



Embryonic Stem Cell Research

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Leader Guide

This brief, downloadable Bible study is in an easy-to-use, discussion-based format. Primary Bible verses relating to the topic are included, but you may want to have Bibles handy for study participants.

Before the session begins, familiarize yourself with this study. Pay special attention to the three Bible verses printed in the section entitled, “Unchanging Word.” Consult the Concordia Self-Study Bible, or other reputable commentaries, for notes on those passages. Also familiarize yourself with the list of medical and scientific terms at the bottom of the study. These will prove most helpful to you and your group as you discuss this topic.

Make enough copies of this study for each Bible study participant. Divide larger groups into smaller groups of no more than 8 people. You may choose to do this for the section, “Changed Lives.” Smaller groups encourage a greater number of participants to reflect and respond to questions, and will make the study more enjoyable and memorable for both them and for you.

In addition to Scripture, we recommend reviewing the following resources from the Book of Concord:

- Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds;
- Luther’s Small Catechism (Explanation to the Fifth Commandment); Large Catechism (Explanation to the Fifth Commandment, especially paragraphs 188–194);
- Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article I (especially paragraphs 7–9, 28, 43).

Changing Currents

Science is a complex discipline asking simple questions: Where does this come from? How does it work? How do we fix it? Can it do anything else? And yet, with those simple questions arise many difficult, and sometimes contradictory, answers. We see this conundrum most readily when it comes to applying ethics (moral principles or values) to embryonic stem cell research (ESCR).

According to some, stem cells (cells having the potential to develop into a variety of human organs, bones, and tissues) extracted from human embryos offer great promise for the treatment of such ailments as spinal cord injuries, Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes, stroke, Parkinson’s disease, and others. Research universities and private medical firms are especially eager to engage in this area of research because of the potential cures it promises—treatments for some of life’s most cruel and debilitating diseases and traumatic injuries.

Others argue that ESCR is unethical (immoral and therefore should be prohibited) because it destroys tiny, developing, human beings, and that this form of research has yet to provide any cure. They also maintain that ESCR is unnecessary because human stem cells are readily available from other non-embryonic sources—adult human tissue, umbilical cord blood, discarded placenta, and so forth—and that adult stem cell research (ASCR) using these alternate sources has already provided proven results.

1. Dana Reeve, widow of the late actor Christopher Reeve, former First Lady Nancy Reagan and son Ron Jr., and actor Michael J. Fox all have one thing in common. What is it?

2. How do celebrity voices affect your decision making when it comes to purchasing products advertised on television or the Web? deciding to support a particular political party? deliberating ethical or moral issues?

3. Do you have a relative or loved one who suffers from a progressive disease, traumatic injury, or the like? If so, how might their suffering influence your view of the promises or problems of ESCR?

4. The Bible does not mention the phrase “embryonic stem cell research,” but it does speak about God’s gift of children, original sin, the humanity of Christ, and our need to speak up for the weak and helpless. How might these Bible teachings inform us of God’s will when it comes to ESCR?

1. In this passage, children (both sons and daughters) are God’s gift to a human couple. True, children do present certain challenges, but a child is also a “bundle of joy.” If you have been blessed with children either through birth or adoption, describe your joy upon receiving your special gift.

2. Some *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) techniques implant blastocysts (human embryos at about 4–5 days) in the womb to induce pregnancy. ESCR destroys blastocysts to extract stem cells for experimentation. Discuss the sad irony of implanting one blastocyst with the hope of giving birth to a child, while destroying another blastocyst for research.

Unchanging Word

Children are a heritage

Western society tends to view procreation (literally, to “create forth”) as an optional pursuit for couples (we see this in declining birth rates in both North America and Europe). But our culture also seems to have taken a “factory view” of children: they are products manufactured according to budgets (“We can’t afford a child right now!”), timetables (“We’ll have another in three years.”), or in view of competing interests (“What about completing your degree?”).

