where Do We Go From Here?

Someone has said that the storm of cloning, eugenics, and human manipulation is upon us, and the raindrops have already begun to fall. We as ambassadors of the Most High cannot sit back and simply watch the wind and the rain. We must engage the bioethics storm head on instead of hiding behind our Christian "umbrellas." It is imperative that we develop a robust, biblical anthropology that will help evaluate biotechnology and set rational limits to the scientific enterprise. In seeking to set such limits, we must do four things.

First, we must educate lay persons, as well as professionals. Unless we form a grassroots movement, our desire to stem the tide toward "anything goes" will fail. In the case of biotechnology, we face a formidable task. The complexities of many scientific procedures are difficult to sort out, the implications only vaguely understood. We therefore need to communicate as simply, but also as accurately, as possible.

Second, we must help educate our politicians. However, we know that many politicians pay primary attention to their opinion polls, which underscores even more the need to educate the public about the implications of scientific advances.

Third, we must preserve the integrity of human language. Whenever men want to tamper with human beings, substitute words are used to desensitize us to horrific realities. For example, when Congress banned "partial-birth abortion," a representative from a pro-choice organization responded, "So Congress has banned a medical procedure...what is next?" We can imagine that the killing of ill human beings will be referred to as "giving individuals the gift of non-existence"; the discarding of weak human beings will be described as "seeking the perfection of the species." Morality will collapse into biology and ethics will be spoken of in purely clinical terms.

Finally, as Christians we must remember that our greatest weapon is the message of the gospel of Christ. Thankfully, the gospel not only forgives our sin, but also gives us new desires and clarifies our perspectives. Many of us know people who were staunchly and unwaveringly pro-abortion but immediately changed their mind on the issue once they were converted.

Future generations might well point fingers at us asking: Why did we not stand against this "brave new world" with its potential for dehumanizing human beings and destroying the family structure? With regard to the realm of biotechnology, I believe God is throwing a pitch in our direction—we must step up to the plate. ■

¹Lester, Lane P. and James C. Hefley. *Human Cloning: Playing God or Scientific Progress?* Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1998, p. 155.