

Ethical Issues Related to Life and Death

Recent advances in medical technology coupled with a declining influence of the Christian morality in our society has brought the church face to face with several issues relating to life and death that were either nonexistent before or of relatively infrequent occurrence in our culture. It is imperative that we address these issues and give some guidance in harmony with the principles of Scripture. It is not our purpose to treat these issues exhaustively, but to provide adequate bases for ethical decision making.

Issues Related to Reproduction

It has been stated that approximately ten to fifteen percent of all married couples in the United States and Canada are infertile, while an additional ten percent have fewer children than they desire. As in the case of various Old Testament characters, childlessness can become a burden to individuals or couples today. In the past there was little to be done to cure or correct infertility. Now, however, with the modern advances of medical technology, these people have various options to choose from in order to have children to call their own. These options include artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, embryo transplant, and surrogate mothering. There are, however, moral and ethical implications involved in these procedures that make them unsuitable.

ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION

Artificial insemination is any process by which fertilization of an egg is attempted unnaturally by introducing sperm into the vicinity of the egg by means of an artificial process. The sperm used may be from the husband of the woman desiring to conceive or it may come from one other than the husband. In the latter case, artificial insemination is adulterous, inasmuch as it involves a third party, and would therefore fall under God's condemnation. "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God" (I Corinthians 6:9, 10).

God told Adam and Eve that they were to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth (Genesis 1:28). Genesis 2:24 tells us a man shall leave

his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. This speaks of the intimate union of two individuals in the reproductive process. This is according to God's plan.

The marital act signifies and celebrates the couple's total self-giving in love for each other. God is the giver of life, and if it is His will He can produce life without the use of artificial insemination. Although artificial insemination using the husband's sperm may not be intrinsically wrong, it is fraught with morally questionable implications.

IN VITRO FERTILIZATION

In vitro [test tube] fertilization describes a procedure by which life is conceived in an artificial environment through human manipulation. This is accomplished by uniting a sperm and an egg in a test tube, so beginning a new life. The whole procedure is fraught with moral and ethical questions.

With each union of sperm and egg, a new life is begun. What right does man have to manipulate conception in an artificial environment and/or to destroy such life? What becomes of those embryos that are put on hold and are never implanted in the womb? To whom do they belong? Who is responsible for their further development or demise? And if they die, or are washed down the drain, what has man done?

While in the animal world in vitro fertilization and/or the use of embryo transplants may be of no moral significance, not so in the human family where every union of sperm and egg results in a new life combining soul and body that only God has the right to begin and end.

SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD

A surrogate mother can be defined as a woman who makes her body available to another couple for the purpose of carrying to term a child who is to be surrendered to the couple as their "very own." The child may result from an embryo transplanted in the surrogate's womb, in which case she would indeed be a substitute mother. Or the child may be conceived in the surrogate's womb through artificial insemination of the sperm of the husband (or a donor) of the couple for whom the surrogate mother carries the child. In such a case she is not really a substitute mother but the actual mother of the child.

Surrogate motherhood is not a new phenomenon. The Old Testament characters Abram and Sarai resorted to a form of surrogate mothering with undesirable results. Sarai had failed to have a son as promised to Abram in Genesis 15. As many women today desire children, she also did, and took

things into her own hands, giving her maid to Abram for the purpose of producing a child. Rachel also so strongly desired children that she sought a surrogate mother in her maid Bilhah (Genesis 30:3,4). While in these situations natural means of procreation rather than artificial insemination were used, there was a third person involved.

Surrogate motherhood always involves at least a third party where there should only be two according to Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:5, 6. This constitutes an immoral situation which in itself, aside from the psychological, emotional, social, legal, and other ethical implications, rules out surrogate motherhood as an option for Christians.

CONCLUSION

The desire to have a child of one's own is understandable, but it should not become an obsession. God's plan for a given couple may include the possibility of infertility. If that is God's will for them, certainly they would avoid all morally questionable procedures to override that will. Nevertheless, it certainly is not wrong to entreat the Lord for children, as did Hannah.

While we may consider a child of our own as preferred, adoption does provide a viable option. Many children are born unwanted and unloved, and as Christians we can provide the kind of home environment they need for nurture and growth physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually.

Issues Related to Death

ABORTION

While infanticide is legally and socially treated as murder and few in our culture would approve it, the killing of unborn infants (often called fetuses in order to still the conscience and minimize the social stigma) has become both legally and socially acceptable. For some women, unmarried and married, abortion is just another form of birth control.

