



# The United Church of Canada General Council

## GC27 Report of the Commission on Ethics and Genetics (1977R215)

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### Excerpts of Report

#### Theological, Social and Ethical Perspectives

At the onset it must be acknowledged that, while the faith perspective is important to Christians in any serious endeavour such as genetic science, its contribution is not always immediately clear or unambiguous. As Christians, our lives in all decision-making moments are informed by Jesus Christ, the history of the Jewish people and the Christian church of which he is the centre; and we need to try to understand how this history and tradition relate to the problems with which we are faced. However, when these problems are new and have not been encountered before, as is the case in genetic science, we cannot immediately apply our understanding of faith or the biblical patterns and images to them. In addition faith itself is a dynamic phenomenon, and the ways we understand it are changed subtly by new knowledge and insights which may come from any source, including genetic science.

## **A. Faith Perspective**

Christians believe that God is faithfully and consistently with his people in love; a love which has been most perfectly expressed for us in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Out of his belief come vision, hope, confidence and purpose. The purpose of our individual and community life is, then, to respond to that love and express it in real tangible ways to all people. This may and will involve the courage to risk the unknown, but that, too, derives from the basic belief that God's love does not fail.

The early Hebrews set out from their familiar surroundings toward a future that was sustained only by a promise. However, theirs was a promise with a difference - it came from Jahweh. The relationship of promise and love between God and his chosen people began and developed as a dynamic and vital encounter, and, as God joined himself to their aspirations and struggles for identity and liberation, the people of Israel became a visible and real community.

Through long years of trial and triumph, from the desert wastelands to the land beyond Jordan, this small tribe now came to exist on God's initiative. He took hold of their troubled existence as slaves, transforming them into a nation.

The experience of the guiding hand of God was, and remains, of paramount importance in Hebrew and Christian faith, and response to it has always been one of thanksgiving, joy and commitment.

But we recognize also that God is experienced as intimately involved with all the processes of nature, as well as with the history of mankind. He is not merely the one who occasionally moves from some other world to the earthly realm by means of intercession and intervention. Rather, he is involved in the process of creation, and the ongoing unfolding of the purposes and fulfilments he continues to reveal to his world and to his creatures. God accomplishes continuing creation, not by acting outside of the processes of nature, but through them.

Thus, we believe that man is related to God, not only through his faithful love in history, but also through his continuing work in nature. It is this dual relationship with the one God which gives man both his freedom and his "order" of process and change which follows according to established rules and goals to fulfil his own intentions. This means that, recognizing his relationship with God, man's

responsibility is to act creatively in accordance with his knowledge of God and his knowledge of the world which God is creating.

Christian trust in and loyalty to a faithful God who works with his people everywhere in nature and in history is focused in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. St. Paul emphasizes the faith in Christ as that which gives new life; that is, life with a new dimension of hope and confidence and joy. And all through the Christian tradition there has run the finely woven thread of the idea that God engages in a vital and real way with existing human lives by fulfilling them, and calling them in Jesus Christ.

We may consider the accounts of Jesus' deeds of healing. From a reading of the gospel records there can be no doubt that Jesus considered one important part of his ministry was the healing of the sick people. He healed two types: to those who through mishap or disease had lost their good health, he restored their former state (e.g. Mark 8:24, 10:52, Matthew 9:20, Luke 13:10) and to those who through accidents of birth had lived all their days with a handicap, he gave health and strength where previously it had not been (e.g. Mark 8:35, John 9:1). By his healing ministry Jesus implies that sickness and suffering are not, in themselves, to be considered good or a natural part of the world which God is creating. They are enemies to be overcome by faith. He also demonstrates that God moves through life in all its aspects, entering into natural processes, altering, recreating and completing the growth of his people, not in opposition to their will, but in response to their faith.

It should also be noted the Jesus clearly command his followers to continue his healing ministry as they enter into the world in his name (Matthew 9:35, 10:16 and parallels, cf also Matthew 17:14-21).

Genetic medicine attempts to improve the biological component around which human wholeness can be established. It may best be understood by the Christian as a human action, hoping to add form and direction to lives that are deformed and genetically diseased. This is not to say that this human action is identical to God's initiative in human life, only that the goal is the same kind of goal, the wholeness and completeness of life. Moreover, the dynamic movement of God provides us with

a parallel of action to imitate. We do not claim that any action of ours, no matter how sophisticated, coincides with God's. Nor do we say that our human endeavours to improve upon what we have received naturally will yield entirely positive results. What we can say, and do say, is that God has given us the freedom, the responsibility and even an urgency to follow the example of Christ in looking for ways to find wholeness of body and life.

