7/97 Bioethical Issues

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Introduction

1. In October 1997 the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney passed a resolution setting up a committee "to study and report on bioethical issues arising from developments in eugenics, genetic engineering, the human genome project, reproductive technologies etc, with particular attention to the theological principles involved". The committee met first on 3rd February and subsequently held 4 meetings. It comprised Dr Megan Best, Dr Robert Claxton, Mr Steven Nicholson, The Rev M Hill, Mrs Patricia Judge, and Dr Peter Jensen. The Rev A Cameron was co-opted as an extra member.

2. The committee agreed that, given the constraints of time and the nature of this report, most attention would be given to the fundamental issues in bioethics and the Christian doctrine of humanity. The key question was regarded as, "What is a human being, and how do contemporary bio-technologies impact on our understanding and treatment of humans?" The committee aimed to identify those developments which raise ethical and theological issues for the Christian faith, and to suggest how a Christian understanding of humanity may help us to respond appropriately.[1]

The Developments

3. It is only 50 years since the first organ transplants were undertaken and 45 years since the structure of DNA was identified. The first IVF baby was born in 1978. Advances in biomedical science have been rapid in the last 50 years and many of the technologies have raised ethical issues. It was only in the 1970s that the now common word "bioethics" was first used to describe a broad range of ethical issues dealing with the creation, manipulation, and ending of life.

4. Technological advances which have enabled the identification and manipulation of genetic material have progressed rapidly over the last 20 years. During the 1980s many human genes were located and their coded sequence described. In 1988 an international scientific collaboration was started, called the Human Genome Project, which seeks to map the entire genetic make-up of humans. It is expected that information generated by this project will allow the following developments -

(a) The manipulation of genetic information within a human. Gene therapy involves modification of a defective gene, either by substituting a correct copy of the gene, or inactivation of an existing gene. Gene therapy could be applied to germ line cells (the cells which produce the egg and sperm cells) or somatic cells (all other cells apart from the reproductive cells). Germ line gene therapy would change the genetic information which is passed from parent to child and would therefore alter the human gene pool. The effects of somatic gene therapy would be restricted to the person treated. Currently only somatic gene therapy is being developed.

(b) The analysis of the genetic makeup of an individual through genetic testing. This will allow the diagnosis of disorders, including those which may occur in the future. Testing may be done on any person, including those in the womb, and already has widespread clinical application.

(c) The cloning of a human. Cloning reproduces that human's genetic information either partially (the cloning of organs for transplant) or completely.

5. Modern genetic technologies also allow the production of new organisms, by altering the genetic information in an existing organism. Processes like these have already been achieved in the simpler structures of plants and animals. Such technologies have great potential but the possible human price of developing them may also be great.

6. There is the potential to diagnose and treat hereditary abnormalities, as well as to determine the role that genetic makeup plays in our sexuality, and our predisposition to a variety of diseases. We may be able to grow organs for transplant from the genetic material of the recipient, without the

problems of rejection. There is the potential to clone human beings, and for parents to select the genetic characteristics of their children.

7. On the other hand, the price of developing human cloning includes such procedures as experimenting on human embryos. The possible enhancement of human beings could provide a powerful tool for those who advocate eugenics and directed evolution. There is also concern about privacy of genetic information and the need for informed consent before it is collected. When genetic testing is developed before the capacity to treat those abnormalities, apart from the anxiety of the individuals concerned, there may be discrimination against those diagnosed. Insurance companies and others may treat those individuals differently on the basis of a disease which may not manifest itself for years to come. A further price of being able to diagnose genetic disease before it can be treated will be the abortion of children who are diagnosed before birth. The high cost of the research may also lead to the ownership of genetic information by large corporations.

8. As well, the practice of aborting children with a genetically diagnosed abnormality and selecting the genetic characteristics of children, could change our understanding of what it means to be a normal human and lead to the further marginalisation of those considered not to be normal.

9. Many of the ethical issues raised by these technologies were raised much earlier by euthanasia, abortion and surrogacy. They go to the heart of what it means to be human. Careful consideration needs to be given to whether we should continue to develop these technologies, and whether the price is too high in the context of our understanding of what it means to be human.

