Introduction

Protestants have grappled with ethical issues raised by human interventions into birth, suffering, and death for centuries. They have responded to these and other central human events by using the resources of medicine and health care in ways that they consider faithful to their religious convictions and obligations. In the 1960s and 1970s, Protestants and others came to realize that advances in medical research and technology were furnishing medicine with novel powers that humans had only dreamed of half a century earlier. At this time, bioethics, which takes an interdisciplinary approach to resolving ethical issues raised by the life sciences, began to develop,1 and Protestants, among others, became participants in this field, exploring questions of medical and health care ethics with increased intensity.2

Sophisticated theologians and ordinary persons within the various Protestant denominations addressed such issues as the following: Should we use respirators, miracle drugs, transplanted kidneys, and every other medical means at our disposal to prolong human lives?3 How can we presume to know that a person's life has reached its end and that medical treatment should now turn to palliation—or, some asked, whether it should

be ended directly? Should we pursue genetic testing of our children in order to learn about medical conditions they might face in the future? Would it be wrong to enhance our offspring by genetic means? Is it morally acceptable to pursue human embryonic stem cell research, since it involves the destruction of early-stage human embryos developed outside the body of a woman? Protestants have sought to shape their responses to these novel and difficult questions on the basis of their understandings of the Christian faith and the newly developing field of bioethics.

Rather than discuss the whole range of bioethical issues that various Protestant thinkers and bodies have addressed, this article will consider some of the essentials of Protestant bioethics as seen through the lens of the uses of new reproductive technologies. In vitro fertilization, contraception, and other techniques proposed to induce or prevent the development of embryos and fetuses in utero offer remarkable avenues of control over the beginnings of human life and consequently raise profound ethical questions. Certain cognate ethical questions, such as whether to develop spare embryos and utilize third-party gamete donors in the course of using methods of assisted reproduction, have also been raised by the growth of these technologies. Thus, issues related to reproductive ethics offer fertile ground for understanding how Protestant bioethics approaches an important benchmark in human life and for gaining a sense of how it concurs with and differs from Judaism and Islam on these issues. This focus on a significant area of human endeavor will allow greater depth of exploration.

---