



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Cultural Geography of Cloning
(*Cloning*, pp. 11-20)

Suggested Article:

📖 Beyond Minimalist Bioethics
(*Cloning*, pp. 81-85)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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The Cultural Geography of Cloning

As we gain knowledge of the human genome and the power to clone, do we have the wisdom to use this knowledge and power for human flourishing? Or will we simply take the course of least resistance, the course determined by the cultural geography, the social enthusiasms, of our time?

Prayer

O God, you have given us the breath to sing your praise,
you hold the power of life in your hand.

**Keep us mindful of our creation in your image,
the privilege we share as co-creators with you,
and our responsibility as bearers of hope in an ever-
changing world.**

Awaken us to your presence, O God, that we might hear your
voice amid our shared reflections and the words we speak.

**Give us wisdom and discernment to be faithful followers of
Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Genesis 11:1-9

Midrash on this Scripture Reading

“When a person fell, the work went on,
but when a brick fell, all wept.”

Reflection

In the puzzling story of Babel, what is so wrong about building a city with its tower reaching to the heavens? To understand the builders’ motives and evaluate their ambitious project, the context is essential. The first stories in Genesis have a recurring theme: though God blesses humans with the divine presence and gives them every good thing, they fail to trust God and enjoy the good God provides. The tower builders epitomize this pattern of rejecting the creator.

Their ancestor, Joktan, had divided humankind by moving to the east, away from his brother Peleg (see Genesis 10:25-30 and 11:16). This is an ominous beginning—for Adam and Eve (3:24) and Cain (4:16) had moved eastward after being cast from the presence of God, and later Lot, after clashing with his uncle Abram, would journey eastward toward Sodom (13:11). “Let us make a name for ourselves,” brag these people who build their tower “east of Eden.” How different are they from Peleg’s descendants, especially the couple that gladly and humbly receives new names—Abraham and Sarah—as a gift from God (17:5, 15)!

It is not the people’s brick-making technology (11:3) about which Scripture warns, but how they used this knowledge and power to reject God. How will we use the technology of the Human Genome Project? Allen Verhey critiques how these “cultural maps” orient us toward our new knowledge and power:

- ▶ *genetic reductionism* portrays the human genome as a “code of codes” that determines a person’s life. This “map” is behind the misguided promises of ‘copying’ a person, or ‘preserving’ a life through its clone. It fails to recognize, however, that



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“not even the body may be reduced to genes,” for “persons and bodies have histories, not just genetic fates.”

- ▶ *the Baconian project* celebrates genetic knowledge as “practical” – the only form of knowing that is valuable, because it gives us power. This map denies any other sources of wisdom than technology-producing science, and it “sets humanity not only over nature but against it,” Verhey says. “The fault that runs through our world and through our lives must finally be located in nature. Nature may be, and must be mastered. Technology becomes the faithful savior.”
- ▶ *the project of liberal society* is to maximize personal freedom. As attractive as this map appears, it is not a complete moral view because it tells us nothing about what goods to seek or what personal virtues to develop. If used alone, this map distorts the moral life. “It reduces covenantal relationships (like the relationships of husband and wife, or parent and child) to matters of contract,” notes Verhey, and may lead to public policy that ironically “leaves the weak still more vulnerable.”
Andrew Lustig, in “Beyond Minimalist Bioethics,” shows how this minimalist account of the moral life, which values freedom but ignores deeper questions of meaning, purpose, and human identity, might be enriched by a Christian view.
- ▶ *the project of (re)producing perfect children*, which flows from our trust in technology and celebration of personal options, tempts us to view our children as human achievements rather than gifts from God. Verhey warns this map “may finally reduce our options to a ‘perfect child’ or a dead child.”
- ▶ *the project of capitalism* transforms scientific knowledge into a marketable commodity. “The beneficiaries of genetic knowledge and power, both economically and medically, very likely will live in the developed nations and be among the relatively well off within those populations,” Verhey predicts. “It is hardly accidental that the most common worry is that companies that hire people or that provide health insurance will use this knowledge and power to serve their own financial interests rather than the interests of the sick poor.”

Study Questions

1. According to the rabbinical midrash quoted above, what moral issue was at stake in building the tower of Babel? How is it depicted in the biblical story? Is it still at stake in developing technologies of human cloning?
2. Give specific examples of how each cultural map discussed by Verhey could mislead us to morally misuse genetic knowledge and power.
3. How does each cultural map either support or discourage the appeal to religious perspectives for guidance in using genetic knowledge and power?
4. Discuss Verhey’s view that sometimes maximizing freedom may harm the weak and disabled members of society, increase our bondage, or limit our options (*Cloning*, pp. 15-16). Do you agree?

