



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 A Theologian's Brief  
(Cloning, pp. 37-48)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Are We Asking the Right Questions?  
(Cloning, pp. 86-91)

### 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 Human Embryo in Christian Tradition

"The Christian churches teach not that the early embryo is certainly a person, but that the embryo should always be treated *as if* it were a person," says *A Theologian's Brief*. How have Christians interpreted Scripture over the centuries to clarify the moral status of the human embryo?

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 139:1-17

Responsive Reading: Psalm 139:23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
**test me and know my thoughts.**  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
**and lead me in the way everlasting.**

### Reflection

Should society restrict, or even prohibit, human embryonic stem cell research? Scientists claim these stem cells may help us understand and treat degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, heart disease, and cystic fibrosis. Yet the research is morally controversial because the stem cells must be harvested from human embryos, either spare embryos originally created for *in vitro* fertilization or newly cloned embryos made specifically to be dissected. As the research develops and therapies are tested, extensive cloning will be required to produce the needed human embryos for dissection.

What is the moral status of a human embryo, even in the blastula stage (before it is 14 days old) when its stem cells can be harvested? This was the issue before the United Kingdom's House of Lords Select Committee on Stem Cell Research in 2001, when a group of theologians from the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformed traditions put forward in *A Theologian's Brief* "five principal considerations which should inform any Christian evaluation of the moral status of the human embryo":

- ▶ *Though penalties have varied, the Christian tradition has always extended the principle of the sacredness of human life to the very beginning of each human being, and has never allowed the deliberate destruction of the fruit of conception.* The *Didache*, a Christian ethical manual from the first century, teaches: "Do not murder a child by abortion, nor kill it at birth" (2.2). Though early Christians differed on when a fetus becomes a human being, the *Brief* observes, they agreed "abortion was gravely wrong, an offense against God the Creator and either the killing of a child, or something very like the killing of a child."
- ▶ *The origin of each human being is not only a work of nature but is a special work of God in which God is involved from the very beginning.* Describing in the fetal stage, the psalmist declares, "I was...woven in the depths of the earth," in a clear echo of God's forming Adam from the topsoil in Eden (Psalm 139:15; cf. Job 10:8-12; Ecclesiastes 11:5; Ezekiel 37:7-10). "It reveals



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the creative act of God bringing about the reality of *this* person...in an analogous way to the creation of the entire cosmos.”

- ▶ *The Christian doctrine of the soul is not dualistic but requires one to believe that, where there is a living human individual, there is a spiritual soul.* For centuries some Christians—accepting the theory of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) and Galen (A.D. 130-200) that a fetus gains its soul, or is “formed,” only after 40 days—placed lower penalties on aborting an unformed fetus. In the eighteenth century, Christians followed modern medicine in moving away from the unformed/formed distinction. The soul—“what makes each individual human person unique, and gives each one the ability to know and to love”—is “not a splinter of God that is trapped in a body. The soul is the natural life of the body, given by the life-giving God.”
- ▶ *Each human being is called and consecrated by God in the womb from the first moment of his or her existence, before he or she becomes aware of it. Traditionally, Christians have expressed the human need for redemption as extending from the moment of conception.* God calls prophets before they are born (Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5) and cares for each human being in the womb (Psalm 139:13-16; Job 10:8-12). “Such passages do not establish *when* human life begins, but they establish God’s involvement and care from the very *beginning*, a concern that is not diminished by our lack of awareness of him.”

The doctrine of original sin (based on passages like Psalm 51:5 and Romans 5:12-21) says each of us is bent by sin from conception, though we are not personally responsible for it.

- ▶ *Jesus, who reveals to Christians what it is to be human, was a human individual from the moment of his conception, celebrated on the feast of the Annunciation, nine months before the feast of Christmas.* In the feast of the Annunciation on March 25, we celebrate the beginning of the Incarnation when Gabriel visited Mary (Luke 1:26-38). “Jesus was a human being from the moment of conception: therefore, it seems, every human being must come into existence at the moment of conception.”

### Study Questions

1. How do the authors of *A Theologian’s Brief* appeal to Scripture to discern the moral status of the human embryo?
2. Discuss the significance of this statement by St. Basil the Great (A.D. 329-379): “The woman who purposely destroys her un-born child is guilty of murder. With us there is no nice enquiry as to its being formed or unformed” (*Letter 188*).
3. How would you describe the moral status of a human embryo? Does an embryo’s status change during its development, or is it the same from conception to birth?
4. Is there a moral difference between dissecting a spare IVF embryo and cloning an embryo specifically to be dissected?
5. What themes from Psalm 139 does Terry York develop in his hymn, “God Who Searches, God Who Knows” (*Cloning*, pp. 49-51), to help us discern the moral limits to human cloning?

