

Chapter Seven—Genetics, Christians, and the Public Debate

“Time and again, particularly in the past thirty years, the United States has repeated a cycle. . . . Quite unexpectedly, or at least seemingly so to those who do not follow scientific developments, scientists announce a discovery. The media covers the story, albeit with as much sensationalism as possible. The public then responds to the announcement with surprise and consternation. A few ethicists and official religious bodies formulate positions, but often well after the controversy has passed. Eventually, most people cautiously accept the new technology, some because there seemingly is no choice and others because they overcome their initial negative reaction.

“[There are] . . . many such instances of this cycle of discovery, reaction, and cautious acceptance. Artificial insemination by donor, considered to be a form of adultery fifty years ago, has become a widely accepted practice in the treatment of infertility. Prenatal diagnosis (introduced in the late 1960s) and *in vitro* fertilization (first available in 1978) similarly evoked consternation and then general acceptance. When recombinant DNA research was initiated, scientists, as well as the public, had concerns about safety and the unintended release of genetically altered organisms into the environment.”¹

Introduction

Does the cycle noted above indicate that our society will reluctantly, but relatively quickly, accept every biotech innovation that comes along? Will our culture in the near future practice all conceivable forms of genetic testing, genetic medicine, genetically modified farming, and human cloning? Could our society instead debate these matters and say “No” to a specific application of a technology? Could these debates include moral and religious concerns? Should the church as an institution be involved in these public conversations?

To effectively answer “yes” to any of these questions, Christians must think through how to call for and how to take part in a meaningful public discussion. There are several means for such activity. One significant avenue involves individual Christians, on the basis of their faith and knowledge, speaking out on the public questions that are just below the surface in many of the genetic developments explored in this study guide. Another way invites the congregation to take a role in education and moral deliberation on genetic issues. The most public way for the church as an institution to be involved is as a participant in social and legal debates. This chapter deals with each of these means and gives special attention to how the church practices what is often called *public theology* (see sidebar). This attention is warranted because the church’s involvement in such debate must be carefully thought through if it is to be effective and faithful. Nevertheless, the underlying concern of this chapter is how Christians understand their involvement in the social order and in public debates about genetics.

Public Theology

For purposes of this guide, may be defined as the intentional effort of the church as an institution to engage, influence, support, or criticize the social order from its specifically religious convictions.

We will concentrate first on characteristics of our society that effect the nature of public discussion about genetics. The prime concerns include the *pluralism* and *secularity* of contemporary society and the increasing dependence of science and technology upon the dictates of the market. We then explore how Lutherans understand the relation of Christian faith to society, especially through the teaching of the *two kingdoms*. Several key questions guide these explorations. Are there distinctive contributions that faith-based voices (individual, activist groups, and religious institutions) can make to a social debate about genetic topics? In what ways can Christians as citizens speak with explicit Christian convictions in the public arena? On what grounds should a church institution participate in public conversations? How is it actually to be done?



GENETICS!

Where Do We Stand as Christians?

Personal Experience and Values

The conversation regarding genetic developments involves, at some point, the regulation of genetic developments via legislation. Such regulations affect both business and individual choice. Consider then: *How much and what kind of regulation should government exercise over the ways biotech businesses operate?* What are the criteria to justify government regulation? Should the market be largely unregulated in order to encourage the development of whatever genetic related goods and services citizens may want?

The second issue concerns the nature and legitimacy of religious institutions adopting official stances on public policy and, in addition, advocating for specific pieces of legislation. *Should the church officially support or advocate for specific kinds of legislation?* What are the criteria to justify doing so? What kinds of legislation? Should the church take a public position only via formal statements, or should they also devote resources to legislative advocacy?

Gathering Input

The Character of Society Today

Church and Society

Many people point to the *disestablishment* of religious organizations in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights as a prohibition to the church's involvement in the "public square." This clause is often summarized by the term *separation of church and state* and often interpreted to mean that all religious thinking should be excluded from public debates. Yet, the legislation authorizing the Human Genome Project (HGP) explicitly provides 3 percent of its budget for the formation of a task group to consider the Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications (ELSI) of genetic developments. ELSI, in turn, has intentionally invited religious thinkers to contribute explicitly religious reflection. Other invitations for such input at public hearings on cloning, for instance, have also occurred. Some believe that these signs indicate a renewed public desire for religious wisdom to be brought to bear on the difficult questions posed by genetic knowledge and power. If so, this clearly encourages religious voices to enter the public debate.