Departing Hymn: “God Who Searches, God Who Knows”

The Cultural Geography of Cloning

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Midrash Reading	Midrash Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)

Teaching Goals

1. To sketch some cultural maps, or powerful social assumptions, which are influencing decisions about how to use genetic knowledge and power.
2. To critique each cultural map as a source of wisdom about how to use biomedical technologies generally and human cloning specifically.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Cloning (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“Cc is a healthy and beautiful kitten by all measures --sleek, curious and playful, and sporting a striped gray coat over white. So how did Cc become a disappointing speed bump on the fast-lane rush toward a brave new world? The story is in her name, ‘Cc,’ which was speculatively assigned by bio-technicians filled with pecuniary hopes, not lovingly bestowed by an adoring caregiver. Cc is a clone, built on speculation, not begotten.

“Her ‘parent,’ a corporation called Genetic Savings & Clone (this is no joke), hopes to make a lot of money from producing carbon copies of our favorite pets. Unfortunately, Cc is quite unlike her original, Rainbow, who is a rather chunky, temperamental, and reserved calico. Cc is adorable, but not a copy. Nothing we value, it seems, from her color to her personality, is ‘just’ in her (or Rainbow’s) genes. Genetic Savings & Clone promises it will be going back to the drawing board, rather than down to Fuzzy Friends, for a replacement cat....

“Cc’s story is a sobering contemporary parable, rather than a minor curiosity, because it reveals a tragic irony. In our extreme trust of biotechnology, old taboos become prescriptions. We cross the line we once would not have dared to cross, then we pencil in another line. Cloning once seemed abominable, but we made an exception to improve farm animals. Today we’re copying desirable pets. Tomorrow will we try to improve our children, or our neighbors’ children? We never intend to cross the next line. After crossing the previous line, however, *we are changed*” [adapted from Robert B. Kruschwitz and James A. Marcum, “Facing the Challenges for Bioethics,” *Baylor News* 13:3 (March 2003), 5].

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Genesis 11:1-9 from a modern translation.

Midrash on this Scripture Reading

Ask the group to read the midrash aloud together. A midrash is a brief rabbinical guide to the interpretation of a biblical passage. This one comes from a collection of midrashim on the book of Genesis which dates from the sixth-century A.D.

Reflection

To follow Paul's counsel to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2), we must expose how "this world"—the myriad ways of living counter to God—influences our decision-making. We can't resist what we don't even notice.

Allen Verhey exposes and criticizes five of the "social enthusiasms" that are shaping how we develop and use the technology of human cloning. These social enthusiasms, or "cultural maps," are so widely accepted and socially powerful that he calls them our "cultural geography"—they are part of the intellectual landscape that we inhabit and rarely question.

The first three maps are reductive, taking something that is true in part and stretching it into an entire account of the matter: (1) we are partly, but *not totally* shaped by our genes; (2) practical knowledge is a valuable, but *not the only valuable form* of knowledge; (3) freedom is an important, but *not the sole or highest* moral value. The fourth map, (re)producing perfect children, flows from the first three maps as a specific instance related to cloning. With the final map, the project of capitalism, Verhey introduces the issues of social justice and the common good that Lisa Sowle Cahill explores in "Cloning Promises, Profits, and Privilege" (*Cloning*, pp. 29-36).

Study Questions

1. Success in the project was more important than the common good or the lives of individuals. This issue is implicit in how the tower builders' describe their goal: "let us make a name for ourselves." Another aspect of their goal, to avoid being scattered across the whole earth, may seem like a concern for the common good. Yet in this story "the whole earth" refers to the place where humans have dwelled in unity of language and from which the tower builders have fled (11:1), so their goal may be to thwart God's design.

Encourage members to discuss whether the cultural maps of the Baconian project, liberal society, or capitalism might lead someone to value the success of the project of human cloning over the common good or the lives of individuals.

2. Most scenarios, of course, result from a convergence of cultural maps—e.g., the attempt to clone pets (like Cc) is based on genetic reductionism, the Baconian project, and capitalism. Even so, members might select one cultural map and "dream" from its perspective about the use of genetic knowledge and power. Many of these dreams will never be realized since they would have to overcome serious technical obstacles or societal resistance, but it is instructive to consider where these maps would lead us if they met no resistance.
3. *The Baconian project*, which says we should guide our lives by "practical" knowledge alone, explicitly devalues religious wisdom. *Genetic reductionism* ignores how our character and personality are shaped through interactions with other people and God. *The project of liberal society* marginalizes and privatizes appeals to religious wisdom—e.g., in public debates, we must appeal to a minimalist ethic of freedom, rather than a rich Christian conception of human flourishing and the common good. *The project of (re)producing perfect children* departs from religious understandings of the family and children, while *the project of capitalism* values efficiency over religious accounts of the common good. Encourage members to discuss whether Christians can use these cultural maps in a limited way that is consistent with their deeper understanding of God's purposes in the world.
4. When we focus on maximizing personal freedom, we will ignore other moral concerns. The freedom to (re)produce perfect children, for instance, puts disabled persons in a negative light and may undermine our commitment to their full inclusion in society. Parents may feel pressure to have a genetically perfect child. And a cloned child will have a history against which the child will be measured. These outcomes might not occur, but again it is helpful to consider where this map will lead us if it meets no resistance.

Departing Hymn

"God Who Searches, God Who Knows" is on pp. 50-51 of *Cloning*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.