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

# The Human Embryo in Christian Tradition

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 1:26-45
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss moral limits on research cloning
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 5	Questions 2, 3, and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To review how Christians have appealed to Scripture over the centuries to discern the moral status of the human embryo.
2. To clarify the traditional Christian view of the human embryo.
3. To discern the moral limits which should be placed on therapeutic (or research) cloning in light of the moral status of the human embryo.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 Observation

Mark Cherry notes that there has been “a profound shift in moral commitments within the dominant intellectual culture of the United States and Western Europe. Where the destruction of human embryos once was understood as the spiritual equivalent of murder, it has become more-or-less routine. The practices of in vitro fertilization with embryo wastage and abortion are legally protected as a part of a secular understanding of procreative liberty.... [M]uch of medical research and healthcare decision-making has been divorced from traditional Christian commitments” (*Cloning*, p. 91). What are those traditional Christian commitments, and how are they grounded in the church’s reading of Scripture?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to examine members’ hearts and guide their thoughts as they examine the witness of Christians through the centuries.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 139:1-17 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

*A Theologian’s Brief* is endorsed by twenty-four theologians drawn from a range of Christian communities in the U.K. and North America. They include the current Archbishop of Canterbury, the Roman Catholic Primate of Ireland, and leading Orthodox theologians in the U.K. and U.S. The *Brief* was written in response to earlier testimony by the Rt. Rev. Richard Harries, who is the Lord Bishop of Oxford and the chairman of the House of Lords Select Committee on Stem Cell Research. Bishop Harries’ testimony ([www.oxford.anglican.org/page/325/](http://www.oxford.anglican.org/page/325/)) and the Committee’s final report ([www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/ld/ldstem.htm](http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/ld/ldstem.htm)) are available online.

Bishop Harries disagrees with the authors of the *Brief* about the significance of Aristotle's view that a fetus has a human soul, or is "formed," only after it begins moving inside the womb on about the fortieth day. The Committee's final report summarizes this difference of opinion:

For many Christians [like the authors of the *Brief*]..., with the outmoding of the Aristotelian concept of delayed ensoulment, fertilisation is the point at which human life emerges and, as vulnerable human life, it is particularly worthy of protection....

For other Christians, however, the fact that the Christian tradition, for so much of its history, made a distinction between the moral status of the unformed and the formed embryo, and thought of the human person in the full sense coming only with a delayed ensoulment, remains significant: it reflects a valid moral distinction which needs to be affirmed even with the outmoding of the Aristotelian philosophy on which it was once based (*Report from the Select Committee on Stem Cell Research*, appendix 4, February 27, 2002).

Your group may want to extend its discussion of this material. In the first session, you might review Psalm 139 and the *Brief*. In a second session, use study questions 2, 3, and 4 to clarify your view of the moral status of human embryos and to apply this view to stem cell research.

### Study Questions

1. The authors of the *Brief* use Scripture in several ways, listed here from the more to the less direct ways. (1) They *generalize* from Psalm 139:13-16 and passages that mention God's concern for specific individuals in the womb (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Job), that God knows and cares for each human being from the moment of conception. (2) Several biblical descriptions of the womb allude to the story of God personally molding Adam from dust and breathing life into him. The authors *interpret this recurring allusion to creation* to mean that God is active in the conception of each person. (3) The natural reading of the Annunciation, as well as the church's celebration of this event on March 25, suggests the Incarnation began at the moment of Jesus' conception. The authors *give a theological argument* that Jesus' life is a model of each human being's life in this detail as well. (4) Finally, a less direct appeal to Scripture occurs when the authors *draw an implication from the church doctrine of original sin*, which over the centuries was fashioned in part from various scriptural passages. The doctrine says that after the Fall each person takes on, at the moment of conception, a brokenness or disease for which that person is not responsible. This implies a new human being is present from the moment of conception.
2. St. Basil the Great, the leading fourth-century theologian in the east, suggests the moral status of an embryo does not depend on its abilities (in this case, self-movement) or stage of development. (See [www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202188.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202188.htm) for a translation of *Letter 188*.)
3. Certain descriptions of the embryo—e.g., "person," "potential person," "formed," "unformed," etc.—point to some abilities or capacities that it possesses. As these abilities or capacities develop over time, the embryo's status will evolve. Other descriptions—"human being," "unique individual," "offspring of these parents," etc.—refer to the embryo's biological reality as a unique organism. This uniqueness is present from conception to birth. A third set of descriptions—e.g., "human child," "baby," "child of God," "son" or "daughter," etc.—mark the embryo's relationship to a human parent or God, which is unchanging from conception to birth. Encourage members to discuss which sort of designation—of abilities, biological uniqueness, or relationships—should be the basis of the embryo's moral status.
4. Spare IVF embryos probably are abandoned by their parent(s). Should they be treated like abandoned, dying, or deceased infants? The researcher is not responsible for their creation.
5. Members may mention that God's Spirit, the "Breath of Life" who enlivens us at birth, is also present to guide us in discerning the truth. God's Spirit, who searches and knows us, will judge our intentions and actions "as we join with [God] in knitting future generations."

### 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.