Theology and Ethics

10. In the Bible, God reveals himself to be a triune God. There are 3 persons in the Godhead. These 3 persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are devoted to each other in loving service (see especially John 14-17). There is no doubt that God is a personal and relational being. It follows that rather than just making individuals, God makes humanity to be persons-in-relationship. Persons are shaped by relationships, for relationships.

11. God makes humanity in his “image” or “likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The ancient Hebraic notion of image indicates that humanity is given dominion over the earth as vice-regents. Humans are to rule over the creation on behalf of God. Humanity's likeness to God, who is both personal and relational, means that humans are to keep God's order and to fulfil his purposes in a way that sustains and nurtures relationships.

12. The sexual bond between the man and the woman further emphasises plurality in unity. Through sexual intercourse the two become one, giving themselves to each other and experiencing a mutual indwelling which can only be described as oneness. Because of the nature of this giving and indwelling, sexual intercourse requires the framework of unconditional commitment. Marriage is the basic unit of community and the foundation stone of society[2]. As a personal relationship based on mutual love and service, marriage reflects the very nature of the Trinity and provides the most appropriate environment for the procreation and nurture of children. Since the child is by nature personal and relational the family provides the ideal environment for nurture. Family relationships are to be characterised by unconditional love and service.

13. In addition to the unified nature of the marriage relationship the Bible provides us with a holistic understanding of persons. While the Bible recognises various elements (body, heart, mind, spirit) as constituents of the human person, humans are recognised to be integrated wholes. The various aspects form a functional unit. Hence the biological aspects cannot be isolated from the psychological or spiritual.

14. The Bible declares that humans were made primarily for a personal relationship with God their heavenly Father. That relationship commences at the time of conception. Unfortunately, our alienation from the Father is seen to be the cause and explanation of the disease, disorder, death and decay found in the world. God offers himself to be known but this offer is cast aside (eg. Romans 1:18-23, 28). Fallen humanity opts for other “knowledges” (cf. Genesis 2:17, 3:6; Romans 1:21-22), which degenerate into patterns of life focussed solely upon the self (eg. Romans 1:19-31).

15. As a consequence of the Fall, humanity's responsibility of dominion now includes the obligation to retrieve and restore the disorder produced by sin, using the gifts that it has been given by God to heal disease, and seek to restore God's order. In so doing humanity not only does good but anticipates the final state of affairs secured by God in Christ (Mark 6:13; Revelation 21:1-4). However those gifts should be exercised in the context of the relationships for which humanity was created and with the aim of furthering God's purposes for humanity and the creation. The Christian view of medicine which emanates from biblical theology is consistent with the traditional view of medicine. On this view, knowledge and techniques gained by appropriate scientific research are applied to sick people to

return them to full function in the company of family and neighbours.

16. Nevertheless, the Bible unambiguously declares that it will not be humanity's efforts which will afford a way of salvation. The disorder generated by sin can only finally be overcome by the restoration of right relationships with our heavenly Father. God has revealed His purpose to restore these relationships through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Hence human activity can retrieve some elements of good in a fallen world but it cannot restore or renew that which only comes by the power of God.

17. As a consequence of sin's entry into the creation, and humanity's not being in a right relationship with God, humanity will seek to subdue and exploit creation for its own selfish ends. Christians have sound theological reasons to resist such exploitation. The Bible presents us with an ethic which will not lightly risk the separation of the emerging child from the personal and relational framework of marriage and sexual intercourse. Nor will it tolerate the isolation of the biological aspects of human nature from the psychological or spiritual.

Applications

18. How do these theological truths apply to modern bioethical issues? We have seen that the new biotechnologies may disclose new genetic information (about humanity and about specific individuals), treat or prevent disorders, and expand human reproductive options. Christian freedom brings hard choices when multiple benefits conflict, as they do here.

19. Some motives behind this research are immediately affirmed by Christians. Christians can and do praise God's creative design in every new discovery and delight when new cures and remedies vanquish terrible disorders. They yearn for children alongside the childless. But Christians seek to chart a course towards these benefits so that other highly significant values are not violated. As these technologies are implemented, Christians share with non-Christians the ability to imagine bad results as well as good ones.

