

Tentatio November 2002 - Embryos

In recent years stem cell researchers have urged the use of thousands of left-over human embryos created in fertility clinics across the country for purposes of experimentation toward the goal of research on disease. Even before this suggestion, however, the question of what to do with left-over embryos had caused morally concerned people to argue against their wanton destruction. The recent appeal for embryos by researchers has increased moral concerns since the justification for such use has been made on purely utilitarian grounds allowing for no protection for human life as human embryos. In short, their use for research argues for destruction for a good cause.

Christians concerned with moral reasoning have tried to point out that such use of human embryos, even for a good cause, does not justify their destruction in the process called research. But the question remains, "What to do with embryos left over from the process known as in vitro fertilization." Couples, having participated in their making, have abandoned these new lives and their future is uncertain. A new appeal has been made by the Vatican asking that, rather than be destroyed in research, these embryos be given up for adoption to couples seeking children. Although preserving the life of some embryos, it is unlikely that thousands of such adoptions will take place and solve the problem of saving all those that remain.

There appear to be five alternatives to the question of what to do with leftover embryos. They are:

1. Immediately destroy the embryos when the couple has the number of children they desire.
2. Use the embryos for research.
3. Put the embryos up for adoption.
4. Support the embryos indefinitely, in so far as it is possible to do so with current technology.
5. Let the embryos die a natural death.

One solution would be the immediate destruction of all leftover embryos following the couple's attainment of the number of children they choose to have. This is most objectionable to morally concerned people since it treats human life as worthless once it no longer meets our needs. It is difficult to justify destruction of embryos on any moral grounds, leaving expediency as the only

reason for such action and that is no moral ground at all. The tendency for couples to go to court for possession of left-over embryos following a divorce; the motivation toward technology that makes it possible to preserve embryos for longer periods of time; and the sheer preservation of vast numbers of embryos across the country may reflect an underlying sense that human embryos ought not merely be discarded simply because they are longer wanted.

The second solution, using embryos for research, appeals to the desire to bring something good out of something bad. This has been compared with using the results of Nazi experiments on unwilling and innocent prisoners for our medical benefit today. To date, no one has agreed to do so and those files remain sealed. Using embryos for research has the impact of appealing to the universal desire to relieve suffering and cure disease. Clever playing with words has led the public to believe that stem cells can be retrieved from an embryo without their destruction, but such is not the case. An embryo consists of an inner mass of cells and an outer wall of cells. Stem cells are the inner mass of cells. The inner mass or stem cells form the human embryo. The outer wall produces the placenta and supporting materials. If the inner mass of stem cells is extracted the fatal end of the human being as a developing embryo is determined. Clearly the appeal is to over-look the sacrifice of this life for the benefit of other lives, but the “betterment of mankind” is never a good justification for taking the life of the weaker, helpless part of mankind.

The third solution, adoption of embryos, is a newcomer to the debate. Posed first by the Vatican, this solution has the appeal of preserving the life of the developing child and placing it into a family. I will argue against this option as I have the others, but realize that the argument will be more difficult to appreciate. My intuitive disliking for this option is two-fold. First, the option suggests that a human embryo can be placed indiscriminately in any uterus for its survival without effect on the biblical understanding of the mystery of marriage and procreation. For example, a single woman who cares nothing for marriage but simply wants a child could adopt an embryo? This could be yet another step in reproductive technology that continues the trend toward the separation of marriage from procreation. Another example, in the case of a married couple, the adopting wife would be little more than a borrowed uterus for someone else’s child? She might gain the illusion of having her own child, but the husband would have no part in it as his child. Additionally, it seems strange that his wife should bear another couple’s child. This seems not to aim at the one flesh union of husband and wife in marriage. Whether these are reasons enough to not save an embryo by means of adoption the reader will have to decide.

My second objection to the adoption of embryos lies in its suggestiveness. Such adoption suggests that the end justifies the means. That is, adoption will offer justification for the indiscriminate making of excessive numbers of embryos. In fact, it may be that adoption would remove any reason to re-evaluate the ongoing excessive numbers of embryos created in fertility clinics. It could be argued that there is a shortage of adoptive children and this provides a continuing means of supply and demand. One begins to see the fulfillment of Huxley’s vision of a *Brave New World* where it is better to adopt screened embryos than risk normal procreation that runs the risk of genetically transferred diseases within the family.

My underlying objection to adoption is that, like many other reproductive technologies, it continues the trend in separating the biological from the relational, or as those who look to the Bible would say, the separation of marriage from procreation. But having said all this, I realize that many Christians will be innocently and, in some cases, defiantly, in favor of adoption of leftover embryos. In a fallen world, few things are lived righteously. Were it not for grace of God, none of us would be born at all. This is not to throw my concerns to the winds, but to alert pastors and their parishioners to the possibility of having to care spiritually for those who find themselves participating in the downhill slide into Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

The fourth option, that of supporting the embryos indefinitely, in so far as it is possible to do so with current technology, must also be evaluated. Surely, few prolife people would oppose the preservation of human life. The assumption here is that technology would devote itself to continuing to find ways to extend the life of the embryos in storage for even longer periods of time. The problem with this solution to the problem of leftover embryos is that it doesn't solve the problem. It makes the problem worse since we are still left with an ever-increasing number of embryos as time goes on, continuing perhaps long after the parents of these embryos have themselves died. My argument is therefore that technology ought to call a moratorium on pursuing ways to preserve embryos longer than is already possible. We have created an undesirable scenario without thinking of the consequences. Any solution ought not attempt to resolve those consequences by creating yet other undesirable consequences.

The best solution to the problem of leftover embryos is not to create them to begin with, but we are still left with the act that they are made and do exist in great numbers. The fifth option, then, is my proposal to the problem of leftover embryos. Let the embryos die a natural death when their current preservation is no longer possible. This is not the same as taking them out of storage to die. This is doing what we all hope to do when life can no longer be sustained and the Lord calls us home. In the case of an irretrievably dying patient it is sometimes asked, "How much more shall we do for him?" Shall we put him on life support when death is near? When it is clear that death is near, the answer is simply to keep him comfortable until he dies? We are neither to cause death nor hasten death, but neither are we to do everything that can be done, knowing that the end result, death, will occur nevertheless. As we all hope to die a natural death, so we could preserve the life of the leftover embryo until it becomes clear that under current technology we can no longer do so.

We might well conclude from this discussion that in the use of technology to produce embryos in a clinic setting we have gone too far. I have already published a previous article in the October issue of *Tentatio*, on in vitro fertilization that addresses that question. It may well be that we will continue to develop these and other technologies that continue to challenge the biblical understanding of marriage and procreation. It will be for pastors and their parishioners to decide how far is too far in their use. We ought know by now that the gift of marriage, children and life itself is constantly under attack in a world alien to the aims of God as Father, son and Holy Spirit. Perhaps Christians may yet be successful in bearing witness to God's better way and bring a deeper understanding to a world that seems to believe there are no limits to what man can do.