

Christian Responsibility Today: Sources for guidance

Gathering

HYMN

(See hymn suggestions on p. 119)

PRAYER

Direct us, Lord God, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and extend to us your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name, and finally by your mercy bring us to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

(*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p.49)



HEARING THE WORD

Luke 10:25-37

DISCERNING THE WORD

Silence

Discernment

What did you hear in this reading? Is there a word of God for us here?

Introduction

Session summary

This session considers the moral or ethical¹ resources that Christians can turn to as they ponder the developments and social issues with which genetics confronts society. The first segment explores Lutheran convictions about scripture as a resource for the moral life, while the second identifies values that all people of good will claim as touchstones for living in the genetics age. The last segment concludes by looking at several relevant moral resources taken from established social teachings of the ELCA.



Real life stories²

1. Phil Ramsey has just been hired as the chief financial officer for Genetic Development Corporation, a biotechnology company located in the Boston area. He has spent most of his career working with fast growing businesses. He has been involved in public financings, initial public offerings, and several venture capital firms, but this is the first time he has been extensively involved in the biotech industry. He is a member of a Lutheran congregation and is pondering what his faith means for his new work.

He knows that genetic testing creates new challenges with which society must deal. He also knows that some people portray him and his co-workers as “mad scientists” or “greedy entrepreneurs” bent upon the advancement of medical technology regardless of its impact on society. But he knows that the individuals who make up the biotech workforce very much reflect society as a whole and are not uniform in their views and beliefs.

His experience indicates, in fact, that the biotech industry includes a significant percentage of people of faith. Moreover, he is coming to believe that those who have chosen this industry did so because they want to accomplish something purposeful with their careers; they want to know their work changed peoples’ lives for the better. He also knows that America does not exist in a vacuum, and that, whatever the concerns with the development of therapeutics based on genetic markers, it will be done somewhere by someone.



Both Jesus and the lawyer who questions him concur on the heart of the Law: loving God and neighbor. These principles are found in Deuteronomy 6:4-7, Leviticus 18:1-5;19:13-18. New Testament parallels for this passage are Mathew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34.

How does Jesus change the lawyer’s need to identify a specific neighbor into a value of being a neighbor to anyone in need?

Ethicists (individuals whose work is dedicated to thinking and writing about what is good, right, and fitting) generally make a useful distinction between morals and ethics (see endnote 1), but you may think of them interchangeably for the purposes of this study.

Social context refers to broad features that shape any human activity like culture or the language used. Social location refers to the idea that human beings are “located” in many social relationships and identities that shape their self-understanding, values and aspirations, and their perceptions of others and the world. Examples of these relationships include race/ethnicity; socio-economic class; gender; religious affiliation; mental/physical abilities; and age.

As he ponders these facts, his work, and what he hears at church, he has settled on two questions he wants to ask his pastor and fellow congregational members:

How can our Lutheran church best position itself to (1) provide input to the industry and the individuals in it from a Christian point of view, and (2) impact decisions in a positive fashion?

What does the Christian point of view say morally about the work he is now doing, and how can that be communicated in a language people in the industry can understand?

2. *Cracking the Code of Life* Segment 13: DNA Databases (use minute 1:25:29 to 1:31)

Christian resources for ethical deliberation

We have called upon Christian resources from the very first session of this study. But as Christians respond in gratitude to the experience of God’s grace and seek to live out their callings and responsibilities, we look for specific moral guidance. Fundamental guidance of this kind is found in scripture and in our Lutheran Confessions as faithful interpretations of scripture.

Scripture as authoritative source and norm

For Lutheran Christians, the Word of God is a living Word active before the foundation of this earth, still active in this very moment and in futures and in worlds unimaginable to us. That which was revealed to us in the Bible is the written word of God. It is a witness to what God has done in the past for many people. By the values it expresses we learn how God has acted in the world. By the repeating pattern of God’s mercy and judgment we learn how God would have us live—with rejoicing and humility before God and with fellowship and investment in our neighbors’ trials and joys.

