

Stem Cell Research – Understanding the Basics

Rev. Dr. James I. Lamb

Executive Director of National Lutherans For Life

California voted to spend 3 billion dollars on it. Movie stars promote it. Major news publications have covered it extensively. We are talking about stem cell research. What stand should a Christian take on this issue? We can answer that question relatively easily when we understand some basics about stem cell research.

Understanding when Life Begins

The question of when life begins is a scientific question. The scientists most qualified to answer are embryologists. Embryologists concur that life begins when the genetic material of egg and sperm join at conception. Medical schools teach this in their embryology textbooks.

Scripture affirms this scientific truth. “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5 NIV). Since we are sinful from the moment of conception, we must be human beings from the moment of conception. This is precisely why Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” He had to pass through all stages of human development to redeem us from our sinful human nature.

Understanding the Source of Embryonic Stem Cells

What we hear so much about is *embryonic* stem cell research (ESCR). Embryonic stem cells are derived from a human embryo at about 5 days after conception. At this stage, the human being is a hollow ball with a thin outside layer only a single cell thick. Once the embryo reaches the uterus, this layer forms the placenta. Inside this hollow ball is a cluster of cells. These cells will soon begin to differentiate into the various tissues—nerve, muscle, skin, etc.—that make up the human body. Each of these cells, then, has the potential to become any tissue in the body. These are the “stem cells” that researchers want to use in an effort to treat disease. However, a five-day old human being must be destroyed in order to obtain these stem cells.

Thus the Christian must oppose ESCR because it violates God’s Fifth Commandment against the taking of innocent human life. The potential of future cures for human beings cannot justify the destruction of human beings. ESCR also violates the “helping and befriending” aspect of the Fifth Commandment. Since life begins at conception, that new person is our neighbor from that moment. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Understanding other Sources of Stem Cells

Christians do not have to oppose all forms of stem cell research, however. There is no need to destroy an embryo to obtain stem cells. Stem cells called “adult” stem cells are found in a variety of tissues in our bodies. Umbilical cord blood is another rich source of stem cells.

Proponents of embryonic stem cell research have downplayed adult stem cells because they do not normally have the capability of becoming other cell types as do embryonic stem cells. However, recent studies are showing that they do. Bone marrow adult stem cells, for example, have shown the ability to become virtually every other cell type. A variety of diseases in human beings are already being treated with adult stem cells. There are no diseases being treated with embryonic stem cells. Christians can support adult stem cell research.

Understanding the Theology of the Cross

No one would deny the heartache and struggle of having an incurable, chronic disease. It is devastating for the individual and the family. It is understandable that the strong desire for a cure may lead to placing trust and hope in things like ESCR. But in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther states that trusting in the one true God means expecting “nothing but good from Him *especially* in distress and want” (emphasis added). God has shown His love for us on the cross, not in the absence of disease. The cross also assures us that God can and does work through suffering to produce great good. The greatest suffering of all time—Christ suffering for the sins of the world—produced the greatest good of all time—the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternal life to all who believe.

Conclusion

The advances in biotechnology can be seen as gifts that God has given to enhance and extend our lives. As with all gifts, however, we can use them in ways God did not intend. God does not intend that we destroy tiny human beings in order to help human beings. God is opening doors for research using stem cells from sources other than human embryos. These we may and should pursue for the betterment of God’s wonderful gift of life.

For more information:

Lutherans For Life has brochures on Stem Cell Research, Cloning, and related issues. 888-364-5433.