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'Cure' for fetal sexual orientation stirs controversy

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As genetic sciences advance, the possibility of mapping an unborn baby's eye color, height and possible genetic health problems moves closer.

But with scientific possibilities come new ethical questions to consider. Recent debates have increased over the possibility of isolating a gene related to homosexuality. Some have argued that if such a gene can be isolated, expecting parents should be informed so they can possibly change their child's sexual orientation.

Some say such practices are unethical and should be prohibited. But others say identifying someone's sexual orientation by their DNA is not possible.

Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, recently posted in a blog that he hopes homosexual genes can be isolated and reversed.

"If a biological basis is found, and if a prenatal test is then developed, and if a successful treatment to reverse the sexual orientation to heterosexual is ever developed, [Baptists] would support its use as we should unapologetically support the use of any appropriate means to avoid sexual temptation and the inevitable effects of sin," Mohler wrote in his blog.

Mohler's views have raised eyebrows of many gay activists. Malcolm Lazin, executive director of the Equality Forum, a GLBT civil rights organization, responded March 14 in a news release.

"Fetal invasion to alter sexual orientation is reminiscent of the Nazis," Lazin said. "It reflects a theocratic and Taliban-like plan that should frighten all Americans."

After receiving a slew of critical e-mails, Mohler posted an update denying that he ever suggested using genetic therapies to make "corrected babies."

"Other articles and reports claimed that I suggested that homosexuality may be genetic in origin and that genetic therapies should be used to create customized and corrected babies," Mohler said. "I never even mentioned genetic therapies or germ-line experiments, and I am adamantly opposed to genetic therapies of such a sort - real or hypothetical."

Despite the controversy, Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, concluded in 2006 that homosexuality is not hardwired.

"Evidence from twin studies does in fact support the conclusion that heritable factors play a role in male homosexuality. However, the likelihood that the identical twin of a homosexual male will also be gay is about 20 percent," Collins concluded in a 2006 study. "This indicates that sexual orientation is genetically influenced but not hardwired by DNA, and that whatever genes are involved represent predispositions, not predeterminations."

Travis L Williams, a communication studies freshman who is gay, said if science does make it possible to alter a child's sexual orientation, the decision should be left to the child's parents.

"I don't personally condone the practice of reversing gay genes," Williams said. "But it should be the parent's decision."

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