a matter of life and death

This 2-day-old human embryo could cure your disease, give you a new kidney, or help you live 120 years. But at what cost?
The Biotech Revolution

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Why shouldn’t we use our embryos and genes to make our lives better? The world awaits a Christian answer.

BY DAVID P. GUSHEE

On June 26, 2000, scientists Francis Collins and J. Craig Venter joined Bill Clinton at the White House for the stunning announcement that researchers had mapped 90 percent of the genes on the human genome, which contains codes for all inherited characteristics. The President declared, “Today, we are learning the language in which God created life.”

Humanity will spend much of the 21st century attempting to speak that language. A fast-developing biotech vocabulary—genetic therapy, stem cells, reproductive cloning, and so on—strains the ability of even the most thoughtful to keep up. Human life may soon be changed dramatically, and Christians must participate in the international conversation about these changes before they become irreversible.

The Christian faith has the potential to serve not just the church but the world by penetrating the fog of current events to discern their deeper meaning—and to offer clear-headed analysis amid growing confusion.

OPPOSING FORCES

Long-established forces threaten to crowd out the voice of faith:

Market forces. The sprawling biotech industry, already doing $80 billion in business in the United States alone, would not be awash in money were there not a demand for its innovations. These products and services include stem cells, gene therapies and enhancements, and, one day, perhaps soon, clones. Biotech firms promise what people want—health, pain relief, reproduction, longevity, success.

Thus far they do so with little public regulation or control, one of the most troubling features of our new era—unlike the nuclear weapons challenge posed last century, harrowing as that was. Then government policy threatened humanity; today, corporate interests do.

Moral fragmentation. A morally fragmented nation may lack the basic requisites for a conversation—a shared framework of meaning, a minimal level of trust, and an agreed-upon vocabulary. But by failing to converse and arrive at a national (much less international) decision about the biotech revolution, we default to existing powers and interests and likely stumble into disaster.

“Our society currently lives from moral fragments and community fragments only, both of which are being destroyed faster than they are being replenished,” writes ethicist Larry L. Rasmussen.

Worldview dynamics. This leads us to a still deeper reality: beneath both economic practice and moral fragmentation lies the foundation of worldview. Among those who press most aggressively for unrestrained development of biotech advances—including nonscientists—worldviews and philosophies such as naturalism, atheism, utilitarianism, and scientific utopianism reign. Much of our culture’s elite lives without a working hypothesis of God. Assuming we dwell alone in the universe, they believe we must simply keep improving life until the next comet hits.

Libertarian ideology—which stresses individualism, privacy, moral relativism, unlimited choice-making, and autonomy—folds neatly into these godless worldviews. It holds that no one should deny himself anything that will bring self-realization and is not immediately harmful to another.

Hence a powerful contingent argues for the largely unrestrained pursuit of biotechnology as a matter of persona (including reproductive) liberty. This quest is driven by a utopian dream: over coming our species’ limits through human power and scientific progress.

Some suggest triumphantly that our species is about to evolve right past hominids to what New Republic senior editor Gregg Easterbrook calls home genetics.
ations will look back on our time as "the point in history when human beings gained the power to seize control of their own evolutionary destiny."

Leaving the limits of nature and the past behind, we will remake ourselves. Still, as bioethicist Audrey Chapman has written, the nations are not sure they ought to heed this siren song. They seem to be pausing at the brink, waiting to hear from the church or any other voice on why they should not plunge into the remaking of humanity.

THE CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANS

Tell us why we should not proceed to remake humanity now that we are developing the power to do so—this is the challenge presented to Christians (and other religious groups). When the U.S. National Bioethics Advisory Commission formulated guidance to the President on human cloning in 1997, for example, it sought the testimony of a variety of religious thinkers.

To offer answers, we must consider some difficult theological conundrums. After we identify a few of them, we will sketch an initial response—exhaustive neither in scope nor argument—to specific biotech challenges.

Is God responsible for these technological advances? A vibrant theology of divine sovereignty would have to answer "yes," at least in some sense. If so, then why worry? Because our affirmation of God's sovereignty comes with the equally biblical assertion that human beings have the freedom to make good or bad decisions.

God did indeed make us with the intelligence to develop these technologies, but we are responsible for what we do with that intelligence. We may stumble into areas beyond our appropriate range; this was the primordial sin, after all. But it is also possible that God is at work in some of these biotechnological advances.

Are suffering, finitude, and death revocable by human effort? Human sin introduced suffering and death into a previously unmarred creation. The reversal of sin's effects marked the kingdom-inaugurating ministry of Jesus Christ, but until he returns the creation will continue to "groan" (Rom. 8:18ff)—illness, death, and finitude will remain a reality.

Indeed, both Scripture and history show that utopian visions of the elimination of suffering tend toward disaster, either through tyranny or as the unforeseen consequence of well-intended schemes. One of the best things biblical faith contributes to the biotech discussion is a well-considered understanding of human weakness, finitude, and sin, and the double-edged potential of many human endeavors.

THE DOMINION MANDATE

And yet does God not mandate human efforts to mitigate the effects of sin? Along with Christ's kingdom mandate to heal and restore, in creation God called humanity to exercise dominion over (Gen. 1:28) and preserve/proTECT (Gen. 2:15) the Earth. After the Fall, the dominion/protection (1837-1920) once famously said. Likewise, a kingdom approach emphasizes Jesus' mission as reclaiming a rebellious and suffering world for its rightful King.

More pessimistic theologies allow for much less actual transformation before Christ returns. Our bioethical dilemmas underscore both the possibilities and the limits of transformation in this world, and perhaps keeping both in tension is the best way forward.

Are genetic anomalies, and the diseases they cause, God's will? Some argue that interventions such as gene therapies constitute an attempt to thwart God's will. Yet, only if we think of cancer, crib death, car accidents, tornadoes, and nearsightedness as God's will in some nonbiblical, fatalistic sense, ought we also understand genetic anomalies such as cystic fibrosis or spina bifida this way. We should instead see these inherited diseases as legacies of the Fall and hence worthy subjects of our best efforts to safely mitigate them.

What is normatively human? Has God established a fixed human nature (the imago dei) that we are not permitted to alter or transcend? While humanity is made in the image of God, strikingly diverse Christian interpretations of the imago dei abound. It may be that Christians can ascribe no single meaning to it, but at minimum the imago dei means that humans were designed to resemble God in ways that other creatures do not—this includes our intelligence, moral agency, and our ability to form interdependent relationships in community.

Human life merits a special imputed respect, even sacred value, on the basis of this design as well as God's unique declaration of our status. Also, by sharing this status, all humans partake of a fundamental equality. But given that much about us is far from Godlike, in the biotech era we must find the balance between reaching our potential and respecting our limits—both of which are fundamental to human life.

To what extent does God work through the agency of government to restrain sin and prevent disaster? Reflection on the biotech challenge helps to settle the question of