The truth is that the Scripturally unlawful taking of human life is always murder, whether it be that of the unborn embryo, fetus, or infant, or that of the supposedly useless members of society such as the handicapped and aged. Abortion is murder. It violates the sacredness of human life—life conceived in the image of God.

Life begins at conception—both physical life and eternal existence. God is the giver of that life (although few realize that) and only He has the right to take the life of the unborn. The question is not at what stage in the development of the unborn child abortion is permissible (the first, second, or third trimester), but when life begins. Logically and Scripturally we are driven to the conclusion that life begins at conception (not the day after or the hundredth day after: Psalm 139:13-16; Luke 1:35) and that the unborn infant is a person with all the potential of normal human development (Luke 1:36,41,44).

This being true, the use of any means of birth control that would prevent the embryo's developing in the uterus, such as the I.U.D. and certain drugs, would be morally wrong as this would be abortion at the earliest possible stage even though the woman may not know that abortion is occurring at that time. Also morally wrong would be the taking of the life of the unborn even when continuing the pregnancy to term would either really or supposedly endanger the life of the mother. That would be abortion nonetheless, and abortion is murder. Such situations call for complete submission to God and His will to provide a satisfactory answer to such a moral dilemma.

EUTHANASIA

As Christians we believe that life is a gift from God and that the sustaining and terminating of that life are equally under His control. We believe that life is more than mere biological existence, and that man has also an undying soul housed within his mortal body. Death of the body releases the soul to its eternal destiny.

Since life is by God's prerogative, we believe that the cessation of life must also be by His design. We believe, according to the Scripture, that it is morally wrong for one person to take the life of another (Exodus 20:13; I John 3:15).

Our society is becoming more and more morally perverse in regard to the sanctity of life. With the legalizing of abortion, the ensuing low view of life is reaching into still other areas of man's existence. "The right to die," "dying with dignity," and other such concepts dealing with quality and value of life are pervading the thinking of our society.

One such concept is called euthanasia, or "mercy killing." Euthanasia is the practice of deliberately easing into death an individual who is suffering from a painful or incurable disease or handicap. The request for

such a death may be a voluntary one by the suffering individual, or from one who is legally responsible for such an individual. Either is morally unacceptable, being in the first case tantamount to suicide, and in the second, murder.

A related facet is passive euthanasia, or the withholding of life-giving sustenance, as in the starving of a newborn having a congenital defect or the withholding of reasonable life support from a terminally ill patient.

From acceptance of euthanasia in these medically related areas, it is but a small step to the justification for putting away socially or financially burdensome individuals to alleviate responsibility for their care. Such death by design is nothing short of murder and should be an unthinkable option for any morally guided individual or society.

In addition to the moral implications of euthanasia there are also social implications to consider, such as the lessening of respect for the sick, the elderly, the handicapped, as well as for life itself. There would also, undoubtedly, be a deterioration in the provision of health care for such individuals. Society would degenerate to a survival of the strongest, the most capable, the most useful.

The disposition of life is far too sacred to be entrusted to capricious human control. It must be left in the hands of God, with a corresponding acceptance on man's part that God doeth all things well.

"What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (I Corinthians 6:19, 20).

LIVING WILLS

The problem of having the "right to die" is an ethical issue resulting from modern medical technology. Today biological life can be maintained for months and years after the brain has ceased to function. The question is, do we keep the physical body going even after the person we once knew is no longer "there"? Answers to this or similar questions are not easy. We have no historical or Biblical precedent on such issues. As Christians we believe that only God can give life and only God should take life.

The "right to die" is a different issue than euthanasia. It is not the "right" to an easy, pain-free death. Neither is it the "right" to will one's own suicide. Basically it is the right to die a natural death in the event a person is

afflicted with a terminal illness and the attending physician has determined that there can be no recovery and that death is imminent. Consequently he does not want to be placed on a support system which effects an unnatural existence and merely prolongs death. For such a person the "living will" may prove useful. We live in an age of specialization, when more and more patients are being treated by physicians whom they do not know very well. The "living will" is a written document which speaks for the patient if he becomes incompetent and helps protect the physician from legal liability. Many states now have laws requiring compliance with "living will" documents executed in advance by competent adults. Efforts are being made to effect uniform "living will" laws for the nation.

These laws are binding upon the physician so that if he does not wish to observe the "will" he must cooperate in transferring the patient to another physician.

