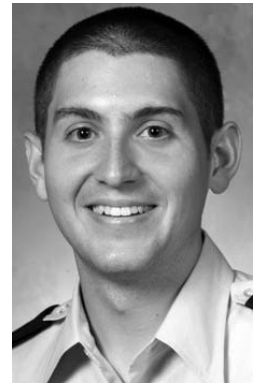




## Paradox Confronted: Exploring the Nature of Christ's Teaching in the Debate on Embryonic Stem Cell Research

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**F**ew societal topics are as monumental, as decisive, as much debated—or as little understood—as embryonic stem cell research (ESCR). It has pitted science against faith, states against nation, and patient against provider. This intersection between science and faith has been broached from several angles. In this study, we aim to penetrate Christ's parables and analyze his allegories to the good of ethical research and the glory of God. By delving into the *ipsissima verba* (the very words themselves) of God in flesh, Jesus Christ, we explore the paradoxical, perplexing wisdom of God Incarnate. Our goal is to seek some biblical light on the subject for pensive Christians who are passionate about the future of science and medicine.

Stem cells are not as arcane or mysterious as some Christians would like to think. They are not the harbingers of a brave new world or the fabrications of fiction. They are, on the contrary, simply undifferentiated cells by which the body regenerates itself. Human beings are teeming with them—they are tucked away in the retina and bone marrow and the recesses of most organ systems. These cells, coupled with those found in the neonatal byproducts (placenta and umbilical cord), comprise the collection of somatic stem cells. As mostly multipotent and progenitor stem cells, they can develop into a limited number of functional somatic cells. While reflecting a partial malleability, these *adult* stem cells have been successfully manipulated and incorporated into scores of clinical procedures.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers, however, covet the touted pluripotency of *embryonic* stem cells. They,

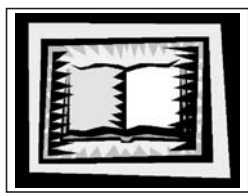
according to ESCR proponents, proffer the context and continuity of life—the auspicious faculty to regenerate moribund tissues *in vivo* just as they would have naturally generated them *in utero*.<sup>2</sup> This is, after all, what embryonic stem cells do. For every human being on the planet today—every complex human body with its 600 muscles and 60,000 miles of blood vessels—was once a tiny ball of cells. This ball, known as the blastocyst, smaller than a comma and mostly hollow, careened down the fallopian tube toward the uterus. Comprising the inner mass, these stem cells were brimming with the molecular knowledge required to fashion kidneys and eyeballs and completely novel fingerprints. All these they produced, with incredible precision, in a matter of weeks. Their encrypted instruction and endowed potency were unleashed in differentiation, amplified in gestation, and showcased, finally, in birth.

### The Paradox

Despite their seemingly unlimited medicinal potential, embryonic stem cells remain contested in the arenas of science, politics, and religion. Christians are often conflicted. On the one hand, they desire to bring disease under their dominion, using their God-given intellects to sustain life. On the other hand, they seek to protect nascent human life by analyzing the means that lead even to the

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## Communication

### *Paradox Confronted: Exploring the Nature of Christ's Teaching in the Debate on Embryonic Stem Cell Research*

*We approach the gospel accounts with three questions in mind: (1) Is there something paradoxical in the nature of Christ's teachings from which we might glean some wisdom, insight, or guidance concerning the ESCR controversy? (2) How can we or should we incorporate a call to community in our conversation on embryonic stem cell usage? and (3) What are the ESCR implications for Christians today?*

noblest of ends. If quality of life is always contrasted with its quantity, then Christians struggle to find the right shade of grey. Though they confess the classical creed that the Scriptures, in their entirety, are the Word of God, they often find no revelation therein—no mention of stem cells or how they should entertain this dilemma. Even the ancient admonition to sanctify life can be bargained from either side of the debate.

In this communication, we take one step backwards. Instead of searching for answers, we search for questions. We revel in the revolutionary perspectives of Christ's life and ministry, concentrating not merely on *what* he said, but *how* he said it. Knowing that Jesus often taught through parable and paradox, turning conceptions into misconceptions and answering questions with questions, we delve into the complex sayings of our Savior. We approach the gospel accounts with three questions in mind: (1) Is there something paradoxical in the nature of Christ's teachings from which we might glean some wisdom, insight, or guidance concerning the ESCR controversy? (2) How can we or should we incorporate a call to community in our conversation on embryonic stem cell usage? and (3) What are the ESCR implications for Christians today?

### **Christ's Words Considered Turning Our Misconceptions Upside-Down (Matt. 18:1-5; Luke 9:46-48)<sup>3</sup>**

Here we encounter a discomfiting reminder that our penchant to cherish the wealthy, the beautiful, the intelligent, the powerful, the suave—our disposition to call these attributes great—is a carnal tendency that needs to be taken captive by the Word of Truth. Fittingly, with the example of a child, Christ says that “he who is least among you all will be great.” Whether consciously or not, we tend to think of embryos as lesser human beings (if human at all)—less important than fetuses, or newborns, or certainly our favorite celebrities. But embryos literally represent the very least of us and therefore reflect the same *imago Dei*. They are often tossed about in bioethical debate as little more than poker chips. Maybe it is time for us to take more seriously

the Savior's admonition to value the least, to cherish the lowly, and to defend the most vulnerable. Will the Son of Man say to us: “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt. 25:40)?