In contrast, Scripture uses “gift” language when speaking about the procreation of children. If unimpeded, children are the natural, fruitful result of consummated human love. When He wills and through the means of man and woman, God creates new life—the gift of new human beings—capable of both enjoying and contributing to His creation (Psalm 127:3–5):

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

3. How might the “factory view” of children apply to the ESCR debate? How might ESCR tend to view human life as a “product” to be used in order to achieve beneficial ends? Do the ends (results) always justify the means (the method of obtaining those results; see Romans 3:8; 6:1–2)? What should be our attitude toward evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22)?

4. David declares, “For You formed my inward parts; You knitted me together in my mother’s womb. . . . My frame was not hidden from You, when I was being made in secret. . . . Your eyes saw my unformed substance” (Psalm 139:13–16). Discuss God’s love and care for every human being from the very first moment of life—and beyond.

Fully human . . . from conception

Children are God’s gift to us. But since the fall of mankind into sin, there has been a profound problem with everyone conceived and born: sin. (Only our Lord Jesus Christ was conceived and born without sin; see 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 7:26–27; 1 Peter 2:24). In Psalm 51:4–5, David recognizes both God’s judgment on the sins he had committed (actual sins) and the sins for which he was also under judgment, Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden (original sin).

Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

1. Psalm 51:4–5 shows that we inherit from our parents both God’s judgment for sin and the inescapable tendency to sin. God’s judgment has both spiritual and physical consequences (see Romans 6:23). How do we quickly recognize that God’s judgment still stands? Does death “discriminate” at any stage of human development?

2. Every human being (except Christ) is conceived and born guilty of original sin, and eventually will commit and become guilty of actual sins. If we are not fully human at conception, then we are not fully guilty of original sin. How does the Bible’s clear teaching about original sin affirm our full humanity at conception?

3. Christ’s miraculous but fully human conception is taught in the Bible (Luke 1:26–35; John 1:14; 1 Timothy 3:16) and affirmed in the Creeds. The Formula of Concord calls all contrary positions “heresy” (FC SD I 43). How does the Bible’s clear teaching about Christ’s conception affirm our full humanity at conception?

4. From the first moment of His conception, Christ was both fully God and fully man (although without sin). Why must Christ be both God and man for our salvation (Hebrews 2:17)? What did He do for us perfectly (Galatians 4:4–5)? What did He provide to take away our sins (1 John 1:7)?

You shall not murder

Children are God’s gift to us from the very moment of their conception. God loves and cares for all of His human creatures, including human embryos at every stage of development. We see that most fully in the dying and rising of His Son for the whole “world” (John 3:16). Because of God’s love and care, He specifically prohibits the intentional, unjustified taking of human life. We see that most clearly in the Fifth Commandment, recorded in Exodus 20:13 (see also verses 1–2; also Deuteronomy 5:6, 17):

And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . . You shall not murder.”

1. In the Small Catechism, Luther writes that the Fifth Commandment demands more of us than not murdering—“we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.” Why should we “go the extra mile” (Matthew 5:41) when *any* neighbor (see Luke 10:29–37) needs our help?

2. When God delivered the Ten Commandments, He first reminded His people that He had rescued them through His servant, *Moses*, from a life of evil under *Pharaoh* (“out of. . . slavery”), which included the *Red Sea* crossing, through which God saved them. How does this parallel our rescue as Christians (Christ, Satan, and Baptism)?

3. The Bible says, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8–9). While we defend embryonic human life, discuss ways how we can also advocate for ASCR that does not destroy human life.

4. God showed us His love by sending us “His Son [as] the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). Indeed, God Himself is love (verse 16), and we no longer need to be afraid (verse 18). Why does God’s love for us in Christ enable us to love our neighbor (verse 19)? How does His love enable us to “help and support” her or him?

Changed Lives

While ESCR offers many promises to those suffering from a variety of debilitating diseases and conditions, it also raises the troubling specter of destroying human life at its most fragile beginnings. As Christians, when we need sure guidance and wisdom to help us navigate complex and confusing issues, such as those arising from science or medicine, we go to God’s authoritative and inerrant Word.

