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*Life  
and  
Death  
Choices*

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Human Life Issues

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## Preface

Baptists have declared that personal faith in Jesus Christ must be lived out in every facet of life. The Canadian Baptist "collective silence" on many social issues has, at times, given the impression to other denominations and the world at large that such issues are of little interest to us. In recent years the Public Affairs Committee of the Canadian Baptist Federation has actively sought to address this situation by initiating public responses to social issues. This book is a result of such an initiative.

The publication in this book of some of the discussion papers that went into the preparation of these briefs represents the hope and prayer of the Canadian Baptist Federation that this book will encourage all who read it to reflect seriously on these vital issues and their relationship to faith. *Life and Death Choices* is proof that Canadian Baptists take seriously their faith and witness in Jesus Christ in the public arena of life. It is an encouraging sign that the Canadian Baptist Federation is finding a consensus across our nation in Baptist Life.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Mrs. Janet Atwood of Winnipeg, who chaired the Task Force on Human Life Issues, to Dr. Shirley Bentall chairman of the Public Affairs Committee and the six members of the Task Force from across the regions, whose hard work has made possible this publication. We also wish to acknowledge Peter Atwood who provided his editorial and typesetting skills.

Dr. Richard Coffin, General Secretary  
Canadian Baptist Federation  
April 1991

# Fetal Transplantation and Experimentation

Craig A. Carter

As modern biomedical technology advances, new ethical dilemmas appear which the human race has never before had to consider. This situation strains our moral and ethical resources and forces us, as a society, to ask and answer certain fundamental questions of a philosophical and theological nature. Is all human life sacred? How do we best express respect for life when the taking of the lives of some will prevent others from dying? Should everything that is scientifically possible actually be done? If not, who should decide which scientific experiments should be prohibited and which should be allowed?

As our society struggles with questions like these we, as Christians, must think them through as well. We have an obligation to speak from a biblical perspective to the ethical issues of the day. We must call our culture to respect human life as created in the image of God. We must keep in mind the vast difference between the faith of the Enlightenment—faith in human reason and technology—and Christian faith. As our culture drifts further and further from its Christian roots, our views will increasingly seem to be fringe opinions by those at the centers of power. But this should not deter us from faithfully witnessing to Jesus Christ.

## The Dilemmas We Face

Let us focus on just two of the many ethical dilemmas facing our society at the moment in the areas of fetal transplantation and experimentation. The first relates to fetal-cell implant surgery. Parkinson's disease is a chronic disease which destroys the cells in the brain that enable a person to speak lucidly and walk smoothly. It is now possible to take brain cells from an aborted fetus and surgically implant them into the brain of a person suffering from Parkinson's disease to replace the ones destroyed by the disease. Should this be done if the fetus was spontaneously aborted and its parents give consent? Should it be done if the fetus was aborted deliberately? Should it be done if the woman deliberately became pregnant for the purpose of aborting the fetus and harvesting its brain cells?

A second ethical dilemma concerns experimentation rather than transplantation. Should embryos produced in a petrie dish by means of *in vitro* fertilization and which are not, for one reason or another, implanted into the womb of a woman be made available for genetic research? The research in question would produce data useful in developing treatments for genetic defects and diseases which are passed on genetically. Should the technology be available to keep these embryos alive and developing, how long should the experimentation be allowed to continue and how should they be disposed of when the experiments are finished?

The Law Reform Commission of Canada recently published *Working Paper 61: Biomedical Experimentation Involving Human Subjects*. In this paper the majority of commissioners recommended that embryo and fetal research be allowed to be carried out providing the research has been approved by a multi-disciplinary ethics committee and providing it is carried out in approved research centers after obtaining the consent of both parents of the embryo or fetus. They also recommended that experimentation on embryos be prohibited after the fourteenth day of development.

In a dissent to the paper's recommendations, commissioner Joseph Maingot wrote:

Whether human life is formed in the womb or in a petrie dish through the technique of *in vitro* fertilization, to intentionally cause the death of an embryonic human life remains unacceptable. The technologically aided production of human embryos cannot be faulted where they are used to induce pregnancy. However ... the production of more human embryos than will actually be introduced into the uterus for the treatment of infertility is, in my view, unacceptable. To create surplus embryos which may simply be discarded, constitutes disregard for human life. (p. 65)

Commissioner Maingot puts his finger on the key issue in this debate, namely, respect for human life.

### A Christian Response

These two ethical dilemmas raise some very basic issues regarding the nature and value of human life. If we believe that human beings are created in the image of God, then we must ask that human life be respected at all stages of its development. If we believe that abortion is an attack on the image of God in the human creature, then we must oppose it even for the purpose of using fetal tissue for transplant purposes.

The problem in our society today is that there are practically no universally agreed upon absolute moral principles on which to base difficult ethical decisions like these. The Law Reform Commission, like the government and the courts, is always trying to balance various rights off against one another. There is a constant series of contradictory demands for rights—from researchers, from patients, from lobby groups and so on. Most of the time we somehow seem to muddle through with no one getting everything they want and everyone getting something they want. The problem is that when it comes down to deciding who shall live and who shall die there just is not any room left for compromise.

The common thread in both of the two dilemmas mentioned above is that of condoning the taking of human life in an effort to enhance other human lives. Using tissue from a spontaneously aborted fetus for transplant purposes is surely no more morally objectionable than using the body of an accident victim for the same purposes. Likewise the technique of *in vitro* fertilization for the purpose of helping otherwise infertile married couples conceive is not in itself wrong. But where both technologies get off track is when they start being used to play God and take life—whether by abortion for transplant or other purposes or by destroying embryos which have been created in the petrie dish.

As Christians we must hold fast to the principle that human life is to be respected because it is made in the image of God. In the face of human suffering we are not cold and callous, but rather, courageous and hopeful. We acknowledge our limits and our lack of omnipotence. We know that we should not do everything we have learned how to do. But we also acknowledge the power and sovereignty of God and we look forward to the day when there will be no more suffering and no more pain.

It may seem harsh to say that those who perhaps could be helped by fetal transplantation and experimentation have to live and die without that help, but we must remember that we are not omnipotent and we are not immortal. As Christians we have a fundamentally different outlook on death and suffering than do secular people. For the secularist, death is final. It is the end of consciousness and of individual existence. Suffering is completely meaningless. Christians agree that suffering is to be avoided if possible, but our faith includes many resources which can help us find some sort of meaning in our suffering and in the suffering of others. Faith in a sovereign God allows us to cling to the conviction that by His power (not ours) good can come out of evil. To us, death is indeed an enemy; but it is an enemy who, we believe, will not have the final word. It is not final. It is not the end of personal existence.

Courage and hope are two Christian virtues which are badly needed today in our society. We are not fatalistic or passive in the face of evil, but it is precisely our faith which gives us the strength not to give up in the face of

suffering and even death. We cheerfully and hopefully do all that we can to relieve pain and extend life. But at the end of the day, when all our human wisdom is exhausted and all our technology has been deployed, we are able to admit our mortality and our limited power. We see life without faith as incomplete and susceptible to despair and pessimism.

When it comes to healing, the main weapon of the Christian church has always been prayer. An essential element of prayer is submission to the sovereignty of God. Even if we do take some lives in order to prolong others we will all die eventually anyway. Given this fact, we are better off to live with integrity, suffer with courage and die with hope than to try to play God and in the process dehumanize ourselves and others.

### Further Reading

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