

Editorial

Dan Epp-Tiessen

Does God care how we make babies? Does God care that we make babies? What are the implications of our conviction that life is a gift of God? How can pastors and congregations respond sensitively to the pain of infertility and miscarriage? How should Christians think about artificial reproductive technology, prenatal diagnostic testing, abortion, and other beginning-of-life technology? This issue of *Vision* addresses these questions and more.

This issue was birthed in an unusual way. Five of the articles originated as presentations at a conference on Pastoring at the Beginning of Life, held at Goshen College in April 2002. We are grateful to Keith Graber Miller, one of the organisers, for asking whether *Vision* would be interested in publishing some of the presentations. We thank the conference speakers who reworked their addresses into publishable form. Our thanks, too, to other writers who contributed their reflections to round out this issue.

New life is a gift of God. Several articles assert that this conviction is the appropriate starting point for Christian thinking about beginning-of-life issues. If we start with this conviction, our primary concern will not be how to manage or control the process of procreation, but how to receive the new life God grants. Some of our writers remind us that all human life, even life that is limited by disabilities, is a gift of God. Sherry Wenger's experience with her daughter Elise, who has Down syndrome, illustrates this point. George Stoltzfus wonders what kind of a community we will become when our technology makes it possible to prevent the birth of children with "abnormalities." Gary Harder's funeral sermon testifies to the power of Adam's life, a life that lasted but a few days. God's purposes can be worked out in mysterious and wonderful ways through broken lives.

Some readers may wonder why we have not included an article devoted specifically to abortion. One reason is the sheer volume

of material that has already been published on this topic. A second reason is that, as Chris Huebner observes, Christian ethics is far more than a matter of asking what decisions we should make when confronted by specific issues and situations. Christian ethics is about asking what basic convictions, practices, and stories will shape us into the people God is calling us to be. By examining some of these convictions and practices, many of the articles do speak to the issue of abortion.

Some writers in this issue reflect on their own beginning-of-life experiences, most related to infertility. Keith Graber Miller, Brenda Srof, an anonymous couple, Melissa Miller, and Sherry

Some writers in this issue reflect on their own beginning-of-life experiences. May these stories sensitise us to the anguish that sometimes surrounds these experiences, and may they encourage us to develop appropriate pastoral and congregational responses.

Wenger remind us that the church dare not speak only in theoretical ways about the beginning of life. People face real-life questions, issues, and decisions, and they need concrete assistance from the church in the form of understanding, support, guidance, wisdom, and even admonition. Stories of real people test the appropriateness of our theology and our pastoral practices. I find these stories encouraging, as they testify to how family members, friends, pastors, and congregations have often been sources of comfort, strength, and support. I find these stories challenging, as they indicate that the church is not always a safe place to share painful experiences and process difficult

issues. May these stories sensitise us to the anguish that sometimes surrounds beginning-of-life experiences, and may they encourage us to develop appropriate pastoral and congregational responses.

One discussion at the Goshen College conference highlighted the need for biblical reflections and worship materials dealing with infertility. We hope that you find such resources in the articles by Keith Graber Miller and Dan Epp-Tiessen, in the sensitive retelling of Hannah's story by Rachel Miller Jacobs, and in Melissa Miller's ritual to mark a miscarriage.

New technology with the potential to benefit humanity usually has a dark side, because it also poses risks and dangers. This is especially true of artificial reproductive technology, prenatal

diagnostic testing, and embryonic stem cell research, which seem to be racing ahead faster than our ethical reasoning can keep pace. Sherry Wenger suggests that it may not always be appropriate for Christians to use the technology available to us, and that in some cases our reasons for using a particular technology ought to be different than those of the medical establishment. George Stoltzfus agonizes over the dilemma posed by the enormous potential of stem cell therapy: it promises to cure many serious ailments, yet the tissues needed for research are harvested from aborted fetuses and embryos left over from fertility treatments.

Chris Huebner challenges the prevailing paradigm, which assumes that medical technology is morally neutral and bioethics is a matter of discerning how to use this neutral technology in positive rather than negative ways. Chris points out that technology itself presupposes certain moral convictions, that it shapes us into a certain kind of people—people who value mastery, autonomy, and control over our lives. Technology’s vision of the good life stands in some tension with the Christian vision that we receive life as a gift, and that faithfulness involves giving control of our lives over to Jesus Christ.

Chris’s article and Gary Harder’s sermon both remind us that beginning of life and end of life should not be separated in Christian thinking. Our lives come from God, and ultimately they return to God. Gary’s sermon, occasioned by the death of an infant, provides a fitting conclusion to our articles. As good funeral sermons do, it points us to yet another death, a death that was followed by a resurrection—a beginning of life that is the source of our Christian hope. Thanks be to God for the gift of life!