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# Letter: Would God 'Play' This Way?

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God gave the Bible for all times and all cultures, and he may have had his reasons for preventing avoidable offenses for later readers. This expectation of harmony cannot be proved, but it seems significant that no unambiguous case of explicit incompatibility with known facts has been documented. Accommodationism leads to unnecessary or even destructive offenses, particularly if moral accommodation is included. There is sufficient unavoidable offense in the cross of Christ.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Paul H. Seely, *PSCF* 56 (March 2004): 75.

<sup>2</sup>A. Rofé, *Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); personal communication by P.H. Seely. For my commentary on Rofé's book, see my post of 25 Nov 2002 on "The Pentateuch dissected and revised" to the ASA internet discussion group, archived under [www.calvin.edu/cgi-bin/archive](http://www.calvin.edu/cgi-bin/archive).

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## Would God "Play" This Way?

Robert Boomsma's article "Embryonic Stem Cells and a Reformed Christian World View" (*PSCF* 56, no. 1 [2004]: 38–48) is a helpful and insightful review of Christian arguments for hES research, but I respectfully disagree with his conclusions. Boomsma begins by discussing the creation and our God-ordained stewardship over it. He suggests that "humans are called to play God, to be his agents in developing the creation," as long as this is done "as God plays God." I would grant that biotechnology can be a part of our stewardship over creation, but there are clearly-defined scriptural limits.

A powerful and compelling counter-argument can be made by a proper understanding of the word "play" in this context. "Playing God" is usually used in a much stronger sense, where "play" means to act in a role or to play a part. Used in this way, "playing God" means "to act in a role as God," or even "to usurp God's place." This is clearly prohibited. After all, this is the sin to which the serpent tempted Adam: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil"<sup>1</sup> Here, "knowing good and evil" means having moral autonomy or making one's own decisions independent of God.<sup>2</sup> Such a way of playing God goes beyond stewardship to hubris, and is seen in attempts to manipulate the nature of human life itself. This defies God's own declaration of human persons as "very good."<sup>3</sup>

Boomsma too quickly rejects the conception view of human personhood traditionally held by the Christian church. He claims this "places too much emphasis on an individual's genetic composition." He adds that "A human person is more than his or her genetic code." I agree, but a person is *at least* that. The uniqueness of an individual begins at the moment of *syngamy*, the establishment of the diploid order. This happens during fertilization/conception. Boomsma correctly points out that fertilization is a process that extends over thirty hours. Yet the fast block to polyspermy that occurs at the union of sperm and ovum is a three-second process that "locks in" the genetic material so that syngamy will inevitably happen, making this a strong candidate for the moment of personhood.<sup>4</sup>

In moving away from fertilization/conception as a decisive moment, Boomsma discusses the idea of twinning, as a possible counter-example to the idea of human uniqueness from conception. He cites my analogy that if a clone were made from an adult cell, no one would doubt that a full individual existed prior to the creation of such a "twin." But he claims that this doesn't help, because it is not clear which individual is "continuously present before and after." Here, Boomsma confuses epistemic certainty with ontological reality: our knowledge of something does not change its nature. It is clear from the cloning analogy that one individual is present from conception and the other is present from the moment of the split. It does not matter if we know which one is which.

The larger issue here is the dualistic nature of human beings, that persons are both body and soul. On this view, there is both a physical side and a spiritual element that lives on after bodily death. Surely Christianity depends upon this metaphysical reality. A corollary to this view is that persons have continuity back to their earlier selves. This means that an embryo is the necessary substantial precursor to the adult individual, and that this continuity extends back to the moment of syngamy.<sup>5</sup>

Human beings begin at their biological beginnings, and there are no philosophically or theologically compelling reasons to reject their moral value at this point other than sheer utilitarianism. That is why Christians should not accept such a cold calculus, but should reject hES research. Jesus said that all men shall know us as His disciples if we love one another.<sup>6</sup> Our fidelity to this principle will be demonstrated by the way we love the smallest and most defenseless in our midst.

If, as Boomsma suggests, "Humans are called to play God," then we must ask regarding hES research, "Would God play in this way?"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Genesis 3:5b.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, V. P. Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis," in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 1:31.

<sup>4</sup>For an extensive discussion of these ideas, see D. M. Sullivan, "The Conception View of Personhood: A Review." *Ethics and Medicine* 19, no. 1 (2003): 11–34.

<sup>5</sup>For an in-depth development of Christian substance dualism, see J. P. Moreland and S. B. Rae, *Body and Soul* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>John 13:35

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## Articles Lack Real Science and Faith

The articles in this journal are becoming more and more philosophical and theological, that is, they are removed from the realities of science and the Christian faith. Science is the study of the physical world from quantum physics to the cosmos. If we accept that God is the Creator, then we do not need philosophy to study science; we should actually study science as it is. It is God's second book.