20. Genetic information about the human genome will be a boon for humanity, even though high research costs may create difficulties regarding ownership, dissemination, and use. But such information may hurt individuals. Genetic testing might proceed without informed consent. Patients, insurers and employers may not understand that such tests can never perfectly forecast the future. People may be left hopeless if results are negative and/or if there is no known treatment, and insurers or employers might infer (perhaps erroneously) someone's future deterioration and discriminate against them.

21. Genetic testing will be invaluable in the treatment of certain disorders. But sadly, foetuses are already routinely aborted when pre-natal genetic tests suggest a possible defect. This response treats humans as a commodity. Christian repugnance to such abortion is in contrast to a widespread non-Christian acceptance. But the latter overlooks a serious new problem. When disabled people (or even just “imperfect” people) are numerically less in the population, our society will tolerate and accept them less, not more. As genetic testing becomes more precise, so also will “justifications” for these abortions increase, edging our society ever closer to a narrow definition of the “acceptable” human. The alliance between genetic testing and “therapeutic” abortion silently shapes a major aspect of our future social policy.

22. If human cloning becomes possible, reproductive options will expand. But unproven techniques will produce many flawed embryos and foetuses during the development phase. When a genetically engineered foetus comes safely to term, human perceptions of him or her may change. In conventional conception, a child's genetic indeterminacy assists the parents to be unconditionally committed, and to delight in his or her unique growth. But children conceived in an atmosphere of genetic determinism are stripped of this. He or she may be expected to be like the original donor (cloning), or to be free from disease (pre-natal testing), or to “save” another (e.g. conventional conceptions in the hope of a bone-marrow donor). Where children are regarded as a commodity, demands and expectations of the “manufacturers” may become very oppressive.

23. But Christians can offer more than just these arguments. Because the Bible tells us what kind of thing humanity is - information which cannot be found by humanity about itself - we are able to raise key issues for biotechnology in the following 4 areas.

Human Sinfulness

24. In the light of the Bible's teaching about sin, any new human power should bring foreboding. Individual researchers might display integrity and caution; but the Bible remains pessimistic about humanity's ability to order our affairs. We are seen to consistently ruin our chances for good relationships by acting from and towards self-interest.

25. This is clear when secular ethical debate is founded upon the “rights” of researchers, or sick people, or parents who might benefit, with perfunctory consideration for the weak and defenceless. A Christian should first ask “how should I act rightly for you?” But our culture has perversely reversed this, demanding “you must act rightly for me.” The beneficiary of the “right” has switched from the other to the self. Responsibility for the good of the other is eclipsed by the good of the self, so there can be no real consideration of the weak, the small, or the powerless.

26. Some researchers believe that new biotechnologies should proceed, merely because they can. It is hardly outlandish to ask how much this sentiment derives from personal greed for prestige, power and patents. Such lusts are routinely celebrated as a valid driving force for human endeavour; but this admission does not magically validate each endeavour.

27. The sum total of this fallen human preoccupation with self, is that as a race, we are simply not trustworthy with new power. Outcomes of its exercise will need repair in years to come.

Determinism and hope

28. The sovereign lordship of the living God means that all truth is his. All discoveries by the Human Genome Project can be celebrated with thankfulness, both to the researchers and to the creator God.

29. However the excellence of such discoveries is overshadowed by a mood of “genetic essentialism” or “genetic determinism” that our culture brings to them. This is the belief that all human identity, behaviour and even destiny is written into one's genome. On this view, choice-making, growth and even personal responsibility, are radically restricted. True discoveries in the area of genetics, combined with the myth of genetic essentialism, can produce defeatism, hopelessness and despair.

30. The Christian view of personhood is a necessary corrective. The gospel always offers hope to people. God's Spirit offers people the possibility of self-controlled and selfless choice-making. God, and (ideally) the community of his people, always offer love, acceptance, and a renewed future.

Disorder and dominion

31. Since God's order has been fractured by sin, one aspect of humanity's dominion has been for medical practitioners and scientists to correct disturbances, disorders, and disease in the order of creation. Genetic technology may address some massive problems facing this disordered world. When applications offer this restoration without straying into de-facto eugenics or tampering with relational patterns intrinsic to the Creator's purposes, Christians can strongly endorse them.

