

BABIES MADE TO ORDER

by Tom Wacaster

The news continues to give attention to genetic engineering, especially when it benefits a couple seeking to either have a baby, or to give birth to a child that is free from diseases that plague both parents. There were at least two items in the news this past week that caught my attention. One was a segment on NBC news in which it was reported that a couple seeking to conceive a child free from a genetic disorder that plagued both of the parents used the process known as in-vitro fertilization to conceive. After conception of a "suitable" embryo, the defective "gene" was successfully isolated and removed, and their child, now five years of age, is free of the defective gene they sought to eliminate. While there may be nothing inherently wrong with conception in a test tube, it is what happens along the way that frightens me. The child they finally got was not the only embryo produced. Numerous embryos were conceived, and the one embryo that met all the conditions was selected for genetic engineering. The others were discarded.

A separate story revisited the case of Lisa and Jack Nash. This couple announced some time back that their new baby had been conceived solely to be a donor of cells for his older sister. The story of how and why Adam Nash came into the world is the story of how even the best of intentions can result in the worst of evils. The story begins when the Nash's oldest daughter, Molly, was diagnosed with Fanconi anemia -- a hereditary and always fatal form of the disease. Doctors determined that the best hope for Molly was a cell transplant, from a relative whose cells matched Molly's, but without anemia. Since they had no other children, the Nashes decided to have one to save Molly. But unlike the California couple who gave birth to a child to provide their daughter with a bone marrow transplant a few years ago, the Nashes weren't taking any chances. Any child conceived naturally would be unlikely to provide Molly with the cells she needed. So, by in-vitro fertilization, they produced fifteen embryos, which they sent to a genetic testing facility. Only one of the embryos had the right genetic material. It was implanted in Mrs. Nash, who, in August of 2000, gave birth to Adam. Adam's stem cells were taken from his umbilical cord and implanted in his sister. Naturally, the Nashes are pleased at the outcome of what they call an "awesome" and "monumental" experience. But thoughtful Christians should respond differently to what has happened here. Despite all the celebration and the medical justification, the fact remains that Adam was, in the words of columnist Ellen Goodman, "conceived not just to be a son, but a medical treatment." But what would have happened if Adam had not possessed the needed genetic makeup acceptable to this medical experiment? Why, he would have been rejected, and discarded like the other fourteen embryos.

When I think upon these two cases of babies made to order," I wonder, "What's next?" This newfound technology and present "world-view" that produced Adam will not be limited to such "noble" purposes like preserving life. As one writer put it, "We're fast approaching a world where kids will be seen to exist merely to enhance their parents' sense of fulfillment. And even if they aren't conceived as merely a source of spare parts, they will still -- through genetic manipulation - - be made to embody their parents' ideas of an ideal child. Parents creating the personality of their kids fits our narcissistic culture, but it is dehumanizing in the extreme." But it is MORE than simply dehumanizing. It is sinful because it is based upon a disrespect for life itself and the loss of the same. I fear that our medical and science community has turned the corner toward a dark and bleak

future that will result in a repeat of what the world witnessed half a century ago. When our Supreme Court made abortion legal they opened a door to the proverbial Pandora's box, the consequences of which are frightening. Euthanasia, doctor assisted suicide, and now the discarding of unwanted embryos are but a glimpse of what lies down the road. I fear that as soon as technology permits, parents are going to be screening more and more embryos for those desirable and undesirable genetic traits. And if an embryo does not fulfill the parents' "wish list," then what? And the thought is too horrible to contemplate.