We have also a much stronger connection with God in our living Lord Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of God, for he does more than teach. He forgives, renews, invigorates and calls us to our vocations. No written word can summarize all he has done for us as the living word of God. We experience his love and his spirit daily.

As a result of our devotion to Christ, our Lord, we hold dear those texts of the Old and New Testaments which witness to the proclamation of God made flesh in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that we acknowledge the Bible as the authoritative, inspired source and norm of both life and the Christian proclamation. It is for this reason that the Bible is the fundamental source for Christian moral guidance, even though Lutherans do not consider the Bible first or foremost a rule book, but as the witness to the power of God in all God’s dimensions.

Lutheran Christians also recognize that these texts witness within the limitations of their authors’ human creativity and sinfulness, culture, social status, age, race, nation, language, and particular intended audience. As a result, Lutherans do not consider the Bible as the only means by which God speaks to us. Its witness is source and norm, but not the sum total of moral guidance.

This recognition of social context and social location behind the biblical authors’ witness is a great blessing in our study of genetics. It teaches us to be listening for God’s guidance in many other places. It also reminds us of our own limitations in any statements that we might make. (For instance, even while writing this study, the task force acknowledges that its witness to the blessings and limitations of the genetic challenge will not be that of all peoples or all nations or all times.)

Additionally, recognition of the role of social context and social location means we can take seriously what the Bible has to say about matters related to genetics. While we will not see the words “genetics” or “genome” in Christian scriptures, we can examine biblical texts that speak to ancient concerns that still resonate in the twenty-first century, e.g., (in)fertility, hybridization, crop failure, illness and healing, confronting mortality and death. As we learn both about genetics and the scriptures, we will be able to identify how God engages such concerns with creativity, justice, and mercy.

Guidance from scripture

As the fundamental source for moral guidance, what is scripture's basic principle for the moral life? Christians have generally looked to the *double love commandment* for this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Luke 10:27 and Matthew 22:37, 39). In other words, both the Old Testament and Jesus teaches that *all* individual and corporate actions should unfold from loving the God who has first loved us, and should be directed at care for neighbors who need to be loved. Or to tie it to the idea of vocation, the double love command grounds both faith in God and the baptismal vocation to serve others. Insofar as we have faith, we cannot help but be active in serving. Insofar as we have faith, we know that bringing good to the world is what God is doing and we know that we are called to do the same.

Sometimes this statement about love of neighbor can be understood as if the Bible is concerned primarily about individual lives. But Scripture is quite clear that God's priority is to address believers in their corporate and social life. We find a strong example in the words of the Lord God given to the prophet Amos (Amos 5:1-24) "...but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever living stream." God governs the whole world and commands that justice be done in the social dimension of life. God is just as active in the social arena as in governing the Christian heart.

Scripture also provides a vision of the future that directs Christian love and justice seeking in the present. This vision is grounded in the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead as the first born of all creation, and it is vividly described in some places: "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:1-4. See also Isaiah 25:6-9; 65:17; 66:22.). Scripture's guidance, then, includes this vision of human health and wellbeing as the end goal for all creation. We do not create this future, but in gratitude for its promise, Christians are to invest creative energies in approximating this vision of salvation and in creating fragmentary yet real illustrations of it now. Living in hope, Christians pursue an ethic that seeks to anticipate in the present those values integral to God's promised future of wellbeing.

Even while guided by that vision of God's future, the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus teaches us that we live in a world of sin and so must adjust to the realities of life as it is now. Neither the good news of God in Jesus Christ nor a positive end-time vision from Scripture are enough without our continuing the first vocation God gave us, to order the world for the good of all species and the earth itself. To aid us in this task, the Bible also presents guidance through the 10 commandments and other examples of the law. (Exodus 20:2ff) God works through the gospel where appropriate, but also works through the demands of law. Lutherans thus talk about God's work through both law and gospel. Mindful of both, the Christian ethic can be summarized as "faith active in love seeking justice."

