Bioethics: Why Should I Care?

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"What is bioethics?" Friends, family, acquaintances, and even complete strangers posed this question as my wife and I told people that we were moving so that I could attend school and study bioethics. In fact, the more people we told, the more obvious it became that very few people understood the term. Of course, it is one thing to be familiar with a specific, technical term and another to be knowledgeable of its underlying issues. However, I found that most people who are unfamiliar with the term bioethics have little more than a superficial knowledge of most of the issues with which bioethics deals.

Everyone has heard of abortion, cloning, stem cell research, advance medical directives, euthanasia, and the like; but a true understanding of these procedures, processes, and their far-reaching moral ramifications is sadly lacking. The harsh reality is that while bioethical issues are increasingly confronting us on the evening news, in the Sunday papers, and even in our own lives, few people grasp the science involved in the "bio," or the moral dilemmas involved in the "ethics" of bioethics.

Allow me, then, to share with you five reasons for involvement in bioethics. The first is what I call the fallacy of bioethical distance or the "it can't happen to me" syndrome. It may seem that the situations that arise in bioethics are classic cases of things that "can't happen to me" and things that "don't affect me." Other people die slow painful deaths; other people have fertility problems; leftover embryos are not my problem. Yet all of us were born, most of us want children, and all of us will die. Given the fact of human frailty and the current state of medical technology, it is likely that bioethics will touch our lives or a life very near ours at some point. Perhaps a friend will experience an unexpected pregnancy and seek our advice. Perhaps a parent's health will deteriorate to the point where decisions about feeding tubes or respirators must be made. Perhaps a sibling or friend will find that he or she is unable to have children and will wrestle with numerous reproductive technologies.
Second, the startling pace of biomedical advancement compels involvement in bioethics. In Brave New Church: What the Future Holds, Richard Kew states, "It would appear that research is advancing at such a pace that our ethical understanding of its consequences is unable to keep up with the moral outcome of our actions."¹ Science's outpacing of ethics places a burden on "the Christian community to step in and become society's conscience in some way or another."²

A third reason for bioethical involvement relates to our rights and responsibilities as citizens. As Americans, we have a right to participate in the political processes of our country, but that right carries with it the responsibility to inform ourselves on the issues of the day. This is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. Rather than shying away from controversial matters such as stem cell research and cloning, Christians must equip themselves to enter the debate effectively.

Additionally, our responsibilities as Christians have bearing on our involvement in bioethics. Not only will bioethics likely impact our personal lives, but the life of the Church is also touched by these issues. Bioethics affects areas of our lives that are deeply personal, often in times that are tremendously painful, times when we feel most vulnerable. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are struggling with bioethical issues in their lives right now. More than that, many outside of the Church seek out communities of faith for objective, reasoned, biblically sound guidance in times of personal bioethical crisis. As the Body of Christ in this world, we must be ready to respond to those who are hurting, to reach out to them, and to point them to Christ, whether through prayer, encouragement, or ethical advice.

Finally, wisdom demands that we be prepared, that we develop a carefully reasoned, biblically based approach to bioethics before it is "needed." Bioethical quandaries often arise suddenly and in the midst of personal crises, and if we have not taken the time to prepare a Godly response, we can easily slip into the popular medical ethos of our time, which, as Richard Eyer writes, "is guilty of overvaluing choices that are likely to be "practically and emotionally satisfying."³ A safeguard against such danger is provided by Proverbs 1:7, which says that, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." A proper fear of the Lord requires that we are prepared to honor him in all that we do, especially in these important matters of life and death.

² Kew, 96.

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