

Price to pay: The misuse of embryos

by [Amy Laura Hall](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

A 43-year-old woman rolls slowly out of bed, having dreamt the night before of her fifth-grade classroom—a room she knew well before taking disability leave. She makes her daily plea for a treatment that will allow her to get to the grocery store without tripping over her own feet. Meanwhile, a seven-year-old girl wakes up to check her insulin level. She adjusts the pump attached to her abdomen and wonders whether she will be able to eat the school lunch today, and whether she will eventually lose her sight.

These stories of people suffering from Parkinson's disease and juvenile diabetes represent the plight of real people. Stem cell research using human embryos might mean new mornings for people like these—people you and I know by name. If embryonic stem cell research (ESCR) can alleviate such suffering, then is it not consonant with the Good News?

I have come to believe, on the contrary, that ESCR is not consonant with Christian faith because of the moral costs involved. To count these moral costs requires us to take several heart-wrenching steps away from the names, faces and complicated narratives of those who might benefit from ESCR.

The default mode of bioethical reasoning in popular Christian culture—a sentimental version of utilitarianism—deems such reflective distance unfeeling and cruel. It was at the risk of such apparently cruel abstraction that a small group of pastors and scholars worked on a United Methodist Bioethics Task Force convened by the church's General Board of Church and Society to consider ESCR.

After months of discussion, the group drafted a call to ban all human cloning and to limit ESCR to the use of the “excess” embryos created in the process of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Most controversially, the group took on the question of IVF and the production of “excess” embryos and counseled United Methodists to pursue adoption and foster care rather than IVF.

When the United Methodist General Conference discussed the proposal at its Pittsburgh convention in May, it vitiated the original document. The revision committee rewrote the report by striking in particular the contributions of the moral theologians.

As a member of the initial task force, I submit that we posed several distinctions, questions and answers that are crucial for evaluating ESCR. What follows is my own interpretation of the issues involved. It does not necessarily represent the reflections of the other members.

The left and right wings of the UMC tried originally to ferret out whether the composition of the original task force was “pro-life” or “pro-choice.” That approach reflected a misunderstanding of the question at hand. The debate about ESCR must be distinguished from prior debates on abortion. Naming abortion a *sui generis* conflict of life with life, most mainline Protestant denominations have affirmed that abortion should be rare but also legal.

Unlike abortion, ESCR involves neither a conflict between two physically interconnected lives nor the rare, unplanned and deeply regrettable destruction of incipient human life. When advocates of ESCR rhetorically evoke prior debates on abortion by presenting ESCR as a choice between a living person and an early human embryo, we are distracted from the broader context of ESCR.

A multimillion-dollar medical industry surrounds the supposedly simple “which of these two entities matters more?” approach. Endorsing ESCR means endorsing an elaborate, systematic, routine industry of embryo production and destruction, an industry not likely to limit itself to therapies for chronic disease. To suggest that we will not also see the emergence of more generally applicable, and more widely lucrative, products defies common sense.

The original United Methodist proposal recognized that the fertility industry already engages in the routine production, cryopreservation (freezing) and disposal of human embryos in the process of IVF. Mainline Protestants have largely avoided this set of questions attached to IVF, perhaps because we are justifiably reluctant to question the process by which many (rightly) beloved and (rightly) baptized children have been conceived.

But there are two related problems with this avoidance. Not only is IVF the most obvious source of “fresh” and cryopreserved embryos, but the growing acceptance of embryo creation and disposal through IVF has shaped our moral imagination, rendering us less and less capable of seeing any relevant moral claims attending the early embryo as incipient human life.

Once early embryos become something less than incipient human life, once they are treated in vitro as a means toward the end of pregnancy, once they are cryopreserved in thousands of vats across the country, ESCR with “excess” embryos may be predictably the next step. Given that so many good Protestant couples have accepted the creation, cryopreservation and disposal of early embryos, it may be almost impossible for an argument against ESCR to gain traction.

It may also become increasingly difficult for any argument against any research on early embryos to command a hearing (including arguments against “therapeutic” cloning) as other procedures that involve embryo selection and disposal become more common. As use of preimplantation embryo selection grows, for example, there is a diminishing chance that anyone in the mainline will remain willing to throw the first stone at the Goliath of embryonic biotechnology.