32. The line between the treatment of disease (restoration) and the fulfilment of other human desires may be difficult to draw in practice. Where the line is drawn depends on the understanding of health employed. Expansive definitions will blur the distinction. If health is “complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”,[3] what may be legitimised seems limitless. A view of health that better fits the biblical understanding, is one that makes no attempt to create a medical utopia, but which continually channels its resources toward the elimination of disease and suffering where possible.

33. In the wider perspective, the restorative use of genetic engineering is but a holding process. The gospel reveals that God brings the ultimate and complete restoration, though the work of Christ. Final hope is wisely placed only in this.

Reproduction and relationships

34. The biological aspects of the marriage relationship cannot be isolated from the psychological or spiritual, and children are “fruit”, emerging from this intimate union of husband and wife. With the Bible, we might speak of parents “begetting” a child, to reflect their intimate and personal involvement in his or her emergence.

35. Given this holistic understanding of persons and the unified nature of the marriage relationship, some biotechnologies (including older procedures) are intrusive and morally unacceptable. They separate the emergence of children from the personal and relational framework of marriage and sexual intercourse. They also move the child's emergence from “begetting” to the arena of production.

36. Children born of surrogate mothers can become the object of terrible legal battles for custody. People born by donor-assisted conception are presently prevented by law from knowing one biological parent. A cloned child may emerge without a living biological father or mother, and become deprived of up to one half of the extended family relationships that the rest of us take for granted[4]. The technologists who make the child's emergence possible are unlike parents, for they have no investment in the child's nurture, and they take no responsibility for him or her and for any burdens that he or she might carry.

37. But while Christians may oppose some biotechnologies that produce a person, we would never oppose such people themselves. The Christian understanding of God's final and wonderful kingdom offers hope to them, and we can welcome them among us without reservation. For even if the motive and mode of their production is wrong, and even if the relationships they inherit are less than those that should welcome a human, we will know that these are people loved by God. We can help them to find a relationship with their true Father. Their own history can start with a God who saves, who give new brothers and sisters to people, and who remakes his people into the image of Jesus, their great elder brother.

Conclusion

38. The new genetic technologies promise significant advances for medicine. New knowledge will quickly provide new therapies, and Christians are grateful for the scientific work, and praise the God through whom these things are possible. But Christians also call upon scientists to take responsibility for the outcomes of their procedures in the lives and relationships of the people to whom they are applied. Some things that can be done, should not be done. Christians oppose applications of these new technologies that radically alter God's order of creation, or that are solely to meet selfish desires. Rather than becoming a venue for new forms of sin, these new technologies should be used to check, in a small way, some of the ravages of sin.

For and on behalf of the Committee

PETER JENSEN
Chairman

14 August 1998

Endnotes

1 Every human being is made up of millions of cells. Each cell contains a complete copy of a person's genetic plan, which was put together at the time of conception from genetic material contained in the egg and sperm. This genetic material, which includes the blueprint for each cell's structure, is contained in the nucleus of each cell. It is packaged as long strands of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), which are called chromosomes. Every normal cell contains forty-six chromosomes, twenty-three inherited from each the father and the mother. Each chromosome is like a string of beads where each bead represents a gene.

A gene is a piece of genetic material which does one particular job. For example, it may contain the information for how we look, whether we are tall or short, brunette or blond. It is estimated that there are between 50,000 and 100,000 genes in every cell of the body. Although every cell contains the same genes, not all the genes are active in every cell of the body. Thus the genes which are active in a kidney cell are different from the genes which are active in a bone cell. This is because different cells have different functions and use different parts of the genetic blueprint. The way a gene is expressed is usually dependent on the environment in which a person lives. For example, a person who has genes for “tallness” may not necessarily be tall; he may suffer malnutrition or disease as a child, and not live up to his genetic potential. There are other genetic combinations which will always be expressed regardless of the environment. An instance of this is that a person with the genes for cystic fibrosis will always develop cystic fibrosis.

2 This is not to say that all can or should be married, or that human fulfilment can only be found in marriage. The example of Jesus himself indicates otherwise.

3 The definition is from the World Health Organization in its 1946 Constitution. http://www.who.ch/pll/hlt/hist-coll/constitution.html, June 1998.

4 Of course, biologically unrelated carers can develop loving, faithful relationships with children. But nonetheless, on the account of humanity we have described, persons should have access to the knowledge of two biological parents wherever possible. (This is why we consider the death of a parent to be tragic.)