

Beginning Biotechnology Guidelines

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There is no doubt that the new opportunities and challenges lifted up by such things as stem cell research, cloning, genetically generated pharmaceuticals, trans-species genetic modifications, xeno-transplantation, genetic screening, genetically modified foods, bio-patenting, and nanotechnology (to build products starting from the atomic level), will dramatically alter the lives of people, now and in future generations. Such alteration can hold much promised good. It can also produce destructive and uncontrollable dynamics.

Along with all people of good will, the task of faithful Christians is to help chart a course that will promote the former and resist the latter. But that's not going to be easy. We live in a world where strong forces can blind us: the profit motive, the itch to be "first", the urge to do something simply because the power to do it is within our grasp, the desire to pursue that which prompts our curiosity because it might have some possible benefits despite any possible negative implications.

However, some guiding suggestions for prudent ethical reflection have emerged from the experience of bio-ethicists to date. We the *Biotechnology Reference Group* believe these guidelines can help us and possibly others in our own processes of judgment not as if they were the last word, but as an initial word of needed, on-going reflection on how Christians might responsibly address biotechnological/nano-technological innovations in our time.

Here is a list you might find helpful:

1. **Keep utility and vision in a creative balance.** A utilitarian assessment, in a post-modern world, may seem an inviting way to deal with ethical issues. But that method tilts us towards thinking that the "end" we see as good always justifies the "means." By contrast, to have a vision is to acknowledge that some boundaries matter, that some obligations are permanent. For example: health care spending should not rush after some stunning new technological breakthrough that will mostly benefit the few, the rich or the powerful, if paying for such innovations will leave unmet the needs of the poor and disadvantaged.
2. **Recognize that stewardship must be understood as service with creation, not self-serving human exploitation.** All of creation belongs to God. Humanity is called to use its creativity for the well-being of creation as a whole, in the spirit of stewardship and discipleship. Biotechnological innovations must be disciplined by a prior respect for all of creation, by a reverent concern to understand the contribution each part makes to the whole of creation. As well we need an awareness that we as humans are not God and did not invent and must not monopolize, but work within the living matrix within which life continues.

3. **Consider all the potential benefits and potential harms of new technologies on living and non-living aspects of creation.** We need always to ask who is paying the price for the benefits we seek, how high is the price they pay, and who (if anyone!) is speaking for them. Those needs (human and non-human) can and might serve to show us appropriate and important limits on our actions. Are we creating conditions for extinction of parts of creation which now play and/or may play in the future an important role in the biosphere?
4. **Challenge misleading or over-simplifying rhetoric about advances and promises in biotechnology and nanotechnology.** Ensure in-depth reflection on all the implications of any proposed action, not only the economic ones, and not only the ones affecting our immediate environment or society. Press for transparency and accountability by decision makers. We live in one human family, one biosphere.

Challenge the assumption that everything needs to be “fixed” or “improved”; that we know how best to do this; and that just because something can be done does not mean that it will be done, or ought to be done. That is, there are “limitations” and “imperfections” in the natural order (e.g., suffering and death), and certainly in our scientific knowledge and technical abilities, not to mention in our moral wisdom. Science cannot save us from our finitude. Nor is science free from human constructs that lead to self-interest and opinion rather than the reporting of more value-neutral scientific observations.

5. **Recognize the inherent dignity of life, and resist the temptation to reduce life to commodities.** Commodities are valued only for the price they can bring or the uses they can be put to. Particular techniques, particular claims of ownership or of intellectual property rights should be examined to see if they imply a disregard for the inherent dignity of non-human living creatures or of other human beings, and if so, on those grounds resisted.
6. **Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God** (see Micah 6:8). This means assessing new technologies from the standpoint of the poor, the marginalized, and those least able to make their voices heard in the world’s clamour. Be still. Pay attention, listen, discern, and be willing to be led by those lacking access to political, economic or technological power. We can’t do justice all by ourselves. What do these voices tell us about the potential impact of a new technology on their lives? Will it tend to empower and strengthen communities on the margins, or will it concentrate power in the hands of those who already hold economic and political dominance? Will it tend to increase ecological diversity and strengthen natural systems, or to undermine them?
7. **Resist the temptation to rush decisions.** The “handiest” of means to a desired end is not always the one that promotes the future well being of all. Sometimes we must decline to exercise our “power over” so as to resist the quick and easy but ethically slippery path to a desirable goal. We need to make room for “ethical time”, which is often slower than “technological time” or “market time.” We need to raise ethical

questions about what we do to help close the gap between ethical time and technological or market time. The impact of genetic technologies can be understood fully only with the passage of time. Therefore, it is imperative that in advance a cycle of re-evaluation be established in order to set the precedent that these technologies be used in a just and safe manner.

8. **Recruit and work to ensure full community participation in contemplating decisions with ethical implications.** We are born in the middle of life. From our beginning we are part of a community, formed by it, supported by it. Responsible ethical analysis is made in the context of full dialogue with others, especially those who directly and indirectly (marginalized) will be affected by the decisions we make.
9. **Consider decisions on birth, life, and death in light of God's providential care over and concern for all aspects of life and death, and the future of the world.** Romans (8:38-39) makes it clear that in Christ neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come will be able to separate us from the love of God.
10. **Encourage legislation that protects the physical, biological, and ethical integrity of ourselves and our communities and future of the world.** Biotechnology and nano-technology exist within the interactive matrix of creation. To ignore our responsibility to this dynamic interrelation as we pursue our creative activities is to court disaster for future generations. Unfettered pursuit of self interest at the expense of the greatest common good for all is self-destructive in the long run.
11. **Encourage and acknowledge additions and adjustments** to these ethical considerations in accord with ways that specific religious traditions may also rightly, in light of the above, wish to add their specific concerns and insights as biotechnology advances.

In light of the above guidelines, the reader is also referred to the document on Christian anthropology produced in 2004 by the CCC Faith and Witness Commission, entitled *Becoming Human: Theological Anthropology in an Age of Engineering Life*, as well as the Biotechnology Reference Group's 2003 publication, *Life: Patent Pending*.

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The Governing Board of the Canadian Council of Churches has affirmed these Beginning Guidelines as a working document of the BRG and given its permission to offer them more widely. These Guidelines will assist in the Reference Group's task of education and communication. The BRG is a committee of the Canadian Council of Churches, and operates according to the Forum model of the Council.

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