While Scripture does not specifically mention the phrase “embryonic stem cell research,” it does guide us to see all children—from conception to birth and beyond—as God’s gift. And, through its teachings about original sin, Christ’s incarnation, and God’s will that we speak up for the weak and helpless, we come to see that ESCR is incompatible with the Bible and thus the Christian faith. Nevertheless, in Christian love for our suffering loved ones and neighbors, we can affirm ASCR that does not require the destruction of developing human life, but rather utilizes donated cord blood, discarded placentas, or adult human cells.

Full of grace . . . Seasoned with salt

1. We often hesitate to speak on difficult issues, fearing that others may notice that we don’t know every detail (embarrassment), or that they will be turned off by our position (rejection). How should we engage in conversations about any subject (Colossians 4:6)? Who is the source of our constant encouragement (2 Thessalonians 2:16)?

2. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has repeatedly affirmed that life begins at conception (1979 Res. 3-02A; 1983 Res. 3-04B) and the sanctity of human life “from the time of conception until natural death” (1992 Res. 3-10; 2001 Res. 6-01). What can we do, as congregations or individual Christians, to publicly support God’s gift of life?

Come, you who are blessed

1. Sin blinds us from seeing and defending our neighbor’s body and life. We justly deserve Christ’s judgment, “Depart from Me” (Mathew 25:41). But by His cross and resurrection we are forgiven and justified. Through faith, our eyes now see our Savior—and our neighbor. How are you encouraged by Christ’s promise, “Come, you who are blessed” (verse 34)?

2. You may have a loved one suffering from a debilitating condition or disease. While medicine may alleviate symptoms or offer the promise of a cure, these are only part of human care. What are some things you can do to provide her or him comfort? Whom does God use to comfort others (2 Corinthians 7:6–7)? How are we ourselves comforted (1:3–7)?

Idea Exchange

For more information about ESCR and other medical and scientific issues see the following:

- Bible Study: *Playing God: Redesigning Life*, Faith on the Edge Series, Robert W. Weise (CPH, 2002).
- Pamphlet: *Stem Cell Research: Understanding the Basics* (Nevada, IA: Lutherans for Life, item #100T).
- Web: *Monitoring Stem Cell Research, A Report of the President's Council on Bioethics* (2004), available at www.bioethics.gov.

List of Terms

- adult stem cell research (ASCR).** Scientific experimentation on adult stem cells derived from blood, bone marrow, fat, and so forth. ASCR also utilizes blood from discarded human umbilical cords and placentas, but does not result in embryonic death in order to obtain stem cells.
- blastocyst.** An embryo (day 4–5 of development) shaped like a hollow sphere and containing an inner mass of cells (stem cells) that, left alone, will develop into a fetal human being. Ironically, blastocysts are used in *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) techniques in order to produce pregnancy, and are destroyed in ESCR in order to obtain stem cells for scientific research.
- embryo.** According to *Human Embryology and Teratology*, third edition, Ronan O’Rahilly and Fabiola Müller (New York: Wiley-Liss, 2001), the official textbook on embryology, the stage of human development *beginning with fertilization* (and the formation of the zygote) and lasting until about nine weeks, after which the developing human being is called a fetus. This textbook also equates the human embryo with an *unborn human* (p. 8).
- embryonic stem cell research (ESCR).** Scientific experimentation on stem cells derived from human embryos (usually at the blastocyst stage of development). ESCR results in the destruction of human embryos.
- ethics.** The field of study examining moral principles or values encompassing law, philosophy, and religion, and applied to a variety of other fields including scientific and medical research. Practitioners in this field are called *ethicists*.
- fetus.** A developing human being from about nine weeks to birth.

oocyte. The scientific term for the female germ or sex cell produced in the ovaries. It is erroneously referred to as a human “egg.”

zygote. The one-cell embryo resulting from the genetic union of a sperm and oocyte; the first stage of embryonic human life.

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