Contemporary Culture

Other characteristics of the contemporary situation, on the other hand, create special challenges for Christians who seek to contribute to a public debate. *Pluralism* is the term given to one of these challenges. For our purposes pluralism indicates that a dizzying number of quite distinct, even contradictory, religious and philosophical traditions now contribute to shaping the general course of society. Christian churches are not the only religious presence in society. Indeed, the once dominant Christian *mainline* denominations have become one voice alongside many others. For example, Muslims in the United States now outnumber the two and a half million members of the Episcopalian church. Any successful involvement by Christians in public debate on genetic developments will have to take this plurality into account. Contemporary society is often described also as *secular* or *humanistic*. The exact meaning of these terms are debated, but they at least mean that our society has a *this-world* orientation. Religious values and concerns do not carry the authority they once did.

Given these characteristics in U.S. society, how can faith-based voices hope to influence such a diverse and often nonreligious set of beliefs and assumptions? Since Christian talk is explicitly theological, on what basis can the church speak to those who share a different starting point? To oversimplify for the sake of clarifying a point: If a Christian wanted to argue that the Bible forbids tinkering with nature by inserting genes from one species into another, why should a nonreligious scientist find this persuasive? Each religious tradition can certainly influence its own members, but many in our society reject any religiously oriented reasoning as an imposition upon their actions or beliefs. While the relation of Christians to the public order has always been challenging, it is even more complex today.

Science and Society

The changing relationship of science and technology to society during the last two decades also dramatically complicates public debate about the uses of genetic knowledge. Notable science projects of the past (the space program, for instance) were run via centralized bureaucratic structures and depended solely on public funding. Any debate could be directed toward the legislative decisions and government funding that authorized these projects. The Human Genome Project and other government-funded genetic research are dispersed, even decentralized, efforts that involve a mix of public and private finance. Contemporary



scientific research, on the whole, increasingly depends on Wall Street financing and owes increasing allegiance to the specialized public of venture capitalists and shareholders. (These complexities are evident in this guide's discussion of patents or genetically modified organisms.) Such allegiance alters the nature and, arguably, the effectiveness of regulatory oversight.

In considering public policy, three additional observations about genetic developments seem important to note. First, the uncertainty regarding which and how competing moral points of view ought to shape public policy is an uncertainty shared by many of good will, both inside and outside the world of faith. Second, it is a fact of life that public policy seeks the least offensive position to the most people. This is a result of seeking a majority opinion in a pluralistic world. Finally, the speed at which developments occur means that the public policy of today will likely need frequent review.

All of these social realities must be factored into any effort to bring religious voices to bear in the public square. Clearly, this is a complex and challenging task. Nevertheless, many believe that an extended public conversation about genetic developments is urgently needed in order to develop policy that upholds society's best interests and forcefully pursues justice. Many voices, faith-based and otherwise, urge Christians and the church to take such a role in this debate for the sake of the common good.

Theological Considerations

"Faithful participation in society is integral and vital to the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We as individual members and as a corporate body live out our Christian faith in encounter with the concerns that shape life in God's creation."² So reads the opening lines of the ELCA document that guides its policies and procedures for addressing social concerns. The genetics' revolution is clearly one of those concerns. How Christians live out their faith in society is the subject of this section.

Twofold Rule of God

The teaching that undergirds the Lutheran understanding of the Christian relationship to society is traditionally called the two kingdoms, or better expressed for today, the *twofold rule of God*. The biblical idea that Christians live in two ages—the old one represented by Adam and the new one begun by Christ (Romans 5), undergirds the two kingdom doctrine that is found in the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century. The fundamental point is that Christians, as sinful and redeemed people, simultaneously live under God's rule of law and gospel.

The doctrine of the twofold rule provides a way for Lutherans to affirm human society as a place of God's activity and to accept responsibility for it. God works through government, commerce, and other social institutions to establish order and justice. God works, also, through the gospel to create faith. God is equally at work in both realms, even though two different ways are necessitated by the presence of sin. The force of law is necessary to establish peace and order in the social realm. The persuasion of love rules in Christ's realm, a realm begun in the church.

Lutheran ethicists today continue to debate the truth and value of the two kingdoms teaching.³ This teaching has often been interpreted, mistakenly, to encourage a compartmentalized thinking that identifies God's work with religious concerns and excludes God from the public realm. This clearly happened in Nazi Germany where the two kingdoms doctrine was interpreted so as to create an impenetrable border between the political activity of the state and spiritual activity. Sometimes even today the idea of the two realms is wrongly identified with the idea that the church should not attempt to speak on public matters.