The need for principles

Yet, is loving the neighbor or knowing the 10 commandments enough to help us decide exactly how to respond to social dilemmas and particular challenges? We need other principles and guidance that can assist us in translating biblical teaching into proper actions and nitty-gritty decisions. Christians, like other people, need relevant knowledge and a whole array of moral principles and standards for making daily-sized decisions about:

- what genetic research to support with tax dollars,
- which scientific or business efforts to encourage,
- whether to use transgenic products,
- if/when to seek out genetic testing.

Commonly shared ethical principles from social life can aid us in thinking about those kinds of decisions, as long as they express dimensions of love and elements of God's commands.

Commonly shared resources for ethical deliberation

When Lutheran Christians seek guidance for engaging complex questions related to genetics, it is helpful to remember that we have a positive view of humanity and creation as good and beloved by God. Because God has bridged the distance to come to humankind, we know that we can draw upon human reason (a God-given gift common to all human beings regardless of any faith tradition) to address crucial ethical issues. As long as this affirmation of human reason and intellectual capacities does not encourage us to put our ultimate trust in our own abilities or to misplace faith in God, Lutherans will not reject such commonly shared human wisdom.

If human reason is a source for moral guidance, then we are free to honor and adopt some of the principles we need. Moreover, the Christian use of commonly shared principles allows us to communicate with others in the public arena, whether Christian or not. We lift up here two significant values or principles important for discussing genetics and public policy.

The common good

The first value is the *common good*. Political thought has long centered on this idea as the prime goal for public policy and an important criteria for evaluating public policy. It is crucial to be able to ask: Does this or that policy contribute to the good of all? If not, who benefits and why? Christians are very comfortable with this idea since it is implied in the commands to love and do justice. As the Apostle Paul writes, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity let us work for the good of all” (Galatians 6:10). The common good is not a magic criteria, but it does serve as a touchstone that can guide and help us evaluate. It is quite legitimate to look at a possible use of genetics and affirm it because its use will benefit the common good. The opposite is also true, and in that respect this value can rule against some genetic developments because they do not significantly serve the common good.

Human dignity

The second value, *human dignity*, has already been mentioned above. Dignity may be defined, in brief, as the quality or state of being worthy of esteem or respect, and thus due appropriate obligations and duties. Christians ground their affirmation of human dignity in the evidence of God’s love that creates us in God’s image. Belief in human dignity is widespread in this society. It is one of the common assumptions this society shares, especially from the standpoint of law. The societal assumption that dignity is innate permits national codes of law to uphold the right of every individual regardless of their wealth, status, or mental condition, even if this is imperfectly done.

But there is another widely-shared meaning beyond the idea of an individual’s inborn legal dignity. Human dignity, it should be noted, is more the result of a relationship than simply an invisible legal mark on an individual. A newborn needs others if it is going to survive and thrive. Parent, family, friends, and others provide attention and affection, and over time these contributions to the child’s life help create a sense of dignity. Human dignity, then, is not just an innate individual thing but arises from the activity of a community. This is important not to overlook!

Nor should it be forgotten that dignity also has a future orientation. The Christian tradition is especially aware of this aspect because of the idea of the resurrection of the dead. Still, even non-Christians evidence such a future orientation whenever they express some sense of responsibility for “our children’s children.” Human dignity, in this sense, comes from the future or end-goal. Christians are assured of this in God’s saving activity; dignity is due other humans because of what God will finally make of us.

The principles of the common good and human dignity should be kept front and center in any discussion or decision about the use of genetics. Christians may enrich these secular concepts with specifically religious meanings, but we use them as commonly shared values in the public arena.

Established resources

One of the primary ways that the ELCA brings together scriptural guidance and commonly shared concepts, like the common good, is through its social teaching and policy documents. The most basic of these documents are called social statements. These statements provide frameworks and principles for considering social issues. They are not new creeds or confessions, and are always subject to testing as to whether they are faithful to Scripture and our heritage. Yet, their role is to guide the formation of Christian conscience, to guide policy-setting for this church, and to guide Christian advocacy and work as a public church. As you probably understand by now, this study is one of the steps in moving toward such a statement on genetics. Even while charting new territory, this statement can draw on previous statements for some general direction and established principles. The following three points illustrate such themes that we can rely on.

