Reflecting on Stem Cells
A church discussion guide

Conversation about the potential and use of stem cells sparks a wide range of reactions and questions within faith communities and also perhaps within individuals. The following is a suggested format for an Adult Education session lasting 1 ½ - 2 hours which accompanies the documents above. Groups are encouraged to dig deeply and to engage one another in dialogue rather than simply entering into what can be a polarized discussion. Yes, the discussion is political, but whatever your political persuasion, we encourage you to pray for wisdom and an understanding mind to discern what is right, as Solomon prayed to God for (1 Kings 3:9,11,12). The mystic poet Rumi said, “Somewhere out beyond any idea of wrongdoing or right doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

Welcome
Opening prayer
Introductions
What brings you here

Introduction
The whole field of biotechnology has increased at such a rate, that many of us would not have imagined, or perhaps that have only been in our imaginations. Things that we might have thought were almost just science fiction, seemed to have at least entered the realm of possibilities. Ideas explored in literature such as Brave New World and 1984 are closer to reality. At the same time perhaps the advances are not as quick as what we might hope for.
Brainstorming
What are some of the misgivings you have in this whole area of cloning of embryonic stem cells? Where do your fears lie?

What are our hopes for this new era of biotechnology? What are the potentials?

Write answers on easel –“fears” on one side, “hopes” on other side.

Summarize
As you can see and hear, we run a whole range of thoughts and emotions on this subject. We can see this broad range within us as a group, and perhaps within each of us individually too. I don’t know about you all, but I certainly feel within myself there’s a pull 2 different ways. And that is quite a pull. The potential good things would be so good, and the potential bad things so bad.

So it’s out of situations like this that we have a need for ethics. Ethics is about muddling our way through conflict and controversy. It’s really difficult stuff. It’s not about finding what is “The Right Thing” to do –in situations like this, is there really a so-called “perfect good” or “perfect evil?”

In many disciplines, including theology in recent years there has been a lot of talk about modernism and post-modernism. It’s striking to me how this shapes our ethics and our view of the world.

Modernity has been going on since the so-called enlightenment and modernity was about the idea that we could control the world around us, that there is One Truth, and that things can be very easily divided between good and bad –a binary way of looking at the world.

But now we’re into the post modern era, and we’re realizing that there’s no one way of understanding the world or looking at the world, and there’s no one universal truth. We’re now understanding that the world and nature are more chaotic, that everything is in constant process. This holds true for quantum physics and the smallest particles that make up our universe, and it also holds true for many processes such as theology and ethics.

So we have a continuum, a tension, and it’s important we hold both of these sides, and everything in between. And this is what ethics are all about - wading through murky areas, trying to get some clarity.
So what is cloning of embryonic stem cells?
A clone is a copy of an organism that has identical DNA –could be a bacteria, or Dolly the sheep, or a human being.

DNA from one organism is taken and used to make an exact copy -not exactly identical –environment (ie. Clones not as identical as identical twins).

Human cloning attempted for 2 purposes:
1) reproductive cloning with the object of “reproducing” a person
2) therapeutic cloning where a clone is grown as far as ~6days, stem cells are extracted (and in doing so the embryo is disaggregated and no longer viable) and potentially used to treat a wide variety of diseases.

Question of when we think life begins?
What about the interesting concept of parthenogenesis attempted by Advanced Cell Technologies in Worcester? In this case an egg can be stimulated to divide on its own to the stem cell stage, without addition of male genes. Does this mean that this is not an embryo?

Looking at Scripture
As Christians, what can scripture tell us?
How can we use scripture that was written thousands of years ago to inform our ethics of how we use biotechnology today?

Split into 2 groups to look at scripture:

**Group 1 NT**

2 Corinthians 5:17-20
Revelation 21:1-5b

2 Corinthians 5:17-20
So there is a new creation, and Paul says we are God’s ambassadors. What does that mean in regards to these bioethical issues?

Revelation 21:1-5b
A new heaven and a new earth…does that have anything to do with our scientific abilities.

**Group 2 OT**

Genesis 1:26-28
Psalm 139:13-18

Genesis 1:26-28
So God created us. Should we mess with that? This is the creation story of 7 days, what do we believe about creation? Is creation still continuing today? Are we co-creators with God?

Psalm 139:13-18
So God knows the intricacies of our development from the fetus…
Report back
Hear from each group and proceed to Case Studies

Case Studies
We all know from our church life and other parts of life that decisions are very often made in committees!
Every biotech company is supposed to have an ethics committee, and on every ethics committee there has to be included members of the public. Now we’re going to pretend that we’re members of ethics committees.

We’re going to divide into groups.
Each committee will get a case study to look at.
Then we’ll come back into the big group and share our case, and where our committee thinks we should go with it.

1 person volunteer or be nominated as spokesperson.
Paper if you want to take notes.
Time limit.
Make sure everyone has a chance to share.

Case Study #1
Doug is age 35. When he was a child he had lymphoma which left him sterile. He says, “I wouldn’t mind being the first person cloned…” “Technology saved my life when I was 16, I think technology should help me have a kid. That’s a fair trade.”
What would your committee say to Doug and his wife Nancy?

Case Study #2
Margaret is a 21 year old single mom and student. She has great difficulties making ends meet. She has been offered $4,000 for eggs. She sees this as a convenient way of making some money.
What would your committee say to Margaret?
Report Back

CLOSING GROUP REFLECTION

Discussion
Any final points?

Closing Prayer

Additional Resources


http://lifesciences.umich.edu/
for an online tutorial of stem cells


http://www.counterbalance.org/

http://www.thehastingscenter.org/