

## User's Introduction

“*Genetics*” is hard to miss in the United States today. News about it appears regularly, sometimes daily, in headlines announcing scientific breakthroughs, new applications, and the related moral questions. Genetic knowledge can lead to amazing medical therapy, allow informed choices, set free the wrongly accused, dramatically improve crop yields, and spin off whole new industries that respond to the ailments and misfortunes of life. Many commentators talk about the Twenty-First century as *the age of biological control* because this new knowledge is granting human beings the power to change, at the most fundamental levels, what humans are and what they are going to be.

But the fast pace of these changes may remind us of an old story: An airplane captain's voice speaks calmly over the intercom, “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, our flight today is going well, with one minor detail. The good news is that the engines are working well, we have minimal turbulence, and we are making great time. The hitch is that we are lost in the clouds and our radar has quite working.”

While we may celebrate the potential of genetic knowledge, its application presents challenges that range from interesting questions to troubling personal crises and social dilemmas. It is true, as Ecclesiastics 1:18 reminds us, “Those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.” Often these challenges seem to outstrip the social and moral radar that helps us to determine a safe and appropriate course. How then shall we live in this increasingly genetized society? What perspective should our faith lead us to on these developments? What do we think God's intentions are in all of this? What should the church, and we as members of it, be saying in the public debates that ensue? Where do we stand as Christians?

The Christian tradition does not have ready-made solutions to these questions. It does have a treasury of resources to help Christians think through the challenges. This guide has been written to help make those resources readily accessible to pastors and lay people. It is designed to provide a working knowledge of the many faces of “genetics” and to aid Christians in determining where they should stand on the issues. It does not attempt to provide “all the answers,” but it does attempt to help the reader tune up his or her radar.

### About this Guide

#### Content

Putting one's radar to work involves attention to four kinds of material. First, this guide attempts to help each reader become aware of the *pre-understandings* (pre-understandings are explained below) that he or she brings to this search for knowledge and understanding. Second, there is a constant emphasis on *learning the basics* of the science, medicine, economics, and so forth. To tune up a radar, one must know the facts. All facts, however, must be interpreted, and this, for a person of faith, involves attention to the third kind of material, *theological analysis and reflections*. Finally, the challenges raised by genetics require *decision*, whether on a personal or social level. This guide concludes each chapter with exercises that encourage the use of one's moral imagination to arrive at concrete moral conclusions, tentative and incomplete as they will be. Suggestions are also included for possible forms of action.

#### Audience

The guide is designed for use in adult study groups, but also doubles as an entry point for the individual reader. The first two chapters, therefore, provide a foundation in scientific concepts and theological ideas. Each additional chapter takes up one of the many topics that result from our new knowledge of genetics. This topical arrangement permits individuals or groups to focus on those aspects of genetics that are of most concern to them. Each section also provides references to other books and materials, primarily faith-based ones, that would allow the reader to delve more deeply into the subject.



This guide is written with Christians of the Lutheran tradition in mind. The bulk of the materials upon which the guide depends are taken from within that tradition. This follows from the guide's intention to make readily accessible to pastors and lay people what specialists within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are saying about these matters. It is, however, hoped that non Lutherans also will find the guide relevant and beneficial. It is recognized that attention limited to Lutheran sources represents an inevitable loss since nearly every major church body now has some resources on genetic questions. These include denominational reports or social statements as well as fine books and articles by thinkers within these traditions. This guide does refer readers to several of these resources in its bibliographic sections and non Lutheran readers can trace connections to resources within their tradition from the books on the bibliography.

## Additional Chapters

Since genetics moves so rapidly, it is a constant challenge to provide up-to-date information and reflection. This guide is fully aware that many important topics are missing. Some of those topics will be addressed in additional chapters that will be made available online. Chapter eight, for instance, will look at the implications and issues of adult genetic testing and screening. This use of the Web to provide additional chapters that continue the work of this study will also provide one means for addressing new developments. Readers are encouraged to visit the ELCA Web site for this purpose. (See page 66 for further information.)

## About Each Section

After the two initial chapters, a regular pattern of section headings becomes evident in the topical chapters. These chapters are designed to be semi-independent, but the patterns of each section provides continuity in the overall effort to inform readers and to encourage discernment. The following descriptions may provide a helpful reference to the rationale behind this approach. Leaders of study groups may especially find this background helpful.

### Introduction

The initial material in each chapter—it might be called a *contact point*—provides a way to establish connection with the genuine challenges and issues of that topic. This is how moral and theological thinking works—an event in life disrupts normal thought patterns or requires decision. Questions, a search for information, and reflection follow. The section entitled *Introduction* helps to sketch out the relevant issues, suggest the themes, and focus the questions that form the threads weaving together that chapter.

### Personal Experience and Values

This guide is conceived as an exercise in “faith seeking understanding,” a venerable theme of the Christian tradition. Implied in that theme is the assertion that all efforts to understand something new involves some *pre-understandings*. Pre-understandings are the broad and pervasive sets of belief, knowledge, experiences, commitments, emotions, and judgments that every individual brings to any new topic. There is no neutral approach to any information. Pre-understandings are the inevitable filters used by each person to seek out new knowledge or understanding. This section of the chapter, then, identifies several relevant questions that can help the reader get in touch with some of the pre-understandings he or she brings to the topic. It is hoped that readers will take the time to allow these questions to help surface his or her experiences, values, and assumptions. This will foster openness and insight.

### Gathering Input

This section begins with information from science, economics, or other relevant disciplines and then considers theological themes. These two sets of material provide the basic ingredients for reflection on each topic.

### Deliberation

Reflection and discussion at some point must be put to the test. This section is designed to encourage readers to put the ideas of the chapter to work in moral *deliberation* (deliberation as used in this guide indicates thinking oriented toward moral decision or action). It offers a specific exercise that encourages the reader to use his or her moral imagination. That is, the reader is invited to imagine what she or he would think or do in the given situation, based on what they know and understand at that point in time.

## GENETICS!

Where Do We Stand as Christians?



The point is to focus his or her present knowledge and understanding on a specific question. The result, admittedly, will be tentative and incomplete. Nonetheless, the application of theoretical ideas to a practical instance of deliberation involves the reader in a crucial exercise of learning.

### Taking the Conversation With You

The activities suggested in this section are not intended to take the place of questions or discussion within the chapter. They are provided, however, in order to encourage participants to apply or act upon what they have learned. The ultimate goal of a study is not knowledge alone, but transformative action. Individuals and groups might use one of the suggestions, or come up with their own, in order to develop a hands-on project growing out of their discussions.

### For Further Investigation

The final section of each chapter provides a short list of books or Web sites that represent more in-depth resources. These references are far from comprehensive, but they represent some helpful and accessible materials for further investigation. It is worth noting that the *Selected Bibliography* at the end of this guide lists additional resources of a more general nature.

