

What Is a Stem Cell?

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In recent months the news media has quietly announced the progress of stem cell research. Although there is great controversy about stem cell research the media hardly ever says why. This fall the President's National Advisory Board and the National Institutes of Health recommended that Congress lift the ban against fetal tissue research as it affects stem cell research.

The controversy is over the source of stem cells. Stem cells are found in embryos left over in fertility clinics and in aborted fetuses. Obtaining stem cells requires a dead embryo or fetus. In a recent (Dec. 1999 http://www.nih.gov/news/stem_cell/primer.htm) report by the NIH the issue is explained in an intentionally deceptive way. The NIH explains accurately that the blastocyst formed early in pregnancy consists of two kinds of cells. The outer layer of cells develop into placenta and supportive material for the fetus. The inner cells develop into the fetus itself. The NIH argues that when the outer cells are removed, the inner cells are no longer able to develop into a viable fetus, and it is therefore not a violation of the ban against fetal research to remove its stem cells, rendering the fetus dead. But the only reason the fetus is no longer viable is that you have separated it from the outer cells which make it viable. This is like saying that "guns don't kill people; people kill people," when everyone knows that it takes people to pull the trigger of a gun.

The proponents of stem cell research have great hopes of creating organs for transplantation and of curing some diseases. If, morally, you believe that "the end justifies the means" then there is no ethical issue for you here. Or, if you agree with the NIH when it says that the benefits of stem cell research outweigh moral considerations, then you will find the NIH argument persuasive. But if there is something inherently wrong in using or killing embryos for commercial use by research firms, then you may find yourself deeply concerned. If using aborted fetuses used for research becomes a justification for abortion, then morality is nothing more than whatever we want it to be for our own expediency.

Why is the NIH deceptive in its reporting? Because it wants to do to human embryos what we have only done thus far to lab rats. Embryos created in a lab will be used and destroyed, never given opportunity to become what God intended them to become. The NIH would also like to make use of stem cells from aborted fetuses, giving rise to such questions as "Will this give encouragement to the profiteers of the abortion industry to press for the increase in abortions because the number of abortions are currently on the decline?"

If I read between the NIH lines, it seems that stem cells can also be obtained by means of cloning, but even cloning human body parts seems to raise moral questions concerning the integrity of the human body. Are we to consider the human body something divorced from what it means to be a human being? Is the human body merely the sum total of its parts or is body and soul a unity that will participate someday in the resurrection? Surely, we are made in the image of God, embodied spiritual beings, created in sacred trust, called to live to the glory of God, and not to the glory of man whose method the NIH seems to suggest is trampling on the helpless unborn "for the betterment of mankind."