Other theologians suggest that the teaching should be understood as a kind of interpretive device. They suggest that the twofold rule of God helps designate the important differences between the areas of life where law dominates and the realm where the gospel is to rule. In this view the point of the doctrine is that "On the basis of a vision of the good life [derived from Christ], the church must show how society may be better. But it is not for the church to be a legislator for society: that is a task for politicians, for the worldly kingdom not the spiritual one. What is a relevant task for the church is to criticize laws and politics."⁴ The witness of the church in society is to flow from its identity as a community graced by the gospel and empowered thereby to serve in love and to seek justice. In both realms, then, Christians as Christians are called to be active, but in different ways. This understanding of the twofold rule creates a foundation for entering into public debates about genetic developments, especially when genetic developments threaten the poorest in our society or bulldoze principles of equality and the common good. On

the other hand, the teaching reminds Christians that they too are still part of a fallen humanity. The Christian and the institutional church should be modest when moving into the realm of politics, even though that move is inherently part of Christian mission.

Three Convictions

The following three convictions, elaborated in the ELCA's Social Statement on Church in Society, expand on the idea of what the *twofold rule of God* means for contemporary Christians.⁵

Baptismal Vocation

As mentioned above, Christ's Body is active daily in society through its members as they serve their neighbors. This includes being wise and active citizens who participate in voluntary associations and movements, including prophetic groups that challenge particular immoral or unjust practices. Thus, Christian efforts to serve the neighbor could lead to being a biotech scientist or to being a member of a citizen watchdog organization. Either or both(!) should be a matter of prayerful discernment.

Community of Moral Deliberation

Christians will disagree, sometimes passionately, on the kind of responses that should be made to genetic questions. Yet, Christian unity is founded on Christ and the common convictions of faith, not on moral agreement. Christians are free to celebrate diversity and are called to deliberate together on the challenges faced in the world. This will undoubtedly be the case with genetic issues. In those deliberations, though, scriptural convictions about God's concern for the powerless will emphasize special attention to those harmed by practices related to genetics. In these ways, the Church and its members will seek to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12.2)

Institutional Responsibility

The ELCA as an institution is to serve God and neighbor also in the life and work of its institutions. It is to do so, recognizing that God works through everyday social structures like family and government. In relation to governmental structures, the church is to respect government's God-given integrity and the tasks given to governing authorities. Yet, the church is expected likewise to hold government accountable to God and must ever be on its guard because sin is present and pervasive. The relationship between church and state is often expressed in the phrase *institutional separation and functional interaction*. This view affirms the constitutional separation of church and state without abandoning institutional responsibility. The church's institutional responsibility includes the pioneering of new ways to address emerging social problems, while it supports institutions and policies that serve the common good.

These affirmations mean that a faith-based involvement in public conversations about genetic questions will include multiple activities. The means will include offering educational resources, fostering moral deliberation in congregations, providing theological reflection, encouraging citizenship, and giving formal attention to public policy. This latter means is the most direct one on the list and leads to a discussion of the ELCA's social policy and its public advocacy ministry.

Several important characteristics of an effective public theology for genetics' issues include:⁶

Sustained Attention

Public theology initiatives should proceed from a clear theological base and have a sense of priority within the church in order to be taken seriously by the wider society. Sustained attention implies a systematic education and wide-ranging conversation that is needed for credibility.

Timeliness

Public theology must ride with the crest of public attention if it is to be effective. This is difficult, though possible, to coordinate with sustained attention.

Informed and Comprehensible

The church must demonstrate a grasp of the science and issues at stake. It is especially important that the logical relation between theological beliefs and public conclusions must be evident to non-believer. The church's position must demonstrate its relevance for the common good.

Clarity and Focus

Any effective public theology must have a clear and specific focus. It must state what it recommends and why in specific ways that are clear about its justification and reasoning.



Institutional Voice

The most authoritative social policy of the ELCA is expressed in documents called social statements. They are theological documents in which the church addresses the question: What ought Christians and the church say and do about a social issue? Such statements are developed through extensive and inclusive deliberation within the church. They become policy only by a majority vote of the churchwide assembly, the church's highest authority. Several current social statements bear indirectly on genetic issues; these include the social statements on abortion, economic life, creation, race and ethnicity. The social statement being developed on health care (to be considered at the 2003 assembly) also will touch upon a number of issues related to medical genetics. A social statement dedicated to genetic developments would be an additional means to present a public witness.

Social policy resolutions represent a second means of public address, but these rely upon already established teachings and social statement policies of the ELCA. The most common form is *a message*, usually adopted by the ELCA Church Council. Recent messages have addressed immigration, suicide prevention, community violence, and sexuality. Social messages are intended primarily to encourage further discussion and action on specific current social issues. Thus, they provide a timely and more focused means to address social or political developments. At this writing, there have been no social policy resolutions related to genetic issues.

The ELCA's Ministry of Advocacy

The Constitution of the ELCA, in proscribing the ways in which the church will carry out its mission, directs that it shall “. . . develop programs of ministry and advocacy to further human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” [4.03.1]

To carry out these mission directions there is established within the Division for Church in Society a Department for Advocacy, consisting of the following: the Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs which interacts with Congress, the federal Administration, and the governments of other nations; the Lutheran Office for World Community which interacts with the United Nations; the office for Corporate Social Responsibility which relates the church's positions to the corporate sector; and a number of State Public Policy Offices which advocate with the various state legislative and executive branches of government. These entities work in two directions: **1)** Equipping the grass roots of the church for an advocacy ministry; and **2)** Speaking the policies and positions of the ELCA directly to public and private decision makers.

