

MAN PLAYS GOD

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More and more we are bewildered by new medical controversies—abortion, types of birth control, surrogate parenthood, sperm banks, artificial insemination, cloning, euthanasia. We see medical experts with greater options and powers as they bestow life and death. Are we playing God?

New Guidelines for New Procedures

On January 6, 1998, scientist Richard Seed appeared on National Public Radio. In an interview with NPR's science correspondent Joe Palca, Seed declared that doctors had the skills and equipment to begin human cloning, and were planning to begin within the next few months. Seed said they will use cloning to help "infertile couples wishing to have children." Although President Clinton has asked for all parties to refrain from human cloning, federal guidelines against these procedures apply only to federally funded projects, not to private doctors and organizations. Seed said that doctors must provide this technology as a service to patients; human cloning is moral and ethical, "a moral imperative—something that will bring humankind closer to God."

Does this new technology "bring humankind closer to God"? If so, in what way? Does it make us able to do things that God does? Does it put us in God's place? Should we be doing this? Philosophers, ethicists, and even public officials oppose many of these medical techniques. On the other hand, have not medical advances in the past met with opposition from organized religion? Selective breeding has built up animal production. Medical experiments can help us conquer disease, avoid birth defects, and lengthen our lives. Are we really impinging on God's prerogatives when we experiment with human bodies and seek to help the human race? If only God should do something, why did he make it possible for us to do it?

These questions face us all. Most modern ethicists are "feeling their way" as they analyze each new technology and observe its consequences. They hope a general consensus will develop. For example, federal guidelines published by the National Institutes of Health now prohibit human embryo research after the eighteenth day after conception, because the spinal nerve and brain are connected by that time. However, there is considerable debate, with religious groups against all such embryonic research, and the scientific community favoring much more. The NIH therefore sets forth a compromise. On the other side of life, the state of Oregon has adopted and put in place guidelines for permitting doctor-assisted suicide. These were determined by popular vote and bureaucratic negotiations. People are adrift on the sea of moral relativity.

The Christian's Guidelines

Christians have a great advantage—they possess the moral law of God. While many situations can be debated, the basic truths remain as a bedrock for our ethics. Many have gone astray while interpreting God's commandments. For example, some oppose many good medical innovations. Jehovah's Witnesses will not allow blood transfusions, a policy that has caused many premature deaths. Some Christians opposed the first heart transplant operations, thinking that the heart was the center of personality; we understand better that the "heart" in the Bible is the spiritual center of the intellect, affections, and will, not a physical organ. Yet, in spite of our misinterpretations, the Bible provides basic principles that should underlie all our thinking, actions, and even medical practice and research.

These basic principles in the Bible provide a framework by which to judge these modern medical questions. I believe there are at least three basic principles:

1. The uniqueness of human beings
2. The value of human life
3. God's authority in life and death

Each of these principles bears on the questions debated today.

Uniqueness of Human Beings

The Bible expects us to domesticate and even kill animals for the good of humanity. God set the pace when he clothed Adam and Eve with skins of animals (Gen. 3:21), and when he approved Abel's bringing an offering from the flock (Gen. 4:4). God later told Noah that he had given the animals to him for food (Gen. 9:2-3). The patriarchs killed animals for food, clothing, and shelter, on one occasion with the Lord himself partaking (Gen. 18:7-8). By God's command the skins of rams and of sea cows covered the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex. 25:5). Animals by the thousands were offered to God in sacrifice, and God ordained that many of those sacrifices should provide for a sacred meal. On the other hand, God forbade human sacrifice in the strongest terms (Dt. 12:31; Jer. 7:31). In the New Testament the teaching concerning animals is unchanged. Jesus declared all foods clean (Mk. 7:19 in modern translations). Jesus ate the common food of the people (Mt. 11:19), provided fish for the multitudes (Mt. 14:19), ate fish himself (Lk. 24:41-42), and cooked some for his disciples (Jn. 21:9, 13). The apostles likewise ate the common food of the people, as evidenced by Peter's experiences in Antioch (Gal. 2:12). Paul said that we may eat any meat purchased in the marketplace, unless we are told it was offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:25). The Bible clearly places animals in a subordinate position to humans.