### **Tradition Does Not Make Truth (Matt. 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5)**

When condemned by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath, the Lord of the Sabbath points out that David ate the consecrated showbread when he was hungry, even though it was considered by tradition unlawful. Indeed, illegality and sinfulness do not always intersect. David and Jesus did the proper and righteous thing. Likewise, maybe contemporary Christians ought to thoughtfully and prayerfully consider what is most useful in the present. Could employing embryonic stem cells to treat terminal conditions parallel eating consecrated bread to ward off starvation? Were the answer *yes*, the practice must not slip into wanton utilitarianism. Rather, it should maintain the friction of wise pragmatism, which would actively preclude acceleration toward therapeutic cloning (or euphemistically, “nuclear transplantation to produce human pluripotent stem cell lines”). Like the showbread of old, embryos too are consecrated (cf. Ps. 139), but are their stem cells as vital as bread? Should stem cells of consecrated embryos trump sacred tradition in favor of life?

### **God Venerates Life (Luke 12:4-7, 22-34)**

Jesus reveals to the multitude that not one sparrow is forgotten by God—that he loves life so much that the “very hairs of your head are numbered” (v 7). Christ's analogy would probably be different in today's high-tech culture. He might say that our very cells are numbered, or our genes known. If God loves a bird, how much more a baby, even at its earliest stages? With this in mind, to what extent are we prepared to pilfer and sacrifice nascent life for the sake of medicine and its sometimes questionable experimentation? “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them,” said Christ (Luke 9:56). Assuredly, he could save the one without destroying the other. We cannot. Consequently we ask: does one facilitate the other?

### *All in God's Time (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)*

At the beginning of his salvific ministry, Jesus, the Holy One, is approached by Satan, the evil one. In exchange for a simple bow, the deceiver proffers all the kingdoms of this world and their glory. Essentially, Satan offers Jesus instant gratification and pleasure, before that ordained time when he would sit at God's right hand as the King of kings. Likewise, perhaps embryonic stem cell vitality seductively served up by science is simply not the *sine qua non* for our healthcare and enjoyment right now. Regardless of their potency—be it *multi*, *pluri*, or *toti*—stem cells will never provide an “earthly” eternal life. Rather, having been regenerated spiritually from above, we must patiently await physical regeneration here below and the renewed vitality of our new bodies, just as Christ delayed his kingly reign above for the sake of righteousness below. With the Word of God written, Jesus resisted a very enticing temptation. Should not we do the same?

### *Knowledge is a Talent (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27)*

In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus shares the story of a master with three servants. Before departing on a long journey, he entrusts his talents (*viz.*, his money) to his servants. Two invest their talents, and the third hides his. Upon the master's return, he blesses the investors and curses the hoarder. The Master of the universe has endowed us with all sorts of talents and gifts, not the least of which is scientific acumen and competence. If we become content and complacent with the progress we have made (e.g., in disease prevention, outer and inner space exploration, computer capabilities, etc.), we essentially disobey the command to invest our talents. But, as Gilbert Meilaender reminds us, “However greatly we value the betterment of life made possible by medical research, we have no overriding obligation to seek such betterment.”<sup>4</sup> The question remains: does stagnancy in the field of embryonic stem cell research parallel the indolence of the unprofitable servant? Might we too be judged as unprofitable?

### *The Paradox of Life both Present and Future (Matt. 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33)*

“Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it,” dictates Christ (Luke 17:33). He is reminding us to forget ourselves—to forget our lives, to forget our circumstances, to forget those things our flesh encourages us to cherish. These things are utterly worthless in the long run. It is meaningless to elevate this life above the next. Yet Jesus valued temporal life. He restored sight, eradicated leprosy, and even resurrected the dead (Matt. 11:4; Luke 7:22). In medicine, too, we apply the arsenal of technology and chemistry to keep and sustain life. Christ's statement must not be accepted superficially,

nor should it be interpreted literally. It belies something within us—some unredeemed attitude to relish our own lives—and Christ exposes it painfully through a cutting paradox. It reinforces his statement that one's life “does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Whereas these possessions will perish, those of the next life will prevail. By tapping into the reservoirs of embryonic stem cells, then, are we vainly trying to save our lives, storing up treasures on earth at the expense of treasures in heaven? Or are we honoring Christ by imitating his paradigm of restoring physical health and preserving temporal life?