While many Christians may never need a "living will" it is an issue deserving serious thought ahead of time. Even though another person can sign as proxy for a terminally ill patient, it is better for a person to sign his own statement while he is emotionally and mentally competent. Therefore anyone considering signing a "living will" should discuss the matter with the immediate family well in advance, so there can be mutual understanding and consent in the event such a document is needed.

DONATION OF ORGANS AND THE BODY

With the advent of organ transplants, the need for many body organs has grown greatly. Most such organs must be taken from people who have recently died, usually within thirty minutes or so of death. The state has made easy provisions for people to donate any organs they wish or to donate the whole body for research. One simply fills out a donor card in the presence of witnesses. Most states make such provisions on drivers' licenses.

The donation of organs or the body for such purposes is certainly in harmony with Scriptural teachings on loving and helping our neighbor. Donations for transplants should not be looked upon, however, as some way to achieve immortality but as a gesture of love to someone in need. We know of nothing in God's Word which would prevent us from donating our dead bodies to medical science.

If the whole body is donated, the state normally cremates the body after it has served its purposes. The state then holds a funeral service (in addition to

any memorial service the family may have had). In most cases it is possible for the family to request the body to be returned for their own family funeral.

We view the living body of the Christian as the temple of the Holy Spirit. However, death is the separation of the soul and spirit from the earthly body, and our bodies return to the dust of the earth from whence they came. While we should give the body due respect, we find no Biblical grounds for placing undue value upon a corpse destined for decay even though that body has been, in life, the dwelling place of the Spirit of God.

We encourage believers who wish to donate organs or their bodies to counsel with their ministry and also to consider the wishes of their families. An appropriate Christian funeral or memorial service should still be planned for the edification of the family and the brotherhood.

CREMATION

Cremation is a process in preparation for the final disposition of the dead human body. In most instances cremation follows some type of funeral, memorial service, or ceremony. The dead body, often in a casket or some other container, is placed in a cremation chamber where applied heat reduces the casket and body to ashes and bone fragments. Does the Bible have anything to say about cremation? There are some examples of it, but burial seems to be the most common practice. I Corinthians 15:37, 38 states: "And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body." I Corinthians 15 speaks of the death and resurrection of the body, and grain is used as a type of the burial and resurrection of believers. It is sown in the ground before it rises out of the ground—it is not burned. We recognize, however, that this figure may have been used because burial was the common practice. It does not necessarily constitute an argument against cremation. The remains of all who have died and will die, regardless of the circumstances, be it by burning at the stake, drowning at sea, being devoured by animals, or rotting in the sun will return to "dust" in one form or another.

When cremation was practiced in the Bible, it was usually associated with punishment and/or purification, or as an emergency measure as in the time of pestilence.

In Joshua 7:25, after Achan had brought defeat to Israel by sinning against God in taking the accursed things that God had forbidden, God directed that

"he that is taken with the accursed thing be burned with fire, he and all that he hath." This may have been for punishment, but it also may have been for the purifying of Israel from the pollution brought by Achan.

Leviticus 20:14 suggests that burning be for cleansing: "And if a man take a wife and her mother, it is wickedness: they shall be burnt with fire, both he and they; that there be no wickedness among you."

King Saul died a shameful death. His three sons died with him. The Philistines stripped the dead bodies and hung the king's armor in their heathen temple, and fastened his body to the wall of Bethshan. Valiant men of Jabesh-gilead went to Bethshan by night and took the bodies of Saul and his sons and burnt them at Jabesh (I Samuel 31:11-13). Jamieson, Fausset & Brown Commentary says the burning of bodies was not a Hebrew custom, and was probably resorted to on this occasion to avoid further insult on these bodies.

In Amos 6:10 cremation is apparently resorted to to prevent infection due to pestilence.

Unbelievers would like to escape a resurrection unto judgment and punishment, but cremation cannot provide such an escape. God's laws are "just" and inescapable. Both the saved and the unsaved will be raised no matter how they are buried. No matter what happens to our body of flesh, God's Word teaches that in the resurrection all shall have new bodies. The believer's new body will be fitted for living in the spirit world and will never die.

The death of the believer separates the soul and the spirit from the body, but only temporarily. These will be reunited in our new body when Christ returns and the dead are raised. Our new resurrected body will be like our Lord's resurrected body.

As our Lord Himself died, then rose from the dead, and is "become the firstfruits of them that slept," surely the divine precedent of our Lord in burial of His body is a good example for us to follow. Nevertheless, the Scripture does not forbid cremation as a means of returning the body to dust. Certainly, the bodies of the Christian martyrs who were involuntarily cremated at the stake will be raised along with those of the saints who were buried.

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