While humans are similar to animals physically (Eccl. 3:18-19), there is a vast qualitative difference between them. This distinction is taught explicitly in several places. In the creation account only man and woman are said to be created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), thus making human beings more valuable than animals. This was reiterated to Noah: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made

man” (Gen. 9:6). In keeping with this fact, the law of Moses specifies that destroying the life of someone’s animal deserves a monetary penalty, but taking the life of a human cannot be atoned for by any amount of money. Only the blood of the murderer can make satisfaction before God (Ex. 22:1; cf. Num. 35:30-33).

Why are humans said to be created in God’s image, while animals are not? The answer lies not in physical appearance or ability or skill, or even in certain forms of intelligence. Many animals are superior to humans in these ways. Zoologists more and more are discovering how animals can be intelligent and creative as they seek to survive and communicate. They use tools, and learn from the example of others. Some animals even seem to display signs of affection and loyalty, some would even say love. If these are common to humans and animals, wherein lies the difference?

The answer lies in the makeup of humans. The human possesses a body with a mind, and in addition an immortal soul. This, animals do not have. While the exact relationship of the body to the soul is a mystery to us, the Bible does clearly distinguish the two. God created humans with a soul, in his image (Gen. 1:27; 2:7). This soul or spirit survives even after physical death. The spirit of Samuel was seen after the prophet had died and his body had been buried (1 Sam. 28:13-14). Jesus spoke of the eternal destiny of the soul after death: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). Therefore, Jesus could assure the penitent thief that his spirit would live in Paradise after his death that day (Lk. 23:43); the martyr Stephen could, as Jesus did, commend his spirit to God at his death (Acts 7:59); and the souls of the tribulation martyrs could be seen in heaven (Rev. 6:9; this was prior to their resurrection; cf. v. 11).

To support this teaching many have used Ecclesiastes 12:7, “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.” But while the KJV makes this a statement, showing the certainty of the continuing life of the spirit, the passage may be translated as a question, as in the NIV: “Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?” This translation may fit the context better, which is speaking of the similarity of humans to beasts. Since the Hebrew of this verse can be translated in either way, it is best to rely on the many other passages for this doctrine.

It is with the spirit that we can receive revelation, understand, reason, and “think God’s thoughts after him.” It is the spirit that enables us to believe in God and worship him (1 Cor. 2:11). God has created us with a body and a spirit, and we are truly alive only when both are functioning properly in concord; “the body without the spirit is dead” (Ja. 2:26). The spirit by itself is not complete, as Jesus pointed out to his disciples: “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost (‘spirit’) does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Lk. 24:39). Paul said to be alive in the spirit but without the body is being “naked,” and he would prefer to be “clothed” with his new body in the resurrection (2 Cor. 5:2-4).

Even in this life the uniqueness of humanity is evident in God’s family law. While some animals practice life-long mating, most do not. For example, most mammals breed indiscriminately, as circumstances allow. There is no sin in this; they are not moral creatures.

However, God has set up strict laws regarding human sexual relations, marriage, and the family. Even though many advocate and seek to practice what their “baser instincts” desire, the Bible clearly puts men and women on a high moral level, responsible to keep sexual relations within the bond of marriage, and to rear children in the family structure. This is quite distinct from the animals.

This first principle, the uniqueness of human beings, affects directly how we carry out scientific investigations with humans and decide questions of medical ethics. What is permissible for animals may not be for humans. The Bible does say we should be kind and humane in our treatment of animals, which also reflect the wisdom and glory of God (Ex. 20:10; Prov. 12:10). However, they were created for the use of mankind, to help supply our needs. Their lives are not sacred. Therefore, scientific experiments leading to more productive or better animals are in keeping with God’s directive to subdue and have dominion over the earth. Abortions or euthanasia practiced for a good reason on animals is not a sin. Artificial insemination or surrogate parenting may be proper to produce better specimens. Modern animal research, such as the cloning of sheep and other animals, can be a useful step in increasing our knowledge of the world and our ability to properly use it.

