

The Christian View on Embryonic Stem Cell Research: The Guidance of Holy Scripture

The Rev. John G. Fleischmann, M.Div., STS

Introduction

The topic of embryonic stem cell research has dominated society over the past several years. Claims have been made that these cells, harvested from days-old embryos, show much curative promise for those suffering with chronic, debilitating illness.¹

Scientists are not in agreement about such claims. Further, concern has been raised over whether or not the implantation of stem cells into another body could actually be harmful to the recipient.

While it is not our purpose to discuss or evaluate scientific claims in this monograph, it is important that one understand that the issue is far more complex than what is often presented in the media and in political argumentation.

As in any issue, the Church's primary concern is to weigh the issue against the Holy Scriptures and the Faith of the Church as it has been passed on by the Ancient Fathers. Admittedly, the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition do not specifically reference issues of modern technology. However, the principles that they lay down can be generally, and often specifically applied. This, in turn, can assist the Church in making decisions about the validity of current issues and whether or not acceptance or participation in them is sinful in the eyes of God.

A Brief Explanation of Embryonic Stem Cell Research

The concept of *embryonic* stem cell research is telling; for it refers to not only the type of stem cell being discussed, but also the locus from which the stem cell is obtained. These cells come from extra embryos that are fertilized during *in-vitro* procedures. According to one source, not all

of the fertilized ova produced in a laboratory during the *in-vitro* process are implanted into the womb of a woman. More than the needed number of fertilized ova are produced to improve the probability of pregnancy.

Embryonic stem cells are obtained from these leftover fertilized eggs. In attempting to justify such usage one writer states:

The surplus embryos will almost all eventually be destroyed, even if it happens accidentally, decades later, due to equipment malfunction²

While stem cells can be obtained from a variety of sources (such as from umbilical cords of infants after birth and adult bone marrow), stem cells from embryos are preferred as they are "totipotent"—that is, theoretically able to become any of the 220 types of cells in the human body.³

The Heart of the Matter

One point that cannot be overlooked is that harvesting stem cells from an embryo necessarily causes that embryo to die. It raises the moral, legal, ethical and Scriptural question of whether or not the embryo is a human being. This is the very heart of the issue that we will attempt to address.

Indeed, this argument came to the fore in the 20th Century with the regrettable decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*. This landmark ruling caused the immediate polarization of "pro-life" and "pro-choice" camps, with the former answering question in the affirmative, the latter in the negative.

It is not our intention to enter into this debate, but to seek the input and guidance of Holy Scripture. For the Church, the Scriptures are the *norma normans*, the

¹ *Human Stem Cells: Background Information.*
http://www.religioustolerance.org/res_stem1.htm

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

authoritative Word of God. Sacred Tradition is closely coupled to this process, as it shows how the Church has historically understood matters of the Faith.

We also acknowledge that for those who reject Scriptural authority and the two millennia of Church History, no successful appeal can be made. Such a position will necessarily lead to a different conclusion from those who submit to the magisterium of Scripture. Embryonic stem cell research leading to the death of an embryo will pose no moral or ethical dilemma. It becomes a classic case of the ends justifying the means. Acceptance of Scriptural authority presupposes that faith in Christ is present. Apart from such faith, Scriptures and Holy Tradition matter little in any issue of life.⁴ This hermeneutical principle is lost to many Christians seeking to confirm their points with Scripture while debating those who do not accept its authority.

What Do the Scriptures Say?

The Holy Scriptures, written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit are all about life.

Viewing the unity of Holy Scripture, it is clear that they begin and end with life. Everything contained in between is about life.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1). The creation account clearly shows that all life is a creation and a gift from God. When God had finished creating He “saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.”

In the Book of the Revelation the Apostle John gives glimpses of the hope of eternal life. “And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In

⁴ One modern difficulty is that the argumentation used by some who reject Scriptural authority is quite persuasive. Many Christians today attempt to synthesize a humanistic understanding with their confession of Christ. As we will attempt to demonstrate, such a position is inconsistent and incompatible with the *fides qua*, that is, the faith that is confessed by the Church.

the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.” (The Revelation 22:1-5).

Indeed, the Christian Church has always seen the purpose of the Scriptures to point to Jesus Christ, whom we confess to be the Son of God; indeed God Himself Incarnate. It is He who died on a cross that we might have life. It is He who said, “For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will” (John 5:16) and “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

It is important to start from this point when discussing matters of life. It provides the context and depth for our theology, preventing it from becoming mere proof-texting when debating issues.