At the same time Christians have always recognized that man has the capacity to disobey God's will and to thwart his purposes as well as to obey his will and advance his purposes. Man's nature is sinful and the world in which he lives is a world often in rebellion against the purposes of God. For example, we might cite the confusion of motives that prompts the scientific community to engage in genetic research. Some researches may be seeking fame and recognition, others financial reward, still others may be motivated by the thirst for knowledge, while another group might be spurred on by the hope for a cure for some disease of genetic origin. On top of this mixture of motives are agencies associated with genetic research. Obvious questions of power, both political and economic, are raised in connection with genetic research and the payoffs resulting from successful conclusions in given areas. The financial rewards for the researchers and backers who discover a feasible way of synthetic production of certain hormones would be enormous. Similarly, military and political power could become associated with expertise and ability in the field of genetic manipulation. Human genetics could become another method for the powerful of the world to exploit the powerless.

We are aware, then, of the variety of motives that impel people to do research in human genetics, and that not all practitioners of genetic medicine have the health and welfare of the genetically disadvantaged as their primary concern. There is always the possibility of abuse of the new power that is contained in genetic knowledge, and we can say that the potential for its abuse exists because of man's sinful and incomplete nature.

## **B. Some Socio-Ethical Considerations**

### **1. Means and Ends**

Even if genetic research and genetic medicine were to attain the highest standards of ethical conduct and the stiff test of Christian love (that of bringing God's healing love to every child of God, irrespective of race, colour, creed, social position or whatever), there may still be biological, social, spiritual and psychological consequences of questionable value arising from those actions. Add to this the means of achieving genetic goals in human population, and we have the basis for some serious doubts and questions.

## **2. Man's Self-Image**

Another important consideration for genetic manipulation is the impact its practice will have on people in their social context, their psychological responses and on the religious faith which informs their world view. The basis for our reflection on this point is the Christian view that man is more than his physical body.

In a general way, then, perhaps the most significant changes to be expected from the common practice of genetic medicine may be alterations, indirect and inadvertent in the human psyche, social behaviour and faith.

## **3. Extension of Choice**

Living in a consumer society where consumer choice is at the very root of our economic and social life, we need to ask what impact a variety of genetic options will have upon us. If genetic science would open up the possibility of choosing the genetic constitution of our children (even to the smallest extent), then how are we to approach the choosing?

All people need to have as clear and complete information as can be provided in making their decisions, and this should include some understanding of the possible costs both to themselves, the rest of the existing family (if any) and to society at large, all of which are involved in the options from which they choose. But, beyond this, they need to have help to raise to the level of awareness the value systems under which they are really operating as they make their choices.

Even now genetic choices are available to Canadians although as yet in a limited degree. It is desirable that those choices exist as options for those who need them, that is for those with genetic complications or those immediately threatened by them. Moreover, there must be a more responsible approach to what is and what is not an appropriate deployment of health resources in the direction of greatest need.

#### **4. Heightened Anxiety in Parents**

One of the most odious aspects of man's eugenic desires, it is fear, would be an increased anxiety about the appearance of genetically diseased individuals. There is abundant evidence of prejudice and abuse of disadvantaged people in our society now. It could be expected that the possibility of making genetic choices in humans would raise the hopes and desires of parents for genetically improved children. Conversely, the birth of affected children might come to be labelled as irresponsible and/or thoughtless on the part of the parents. To such false expectation it must be emphasized that there can be no hope of genetic perfection in people, ever, because spontaneous mutations will always occur as part of the creation process

Certainly, for Christians, there can be no glorification of some abstract ideal of "perfect" health. While we are called to overcome as much as possible those diseases and handicaps which limit us, at the same time we are called to recognize that dis-ease is more than physical, and wholeness or health involves spiritual, as well as physical and mental well-being. Furthermore, as Christians we are called to recognize that suffering and pain, while not necessarily good in themselves, do have a place in human life and may become an occasion through which God's purpose is fulfilled. We need only mention the suffering servant of Second Isaiah or the cross of Christ as evidence of this.

#### **D. Signposts and Guidelines**

Mankind is in fact always moving into the unknown, and every scientist involved in human genetics is doing work, the consequences of which he cannot know, any more than the Israelites could have known their future as they struck out into the desert with Moses. They wanted to return to Egypt soon after they had left, but that

avenue was forever closed to them. They had to cut off their pasts; their hope lay in the future. We are joined with them in spirit on this pilgrimage because we cannot go back from our journey into the unknown genetic future; whatever better days we have to look forward to, those days are in the future and not in the past.

To meet that future we need to be reminded of our faith that God is in the future and will continue to meet us there faithfully; that God still engages with people in the task of completing and reforming human lives; and that he is with us in love.