However, applying these same techniques to human beings does not follow. Humans are distinct, made in God’s image, bearing his likeness. God has decreed that the life of humans is special and sacred. The family is a divinely ordered institution, whose bonds and regulations must not be sidestepped by scientific technologies. We cannot simply apply the same ethics to humans that we do to animals.

Value of Human Life

Human life has a unique value in the world. God created us body and soul—the two united to make one person. While the soul can exist and function without the body, as believers do when they die and before the resurrection, this estate is neither complete nor permanently desirable. Paul speaks of the intermediate, “bodiless,” state in these words:

When we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Cor. 5:3-4)

He calls our resurrection body a “heavenly dwelling,” while our present body is a “tent” in which we “groan and are burdened.” When we die we lose this body, and hence are “naked” or “unclothed”; but that state will change gloriously at the resurrection. Paul longs not for the disembodied condition, but for the resurrection, when body and soul will again be united, without sin and in glory.

We are most fully human when we are alive. It is during our time on this earth when we can serve God, war against sin and the enemies of God, and bear witness for him. Surely the spirits of the saints in heaven do serve and glorify God to an extent, but the picture painted in Scripture of that state is more one of resting, being comforted, and waiting for the resurrection.

This is seen in such cases as the comforting of Lazarus (Lk. 16:22-25) and the description of the souls of the martyrs in heaven (Rev. 6:9-11: 7: 14-17).

The lack of more active life and service in the intermediate state is pointed out several times in the Old Testament as well. When the Lord delivered King Hezekiah from his fatal illness, in gratitude the king thanked the Lord for his life, and declared,

The grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness. (Isa. 38:18-19)

Hezekiah realized that the time of our life on earth, whether sick or well, is unique and valuable—the only time we can hope in God and praise God in these circumstances. In several places the book of Psalms confirms this truth:

- No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? (Ps. 6:5)
- What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? (Ps. 30:9)
- Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? (Ps. 88:10-12)
- It is not the dead who praise the LORD, those who go down to silence; it is we who extol the LORD, both now and forevermore. (Ps. 115:17-18)

Perhaps the clearest teaching on this subject is found in the book of Ecclesiastes. King Solomon, the wisest man ever to live, except for Christ, discovered through experience, thought, and the inspiration of God, that all of life is “vanity,” “meaninglessness.” The only thing that gives it value and significance is the judgment of God, who will render to each of us for all we have done (Eccl. 12:13-14). As Solomon analyzed the gift of human life on this earth, he realized its immense value, even if the life was unpleasant or disregarded by other people.

Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. (Eccl. 9:4-6)

Therefore, Solomon instructs us to use the present human life we possess to the maximum: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (Eccl. 9:10).

Human life is fragile. Even all these debated advanced medical techniques tend more to death than to life. Euthanasia obviously gives not life, but death. Abortion supposedly increases the quality of life of people, but only at the cost of the death of the infant. Even technology designed to help people have children produces more deaths than lives. In order to produce one successful artificial insemination into a surrogate parent, many human embryos, tiny human beings, must be sacrificed, their bodies discarded even before being recognized or known by their parents. Cloning requires many “failures” before one successful individual is produced. When researchers tried to clone a “headless mouse,” they produced over a thousand mice, but only four of them “succeeded.” If cloning of humans is pursued, probably hundreds of thousands of “failures” will occur—little humans who will be produced and then discarded in the laboratory.

Even though it is relatively easy to snuff out the life of a human being on the earth, as in the millions of abortions performed annually, its value is not lessened. God has given us only this time to serve him under the trials and temptations we see about us. In heaven and in the new heavens and new earth, we no longer will be tempted to sin, nor will we face enemies of God from our present position of weakness. This is our testing time. It is now that we can face God’s enemies and offer up our lives for him. Now we have the privilege of overcoming obstacles to gain knowledge, wisdom, and holiness. Only now can we live with hope and faith in what is unseen. God’s judgment on each life, and our ability to serve him here make each life sacred. Human life is valuable because God makes it valuable.