It is also important to understand that the Fathers of the Church have always held to this theology of life. The *Didache*, a Second Century writing of the teaching of the Twelve Apostles affirms life and speaks out against abortion and infanticide—practices that have been around a lot longer than the present issues: “you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born.”⁵ The message of the Church has always been a message of life as can be seen in the liturgies and sermons of Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose and the rest of the corpus of early and medieval Church writing. It is an affront to the Scriptures, to Church History and to the Lord Himself, who is the Head of the Church, that some fellowships today have abandoned this catholic and apostolic stance in favor of a culture of death and “choice.” Such was never the case, nor the Confession

⁵ *The Didache: The Lord's Teaching through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations*. Chapter 2.

of the One, Holy catholic and Apostolic Church throughout history. This is novel theology which actually is liberal sociology, and not theology at all.

Having stated this, we now go to the Scriptures to see what witness they bear.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament has multitudes of references to life, both physical and spiritual. For instance, besides the Creation there is the Call of Abraham who would be made into a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3). There is the Deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt and the Crossing of the Red Sea, where God slew the pursuing Egyptians, typifying Baptism as we hear at the Great Vigil of Easter (Exodus 14:22-15:21). The Prophets declare both God's judgment and favor and ultimately point to the coming of Messiah.

The Old Testament both affirms life and condemns its antithesis. God tells the Children of Israel in Deuteronomy 30: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

The Old Testament condemns the antithesis of life, that is, death in the judgment against Cain (Genesis 4:9-15); in the Commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) as well as in the Levitical laws.

It is also important to understand that the Old Testament places a high regard for life in the womb. Psalm 139 declares, "For You formed my inward parts: You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being

yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them." (Psalm 139:13-16).

Likewise, the great penitential psalm of David shows that the depths of sinfulness go all the way back to the womb: "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5). A non-life could not be a sinner.

Such examples from the Old Testament show the value of all life to the Lord and are simply highlights of a message contained throughout the Old Testament.

The New Testament

The New Testament, likewise, connotes life throughout the Gospels and the Writings, centered in the Work and Person of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John announces, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Saint Paul summarizes life in Christ: "We were buried with [Christ] through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4). Also, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Galatians 2:20). A view of life is expressed here that the world cannot know apart from the Gospel.

Indeed the entire Life, Death, Resurrection, Ascension and Promise of Parousia of Jesus Christ are all so that His Church might have life here and in Eternity.

The New Testament also has a reference to life in the womb at the

Visitation: “Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.” (Luke 1:39-44). Not only is life affirmed in the womb, but the Church has always confessed that by the leaping of Saint John the Baptist in Elizabeth’s womb, so is the *faith* of the unborn.

The New Testament is an unfolding of Life in Christ. Its message cannot be missed or mistaken if one reads it seriously. It provides no other alternative.

Conclusion

In this monologue we have attempted to briefly show that, as a matter of faith, the Church of Jesus Christ has always held to a Culture of Life: Celebrating it, defending it and living it.

The Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, clearly show that life is God’s creation, His gift, and ultimately our hope. Church History and Sacred Tradition have affirmed that this has always been the stance of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and that modern deviations from it, like ancient heresies, are not a part of the True Faith and are to be rejected.⁶

⁶ Coincidentally, this week I received an invitation to another seminar entitled, *Stem Cell Research: Hope for the Future?* Sponsored by “Save our Services on Long Island). Their mission statement in the invitation reads as follows: *The mission of SOS-LI, a community based coalition, is to preserve and promote essential health care on Long Island jeopardized by the imposition of restrictive, religious-based health care policies* (Emphasis mine).

We have also explained that for those outside of the Church, who do not accept Scriptural or Ecclesial authority, nor the evidence supporting the culture of life by the Church over the past two millennia, no appeal of the faith can be made as it cannot be comprehended without the working of the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptural view of life necessarily demands that members of the Body of Christ reject any technology that requires the death of another human being including seeking the good of the chronically ill, the injured or the mother. In Christian theology the ends may never justify the means. Rather, life in the womb – or, tragically in the Petri dish⁷— is always viewed as *human* life. To deny this denies the witness of the Scriptures and the Faith of the Church.

In the lens of the Scriptures, embryonic stem cell research is death masquerading as life. No matter what claims of healing and wholeness embryonic stem cell research brings; no matter how appealing the argumentation, one cannot get around the fact that the life of an embryo—a *human* life—must be willfully taken.

In issues such as this, Saint Paul exhorts: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2)

There are different ways of harvesting stem cells apart from extracting them from an embryo. Whether or not this is a good thing is another topic for another paper and presenter. The Biblical witness is clear however, that *embryonic* stem cell research is never to be embraced, explored or practiced by those who have been “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:13).

⁷ The issue of *in-vitro* fertilization is another issue that bears re-visitation in light of the Scriptures and Tradition.