Church as community of moral deliberation

The character of this study is guided by the conviction that this church is a *community of moral deliberation*. Simply put, solid ethical reflection is not a solo sport. We do not do it well if we only always sit alone with our ideas, concerns, and the scriptures as we contemplate moral questions. We all have partial vision, and listening to, learning from, and sharing with others helps us expand our perspectives on and understanding of very complicated ethical problems.

The concept of a community of moral deliberation was developed outside of religious institutions, but it is now part of the ELCA's self-identity as a Christian community.⁴ This is also an important commitment in the age of genetics since the moral and social issues are so complex. Part of taking responsibility today is being open to engage in such ethical deliberation in order to inform the best possible decisions. The church is one of the best places to have such conversations because we can leave partisanship at the doors of the church and discuss as people united by Christ, even when not united by our perspectives. This then raises the question as to whether such a commitment to honest give and take should stay inside the church doors! The question becomes: on the matter of genetics (and other issues too!) should we also extend this commitment to moral deliberation across vocations, religious traditions, political affiliations, geographic borders, and socio-economic contexts?

Valuing lives

On the controversial matter for genetics of "when human personhood begins," the ELCA has no stated position. The ELCA statement on abortion does observe that: "The strong Christian presumption is to preserve and protect life," and indicates further that "human life in all phases of its development is God-given and, therefore, has intrinsic value, worth, and dignity." It also states that although "abortion raises significant moral issues at any stage of fetal development, the closer the life in the womb comes to full term the more serious such issues become."⁵ These statements seem to suggest a concern for both the protection of life and the developmental nature of human personhood. Given that both kinds of language are in the statement, it is fair to ask: should this church oppose research that creates embryos solely for the purpose of extracting stem cells and should it oppose all non-therapeutic embryo research? Should it be open to genetic research on early stage embryos that have already been created and will never be used?

Beyond these contested questions around the beginning of life, the presumption to preserve life clearly includes valuing all human lives. The lives in question include those in the U.S. and abroad who suffer poverty, lack healthcare, live amid regional warfare, and so forth. This is important in terms of genetic policy questions because of the huge level of resources and the sometimes limited accessibility to the results. This is especially relevant when we remember that human genetic research and treatments are largely carried out among the affluent in the U.S. and Western Europe. Millions die each year in impoverished countries from diseases (malaria, TB, HIV-AIDs) and conditions (poverty, hunger, malnutrition) that do not need a genetic solution or discovery to be effectively addressed.

In the ELCA, there are three types of social teaching and policy documents. The most authoritative are framework documents called *social statements*, while the shorter and more topical teaching documents are called *social messages*. The third kind, called *social policy resolutions*, are brief and very focused. "These documents arise from and address the changing circumstances of the world in light of God's living word of Law and Gospel. With the aid of contemporary experience and knowledge, they bring this church's understanding of its faith to bear on social issues."³

"As a community of moral deliberation, the Church seeks to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Christians struggle together on social questions in order to know better how to live faithfully and responsibly in their callings. Processes of deliberation need to inform and guide this church's corporate witness in society." (*Church in Society: A Lutheran perspective*, p. 7)

So one question is: should the presumption for life in tandem with the principle of justice mean that this church should insist that questions of social priorities and systemic injustice be used to evaluate whether or not to proceed with particular applications of genetic medicine and biotechnology? For example, should this church insist that the delivery of a new procedure, like a genetic test for newborns, answer the question: will this procedure be delivered in a way that makes it accessible to all expectant parents around the world?

Four principles of justice

The existing social statements of the ELCA have already crafted some of the principles we should call on as the ELCA speaks to a society in the biotech century. Four principles of justice—participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability—are clearly visible in the social statements on the environment, peace, and economic life and each has significant overlap with concerns encountered in the area of genetics.⁶ All four express values evident in the speech and actions of our Lord Jesus toward those around him and even in his regard for the creation. These four mediating principles of justice constitute a pattern of discernment in the ELCA for a social ethic. This social ethic, while not fleshed out in detail, still makes it possible to address social issues in a coordinated and comprehensive way. It provides a basis for assessing conflicting moral questions and choosing between the varied goods of life (physical, social, personal goods, and so forth). In this sense, these four principles could be said to articulate a core ethics of “faith active in love through justice” for ELCA social policy.