The most direct activity in which social statements are voiced in the political arena occur through the of the ELCA's advocacy ministry. The ELCA's advocacy staff are not typical lobbyists, but rather are advocates who carry out a range of activities in addition to speaking with legislators. These activities include monitoring political developments, providing education, enabling dialog between contending parties, and others. Advocacy is concerned especially with speaking out, often in tandem with other faith-based voices, on behalf of the voiceless. It is important to note that since all advocacy grows out of ELCA teachings and social statements, little advocacy on genetic concerns has occurred as of this writing.

The question of how faith-based voices could join a public debate on genetics has required a broader look at an understanding of the Christian's and the church's role in society. At this writing, no official policy on any genetic questions has been adopted by the ELCA and no advocacy entailed. Yet, being the church in an age of biological control will require well-informed church members who have given careful thought to the kind of issues represented in this study guide. It may also require the church to raise its voice about genetic developments. Careful thought given now to these concerns by individuals, congregations, and the institutional church will provide invaluable

preparation when that time comes. Only in this way will the church's voice be credible. Only in this way will the church's faithful participation be possible in the age of biological control.

Deliberation

As an exercise in theological and moral imagination, sketch a social policy message of your own on a genetic issue. You might select one of the topics explored in other chapters of this study guide. Obvious topics include genetic testing, genetically engineered foods, or genetic patents. Be imaginative. Don't worry about perfect wording. The point is to further one's understanding by exercising moral thinking about this topic.



GENETICS!

Where Do We Stand as Christians?

Taking the Conversation with You

The brief exercise above could be developed into a more carefully worded statement as a means of furthering conversation. Even in simple form, it could then be used in several ways. Use it to start a conversation by asking others, in your congregation or at work, to review it and provide feedback. Send a copy to the Department for Studies of the Division for Church in Society of the ELCA as a means of letting the institution know the results of your study. Use it to talk to an ELCA advocate if there is one in your state. A last possibility is to develop the ideas into materials for submission as a resolution to a synod assembly.

For Further Investigation

Chapman, Audrey. *Unprecedented Choices: Religious Ethics at the Frontiers of Genetic Science*. (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999).

Division for Church in Society. *Living the Faith: A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics*. (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, 1999).

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. (1991)

Stumme, John and Robert Tuttle. *On Being Christians and Citizens: New Lutheran Perspectives on Church and State* (tentative title). (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2001).

Citations

1. Audrey Chapman, *Unprecedented Choices: Religious Ethics at the Frontiers of Genetic Science*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 109.

2. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns* (1997), 1.

3. Karen Bloomquist and John Stumme, *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); John Stumme and Robert Tuttle, *On Being Christians and Citizens: New Lutheran Perspectives on Church and State* (tentative title) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). This is evident, for instance, in the discussion of two kingdoms thinking by the different writers in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*. More extensive attention is given to these issues in *On Being Christians and Citizens* (tentative title as of this writing) edited by John Stumme and Robert Tuttle on behalf of the Division for Church in Society of the ELCA.

4. Paul Nelson, "Bioethics and the Lutheran Communion," *Bioethics Yearbook*, Vol. 5; Theological Developments in Bioethics: 1992-1994 (1997), 149.

5. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. (1991)

6. These observations are adapted from the work of Dr. Audrey Chapman, Director of the Program on Science, Ethics, and Religion at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C. She has written on public theology in several contexts and is an ordained United Church of Christ minister who has served as a staff member of that denomination with responsibilities for several public theology initiatives. See *Unprecedented Choices: Religious Ethics at the Frontiers of Genetic Science* for greater detail.

The following suggestions will facilitate this exercise. They are drawn from the structure of ELCA social policy messages.

- 1) Choose an issue in genetics that you believe Christians ought to address at a public policy level.
- 2) Create a list of key points to address in the resolution, including a statement of the problem.
- 3) List the key theological affirmations that will provide the foundation for the message to society. Write an explanatory sentence or two for each of these affirmations.
- 4) Based on this work, write recommendations for this topic. Specify how these recommendations should be pursued. For instance, should these recommendations become a matter of law or should they simply be argued as morally persuasive?
- 5) Specify the commitments ELCA members and it congregations should make on this topic. Explain briefly.
- 6) Justify why these recommendations are for the sake of the common good. Remember to argue in ways that can be understood by a pluralistic audience.

Welcome to the task of public theology and genetics!

