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Human Cloning

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

(Genesis 1:26-28)

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7)

Several years ago we could have argued the question of human cloning from both a technological feasibility and moral framework. Today, technologically, human cloning is already here. Research scientists in South Korea have officially cloned thirty human embryos. It is now only a matter of years before the first cloned human beings are born.

This article will produce more questions than answers. Whether we like to consider it or not the church will have to deal with the moral questions of biotechnology and human cloning in particular.

What is cloning?

“Reproductive cloning is a technology used to generate an animal that has the same nuclear DNA as another currently or previously existing animal. In a process called "somatic cell nuclear transfer" (SCNT), scientists transfer genetic material from the nucleus of a donor adult cell to an egg whose nucleus, and thus its genetic material, has been removed. The reconstructed egg containing the DNA from a donor cell must be treated with chemicals or electric current in order to stimulate cell division. Once the cloned embryo reaches a suitable stage, it is transferred to the uterus of a female host where it continues to develop until birth.”¹

What is human cloning?

“Human cloning is the asexual production of a new human organism that is, at all stages of development, genetically virtually identical to a currently existing or previously existing human being. It would be accomplished by introducing the nuclear material of a human somatic cell (donor) into an oocyte (egg) whose own nucleus has been removed or inactivated, yielding a product that has a human genetic constitution virtually identical to the donor of the somatic cell.”²

To simply be able to do something does not carry a moral imperative to do it. The Genesis command to “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion...” was given within some specific theological, social, and physical boundaries. Focusing only on the ability to

¹ Human Genome Project Information, Cloning Fact Sheet,
http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/elsi/cloning.shtml

² Presidents Council on Bioethics, Human Cloning and Human Dignity, Executive Summary, pg. xxiv

technologically manipulate the created order misses the broader implications of delegated authority. Authority that acts in a way to sustain and develop the moral integrity of that created order.

Technology is the god of the modern age. I want to be clear that I am not a total Luddite (a person completely opposed to all technology). However, I am becoming more skeptical of recent technological advances. It is the god-like attributes that we assign to technology, and the technological professions, that gives me cause for concern. Human cloning is the ultimate “god-tech” experience.

Most technological advances are launched to solve problems present with the given state of human affairs. I enjoy air conditioning and it would be difficult for me to get used to living without it. However, the hydrofluorocarbons that were emitted in the production of refrigeration units are producing some seriously negative effects on the environment. Here is an example of technology designed to improve human existence generating its own set of interrelated problems.

In the debate over human cloning those who favor cloning, but respect the ethical questions, present it as an advance to help alleviate human suffering. This is a very noble idea and one that was shared by Jesus Himself. “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.” (Matthew 4:23)

It is certainly a Christ-like attribute to want to alleviate suffering and death. The question revolves around the methods and moral costs of such relief. Human cloning is tied to one of the most controversial techniques of biomedical research, stem cells. Basically stem cells are taken from human embryos and can be genetically manipulated to produce various cell structures used in the human body. There is a possibility that these stem cells could be used to heal neurological damage and reverse the effects of paralysis. This is a great opportunity until you count the cost. Removal of stem cells from a human embryo results in death to that embryo.

The debate over human cloning centers around two main technologies:

1. Cloning-to-produce-children: Production of a cloned human embryo, formed for the (proximate) purpose of initiating a pregnancy.
2. Cloning-for-biomedical-research: Production of a cloned human embryo, formed for the (proximate) purpose of using it in research or extracting its stem cells.³

In their recommendations to the President, the Council on Bioethics stated that the council members were, “in full agreement that cloning-to-produce-children is not only unsafe but also morally unacceptable, and ought not to be attempted.”⁴ Please note that seven of the individuals on this council have no moral reservations whatsoever about cloning-for-biomedical-research. Yet even they see the issues involved in trying to bring human clones to full term pregnancy as too dehumanizing and socially destructive.

³ Presidents Council on Bioethics, Human Cloning and Human Dignity, Executive Summary, pg. xxiv

⁴ Presidents Council on Bioethics, Human Cloning and Human Dignity, Executive Summary, pg. xxix

Here are some basic reasons why not to clone-for-biomedical-research:

- Issues that involve the morality of human research.
- The continued moral harm to society that could result.
- Human suffering is a valid but not a sufficient reason to clone.

In the short story, “The Birth-mark”, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a young scientist becomes obsessed with the removal of a small birthmark from his wife’s face. The attempt to remove the mark leads to the death of his wife. The final line in the story is this:

“The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present.”⁵

We must look beyond the momentary circumstance of human suffering, in all of its horrible consequences, to the Eternal now. The very real hope and reality of this promise: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

Have no doubts about it bioethics, especially human cloning, will be the moral challenge to the church in the twenty-first century. We cannot afford to let the economic, political, and ethical tyranny of human cloning gain the upper ground. We cannot as Christians, individuals, or nations allow human cloning to become a day-to-day reality.

What can we do?

First of all we should pray. Human cloning will challenge every concept you may have of what it means to be human. We can pray that God will help us to be bold in challenging this dehumanizing technology of death. Pray that we will be merciful to the humans that are clones and be prepared to help them work out the spiritual, psychological, and physiological dilemmas they may find themselves in.

We need to educate ourselves on the issues of biotechnology, bioengineering, nanotechnology, and cloning. We can become involved politically, economically, legally, and most of all spiritually in the fight against human cloning. We must be willing to choose the sanctity of human life above any social or economic benefit we may receive.

Finally we must teach our children that they are created in the image of God. Teach them to respect those of us who are physically or mentally challenged. Teach them that all life is precious and from conception to death it belongs to God.

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⁵ Being Human, Readings from the President’s Council on Bioethics, Chapter 1: The Search for Perfection, Sample Reading, “The Birth-mark”, Nathaniel Hawthorne