- *Solidarity* affirms a sense of kinship with the whole web of God’s creative activity, and it should cultivate actions that seek harmony among individuals, cultures, and all living things on the earth. It includes *standing with* the victims of natural disaster, and presumably would include *standing against* other assaults on human wellbeing such as disease and disability. It would seem to imply both moral integrity and the courage to stand with and for creation.
- *Sufficiency* means meeting the basic needs of humans and other life because life comes *from God for* all. In a world of finite resources, sufficiency means that those with more than enough should share with the needy. In a globalized world of modern powers, this would seem to suggest that we must find ways so that all have enough.
- *Sustainability* means providing an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations. In the past, Christians have supported this principle by appeal to the Sabbath and jubilee laws (Leviticus 25:8ff.). Today it includes a scope of accountability that ancients could not have imagined due to issues of population, power, and knowledge. These changes in the human condition call for revisions to what sustainability means in ways we are only beginning to consider.
- *Participation* recognizes that humans are part of a vast, interdependent, and created community of life. This principle calls upon the church to be a community of moral deliberation where the needs of all living things are heard—actual, imagined, present, and future. The interests of the entire community of life must be considered.

Each principle makes its own distinct claims which both support and stand in constructive tension with the others. Together these principles reinforce the sense of holism and interdependence needed in an age of genetics. For instance, sufficiency guides the present while sustainability looks to the future, and together they give due to factors of both time and consequence. Solidarity entails care and accountability for the interdependence of life. In this way all living things are therefore accorded moral standing and rights. It seems right then to ask: in light of these principles should this church stand for setting limits and establishing obligations over the powers that genetic knowledge grants humans?

Invitation to conversation, prayer, and action



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What have you learned about the use of scripture in moral deliberation from the discussion above? Have you ever thought about the double love command or the passage about justice as the starting place for the moral life? What did you find helpful in this exploration? What was missing?
- Choose either the common good or human dignity from section two to discuss. Where does this idea show up in public discussions of social issues or policy? Where are they missing? Do you believe these values are relevant and beneficial for evaluating the use of genetic technology for business, commerce, and public policy?
- Choose one of the four justice principles just highlighted and discuss it. Here are some possible questions:
 - Does this principle seem consistent with scripture and with other Christian moral values?
 - Can you see how it could help guide reflection in a social statement on genetics?
 - How could it help answer the questions posed by “Phil Ramsey” in “Real life stories” above?
- Action question: Has your congregation ever had a Bible study dedicated to the ways scripture should be used in making moral decisions? How did you do this study? If your congregation has not, what issues of scripture and moral values, especially related to genetics, might appeal to your congregation?

Closing

INVITATION TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Pray for those who work in the field of biotechnology as educators and researchers; in production and marketing as CEOs, CFOs, and Boards of Directors.

PRAYING WITH THE TRADITION

Power of the Eternal Father, help me. Wisdom of the Son, enlighten the eye of my understanding. Tender mercy of the Holy Spirit, unite my heart to yourself. Eternal God, restore health to the sick and life to the dead. Give us a voice, your own voice, to cry out to you for mercy for the world. You, light, give us light. You, wisdom, give us wisdom. You, supreme strength, strengthen us. Amen

(Prayer of Catherine of Siena, who lived from about 1347 to 1380)

Endnotes

- 1 Morals are the personal and social customs, practices, and beliefs about what people should do and be. Ethics can be defined, then, as sustained critical reflection upon morals; it suggests systematic-like thinking about what is good, right, and fitting.
- 2 These individuals and scenarios are fictitious composites based on real circumstances and conversations.
- 3 *Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns*, 1997, revised 2006, p.10
- 4 *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, p. 6. A social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991.
- 5 *A Social Statement on Abortion*, pp.2-4. A social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991.
- 6 There are nine social statements of the ELCA. The key ones relevant to this point include: *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, 1993; *For Peace in God's World*, 1995; and *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 1999. More information is available at www.elca.org/socialstatements