There is no immediate way of saying that we know the mind of Christ on the complicated questions related to genetic manipulation. We acknowledge that in matters of this kind we cannot expect to find in the scriptures specific authority for or against any course of action. On the other hand, we will find our community of faith enriched by asserting anew our faith that Christ is the living Lord of our life together, the fountainhead of our sense of love and hope for peace on earth and good will among the people of the earth. Such a faith, as we have understood it in the preceding sections, will prompt us to exercise our freedom to act-constrained by wisdom, faith and love, by planning, and by the careful consideration of foreseeable consequences of any course of action in genetics. We are urged to restraint by our faith which draws a distinction between what we perceive to be God's purposes and what we, as human creatures, desire.

In dealing with the issues surrounding genetic manipulation, mankind is involved in life and death issues. There is no escape from this reality - neither to the world above, to the world of the past, nor to the world yet to come. With the advent of genetic manipulation God is calling man, here and now, to an increased responsibility. Whether it will reflect the shame or the glory of human achievements will be decided by the degree of wisdom and patience we bring to its application and use.

These represent some perspectives provided by Christian ethics. While they may have limitations, they do have an immediate usefulness in clarifying our Christian understanding of the relative promises of benefits and warnings of harm coming from the human venture into genetic manipulation.

**This Commission Concludes That:**

1. Although the Bible offers no absolute solutions to the ethical dilemmas studied to date, it does offer guidelines for decision-making.
2. These guidelines are available to the ordained ministry and the general church membership who, with increased awareness of the problems posed, may make informed decisions in Christian love. This love must be spelled out, however, in concrete terms, in economic and political structures that provide for the positive protection of the weak.
3. The United Church of Canada has a responsibility to alert its members to the issues involved and to urge them to become more aware of the beliefs upon which they make such decisions as are asked of them

## **We Therefore Recommend:**

### **A. That The United Church of Canada:**

- 1 - 5 (procedural recommendations)
6. DECLARE publicly that any agencies involved in genetic screening be urged to keep in the strictest of confidence all data such as case histories, laboratory tests and clinical observations as they pertain to individuals.
7. URGE that any agencies involved in screening programs be aware of the sensitive issues that may arise when genetic problems are associated with particular ethnic or racial groups.
8. SUPPORT the position that the parent or parents involved, without coercion, and employing as much information and counsel as can be provided, make the decisions as to whether or not to seek pre-natal diagnosis and concerning the actions to be taken consequent to such diagnosis.



9. SUPPORT the position that staff in health care agencies must be free to make their individual decisions of conscience regarding their personal involvement in procedures such as those discussed in this report, without fear of retribution.
10. MAKE cloning the subject of further extensive study from an ethical and moral point of view should the possibility of human cloning become remotely feasible in the near future since such cloning carries the possibility of unknown implications for human self-understanding.
11. RECOMMEND to the appropriate authorities that amniocentesis (pre-natal diagnosis) be made available only for the diagnosis of genetic disease and/or medical treatment and should not be made available for the determination of sex or other normal physical characteristics.
12. THAT we provide resources for ministers involved in counselling.

## **B. That the Canadian Medical Association**

1. REQUEST its accreditation committee to consider procedures for control of semen banking and the suitable screening of semen donors. Specifically, that the agencies involved be required to see to it that an appropriate form is procured and completed prior to any semen donations for artificial inseminations by donor (AID). This form should assure the recipient that the donor sperm is free of any known, specified, hereditary or familiar disease. Also, that the Canadian medical Association through its various provincial accreditation committees require appropriate registration, licensing and annual supervision of all sperm banks in a fashion similar to other approved laboratory services.
2. URGE that medical schools, as well as nursing colleges, practising physicians and other related health professionals, have a comprehensive training in genetics as a basic requirement, and that refresher course in the subject of genetics be instituted for those already in practice.

3. INITIATE a process whereby other medical groups, along with interested lay people and organizations, may study how medical resources should be allocated and used within the genetic field in the most responsible way possible.

### **C. That The Medical Research Council of Canada**

BE COMMENDED for its prompt action in formulating strict guidelines for the handling of recombinant DNA molecules. (See its *Guidelines of Handling Recombinant DNA Molecules and Animal Viruses and Cells*, January 1977)

### **D. That the Government of Canada**

1. BE REQUESTED to give prompt consideration to ways in which these guidelines may be applied to research under the auspices of other governmental agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture and of Defense, Crown Corporations, non-governmental granting bodies, and private industry.
2. THAT it work through our representative to the World health Organization and any other appropriate agencies for the adoption of such guidelines internationally.

### **E. That the Provincial and Territorial Governments**

1. BE URGED to devise mechanisms whereby adequate genetic counselling and diagnostic services, including those related to AID, may be made available on as wide a geographic basis as possible.
2. THAT, in administering health care delivery systems, they take measure to provide adequate compensation for the extensive time, energy and expertise of the physician or genetic team required for adequate genetic counselling and diagnosis.

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