God’s Authority in Life and Death

God has emphatically declared his prerogative to grant life and death to us. For example, Hannah ascribed this authority to God in her prayer (1 Sam. 2:6), and David explicitly distinguished the possible causes of death for King Saul that would be God’s doing from murder by himself or his friends (1 Sam. 26:9-11). God retains this authority for himself: “See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand” (Dt. 32:39).

The sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” is the basis for our understanding of human life. This commandment requires us not only to protect the life of our neighbor, but also to guard our own life. This includes medical help when needed. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* #135 refers to it as “the sober use of . . . physick” and cites Isaiah 38:21 as an example: “Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover.”

While it is clear that we all must die, that death is the result of sin in the world, and that death is God’s judgment for our sin, yet we also are taught that there are right and wrong ways to die. The Hebrew and Greek words for “murder” in the sixth commandment¹ are used in Scripture to describe certain types of killing and not others. These never are used in the Bible for the killing of animals or for the killing of people in warfare, self-defense, or the execution of capital justice. These types of killing are allowed or even commanded in the Bible when justified by circumstances.² Rather, they consistently refer to killing by private individuals in one of four contexts:

1. Premeditated killing for hatred: “If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.” (Num. 35:20-21)
2. Premeditated killing for greed: “Say to [Ahab], ‘This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered [Naboth] and seized his property?’ Then say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!’” (1 Kings 21:19)

As can be seen, both of these cases clearly are murder, and the Bible demands the death penalty for them. The words are used also for two other types of killing:

3. Accidental killing, which, while perhaps sinful for carelessness, is not motivated by hatred or greed, and hence is less sinful. Accidental killing was forbidden, but the penalty was less severe (Num. 35:22-28).
4. Premeditated killing for revenge. This was approved in the primitive justice system, before kings reigned in Israel. But it was limited by various legal requirements (Dt. 19:15-19). After kings were in place, they were to enforce this law (1 Sam. 12:13-15).

When applied to the various medical questions we face today, this commandment directs us to our motivations.³ While it is lawful to defend our lives, it is sinful to kill others to gratify our own desires. What might cause us to want to kill another person, perhaps an elderly relative, or perhaps an unborn baby? The *Westminster Larger Catechism* #135 points out that we must resist all “thoughts, purposes,” or “passions . . . which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any.”

What are some of these “thoughts, purposes, or passions”? Euthanasia might result from a desire to avoid suffering, or to preserve one’s money or estate, or simply to avoid “being a burden.” Abortions often are caused because of illicit sexual behavior, followed by the desire to hide the offense, and to avoid financial and social burdens. In other cases, the desire is to pursue a career or lifestyle unhampered by the responsibilities of rearing a child, perhaps even a handicapped child. Medical procedures used to produce biological children by the use of artificial insemination, surrogate parenting, or cloning produce many deaths of tiny children in the embryonic state. They also confuse the family structure and relations⁴; some call it “clinical adultery.” They are motivated by an inordinate desire for children of one’s own genetic structure. Rather than seeking fulfillment in a life of service to God and others, or even seeking to adopt a needy child, these adults will destroy some children for the pleasure of possessing one child who will physically resemble one or both of them. As Jesus said, all sinful actions proceed from a sinful heart (Mt. 15: 18-20).

As we look at our own hearts, enlightened by the moral law of the Bible, we will be able to steer our way through these new critical questions. Can man play God? In the end, we cannot take God’s place; we must submit to him.

¹ Hebrew ראש *ratsach*, or Greek φονεύω *phoneuo*.

² For a good article supporting capital punishment in criminal justice, see J. Daryl Charles, "Crime, The Criminal and Capital Justice," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38/3 [Sept. 1995] 429-44.

³ See Franklin E. Payne, Jr., M.D., *Biblical/Medical Ethics: The Christian and the Practice of Medicine* (Mott Media, 1985), for an excellent platform for studying many of these issues.

⁴ For some bizarre illustrations of this, see Francis J. Beckwith, "Cloning Humans: A Bad Idea," *Citizen* 12/3 (Mar., 1998) 8-9.