Meanwhile, the next stage of the debate on ESCR is upon us. While the initial UM proposal tried to catch up with issues surrounding “excess” embryos, a team in South Korea brought into being the first cloned human embryo to be used for ESCR. If ESCR using “excess” embryos from IVF continues, the next step will likely be the pursuit of such “therapeutic” cloning—the creation of embryos through somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) to provide individually tailored stem cell therapies.

The original and adopted United Methodist documents both oppose such so-called “therapeutic” cloning, but the adopted UM document strikes all moral and theological reasoning for such opposition. I suspect that the revision committee hoped thereby not to preclude future acceptance of SCNT.

The original document explained that to craft incipient human life precisely in order then to disaggregate it for materials crosses a moral boundary set when the first in vitro experiments took place. Why did Western bioethicists of almost every ilk develop this boundary? They recognized, as United Methodists on either side of the abortion debate have recognized until recently, that the in vitro human embryo

makes, at the very least, an iconic moral claim. Put more theologically, both pro-life and pro-choice Protestants have agreed that Christians should assume and hope that even incipient life is indeed life bound for blessing. To bring into being a human embryo solely in order to divide up its constitutive parts for research threatens fully to erode the sense that incipient human life is never simply, or primarily, a tool.

The specter of treating human life simply as fodder for research is relevant for the discussion of “therapeutic” cloning for another reason not discussed in either UM document. Some feminists who have no problem with the creation or research use of “excess” IVF embryos adamantly oppose “therapeutic” cloning for ESCR. Why? Ova. The intricate work of “therapeutic” cloning will require not only millions of dollars but thousands of eggs.

Which raises another set of disquieting questions: Why was the research team (led by a Methodist) in South Korea able to cross the scientific barrier while researchers in the U.S. were not? They were able to harvest a large supply of “fresh” eggs—247 of them, apparently from 16 women who volunteered for the process. How were these 16 women in South Korea recruited for this research? To what procedures did they consent in order to produce this unusually high number of ova?

To date, no one outside of the research team itself seems clear whether basic guidelines for gamete donation were breached. At this point, some in the pro-research camp are suspiciously eager to propose that the U.S. should not force its more stringent research guidelines on a developing country.

This brings me to what I consider to be the most compelling reason to oppose ESCR. With other feminists, I believe that we must consider the likelihood a) that countries with less stringent guidelines for ova donation will proceed more efficiently with research; b) that countries in the one-third world will likely benefit from research using ill-gotten gametes; and c) that advocates for ESCR will argue that, for the sake of justice, the U.S. needs to implement more liberal guidelines for gamete procurement so as to avoid the injustice inherent in situation b).

The guidelines by which research groups in the U.S. have had to proceed were developed to protect vulnerable populations in the U.S. from one of the most intimate forms of exploitation. Relatively privileged Christians in the U.S. must consider the likelihood that the procurement of requisite ova will follow the

predictable patterns of women's labor in an exploitative global market. A moral analysis of ESCR, as it is likely to proceed, therefore requires reckoning not only with the lives of those who suffer from juvenile diabetes or Parkinson's, but also with the specter of women sacrificing their bodily integrity for our sakes.

In debating ESCR, we have the opportunity to ask anew whether we will encourage the routine, systematic creation and destruction of embryonic life. Will we continue to pursue a form of fertility treatment that has led to vat after vat of incipient human life? Will we allow for the creation of incipient human life merely for the sake of its destruction? Will we countenance the systematic and industrialized harvesting of human ova?

The entire conversation around ESCR is ineluctably complicated by our love for friends and family with chronic illnesses and by our love for family and friends who have been blessed through the process of IVF. The original UM document nonetheless called for self-interrogation, repentance and even sacrifice. To ask probing questions about the current trajectory of reproductive biotechnology would have given us a chance to reflect with humility on the ways that our moral imaginations have been shaped by new "givens."

The original UM document called one body of mainline Protestants to affirm at the most basic level that all forms of human life are worth incalculably more than their industrial, market, scientific or even therapeutic use value. This reasoning may initially seem cold and overly distanced, but the underlying issues touch on the most fundamental questions of what it means to be human, of what it means to love.