### *Is the Slippery Slope Argument Biblical? (Luke 16:1-15)*

The “slippery slope” is one of today's most hackneyed arguments in bioethics. Its ubiquity has undermined its effectiveness and credibility in academic circles. Surely, deriving stem cell lines from cryogenically frozen embryos would not necessitate a “slip” into embryo harvesting. If the international milieu is any indication, however, we must be wary of the temptation. As we have seen in Hwang Woo-Suk's work, the field of regenerative medicine not only offers hope to millions of infirmed, but seductive benefits to researchers.<sup>5</sup> Christ warns his disciples to be different. “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (v 8), and if the former are “unjust in what is least, [they will be] unjust also in much” (v 10). If we fail to ascribe dignity to human life in the least of our research, we will do the same in the most significant. The Pharisees were infuriated by the Parable of the Unjust Steward, and Jesus was swift to censure them: “God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (v 15). We ask: Where are our hearts? Do we risk being judged accordingly?

### *Mustard Seeds—the Stem Cells of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19)*

Three gospel writers record Christ's analogy of the mustard seed as representing the infancy of God's kingdom. In biblical times, the mustard seed was a prototypical example of something small that became large, of something seemingly trivial that became significant—of something that developed form and function because it was allowed to reach its God-given potential. Embryonic stem cells are eerily similar to mustard seeds. They are small. They appear trivial on their own. But they have such vast potential. They can develop intricate form and elaborate functions in the womb and in the world. As all great mustard trees were once seeds, so too all great men and women were once embryos. That we would now consider disassembling and parting them out for sale—to grind the seeds into mustard on the specious basis that they are otherwise useless—is really unthinkable. Has





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God not said that what he has joined together, let not man put asunder (Matt. 19:6)? Would this not apply to the progeny as well?

## Conclusion

In light of feigned research<sup>6</sup> and statehood opposition to federal funding limits,<sup>7</sup> Christians need to ready themselves with an intelligent, pragmatic, yet biblically-founded opinion on the issue. Though all cloning procedures are currently illegal in our nation, Christians cannot blithely hide behind legislation. We continue to learn that appeals to emotion and moral posture are inadequate when the controversial topic bears monumental implications on law, medicine, economy, and religion. Rather than surrender to political maneuvering, we must stand fast upon our biblical foundation.

The academic leaders have done a superb job lobbying for the preponderant place of regenerative medicine in our healthcare system. Unfortunately, the initial disgust of the American public—that “wisdom of repugnance”<sup>8</sup>—is diminishing. It is softening under the pressure of celebrity endorsement, international intrigue, and the hubris to beat our worldwide competitors to the prize. But more than anything, it is crumbling under the American ideal to cherish individuality over and above community.

Just a month prior to 9/11, President Bush made his first nationally televised address, announcing his decision to limit federally funded ESCR to existing lines.<sup>9</sup> This stance was decried throughout the nation. California universities, in particular, were outraged. Three years later—on the same day that the President was reelected—these institutions celebrated a monumental victory. The citizens of California passed Proposition 71, allocating some \$3 billion to fund ESCR at the state's premier research institutions. It did not legalize therapeutic cloning, but it opened up the cryogenic freezers for experimentation on unwanted embryos, mostly “leftovers” from *in vitro* fertilization (IVF).<sup>10</sup>

Some feared that Proposition 71 would also open Pandora's Box. Most researchers have been reticent about their intentions and the prospects for therapeutic cloning within our borders. Nevertheless, the “slippery

slope” argument is often dismissed as irrational and uninformed. Over a year has passed since the California law changed, and reputable institutions have yet to publicize attempts to derive new lines via nuclear transplantation.

This issue, however, is certainly not stagnant. The ethical quandary remains, and before it causes another crescendo, we, as Christians, should continue to explore the issue, exegete the Scriptures, and, like our Savior, extend God's healing hand of mercy to all peoples. Jesus' very words changed lives, fulfilled prophecies, and shook the foundations of the world. Like his disciples, we wrestle with his parables and their paradoxes. We weigh our instincts and our desires against Christ's preface in Matthew 5: “You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ...” He redefined the Mosaic Law concerning murder and adultery. He stripped the exterior to reveal the thoughts and attitudes that motivate our actions. The noblest intentions of medicine must likewise be examined in the light of Scripture. As technology evolves and improves, and we behold the vast and pending potential of embryonic stem cells, we must be the guardians of life—in terms of quality *and* quantity. By God's grace we must remain vigilant, lest Christ say of us what he said of the Roman soldiers: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). ✱

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Rick Weiss, “The Power to Divide,” *National Geographic* 208, no. 1 (July 2005): 3–27.

<sup>2</sup>Christine Soares, “Repair Workers Within,” *Scientific American Online* (June 27, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>All Scripture quoted from the New King James Version.

<sup>4</sup>Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 119.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Lemonick, “The Rise and Fall of the Cloning King,” *Time* 167, no. 2 (January 9, 2006): 40–3.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Weiss, “The Power to Divide.”

<sup>8</sup>Leon Kass, “The Wisdom of Repugnance,” *The New Republic* 216, no. 22 (June 2, 1997): 17–26.

<sup>9</sup>“The Stem Cell Compromise ...,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2001.

<sup>10</sup>Weiss, “The Power to Divide.”