A Tale of Two Centers: The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity

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There's a story that Dr. C. Ben Mitchell likes to tell the seminary students in his ethics class. One afternoon, a pastor runs into the church pianist and suddenly realizes that this unmarried woman looks as though she is pregnant.

Concerned, he asks others on the pastoral staff if they know anything about her situation, but no one does. When he expresses his concern in a private conversation with the pianist, she responds with a wide smile. "Don't worry, pastor!" she says. "I'm still a virgin." She explains that when her sister and brother-in-law were unable to have a baby, she'd offered her uterus as a surrogate. "I love my sister, and I'm happy to help her," she says. "I just had to undergo in vitro fertilization. The doctor implanted their embryo in my uterus, and now I'll carry the baby to term for them."

The pastor's mind is spinning—as the pregnancy becomes apparent to all, should this be celebrated? Or is this a matter for church discipline? But perhaps the most important question of all—why did it not occur to the young woman at any point to present her situation to the pastor, or to the elders, to ask how the Bible might speak to this? She assumed instead—

Why would my pastor have anything to say about this?

It was while Dr. Mitchell himself was pastor of a church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that he found himself wondering how to respond to similar kinds of questions raised in the life of his congregation. On his day off, the young pastor began to take an introduction to medical ethics
class. Fascinated, he continued his education in bioethics all the way through to a doctoral degree.

As a doctoral student, Mitchell was troubled to discover that, though there were plenty of secular voices weighing in on bioethical issues, he had heard nothing from evangelicals. He wrote to Carl F. H. Henry at Trinity to ask if he knew of any others interested in bioethics. Henry wrote back to tell him of "a young Brit"--Nigel Cameron--who had just joined Trinity's faculty with that very interest.

Through Cameron, Ben Mitchell was invited to a small meeting in Illinois, a gathering of believers to talk about the future of Christian bioethics. It was there that Mitchell met Dr. John Kilner, and it was there that they first discussed the possibility of a Christian center for bioethics.

**John Kilner was working at the Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics**

when, in the summer of 1993, he joined fourteen other leaders in bioethics to evaluate the state of Christian bioethics in North America. A graduate of both Yale and Harvard, Kilner had been researching and teaching ethics for two decades. As he joined Nigel Cameron, Harold O. J. Brown, Ben Mitchell, and others around a table in Trinity's Rockford Room, the problem was clear: There was little to no evangelical engagement of these issues. Furthermore, there was no vehicle to bring Christians together across institutional and denominational lines to try to foster that engagement.

**Something had to be done.**

The group discussed possible scenarios and locations for a Christian center for bioethics. A national hub, Chicago was convenient for conferences. Trinity not only offered a Chicago location but was also the only evangelical school at the time offering a degree program in bioethics. They decided that the new Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity (CBHD), while legally separate from Trinity, would be located on the Deerfield campus.

With what little money they had through the contributions of two foundations, the group hired John Kilner as the founding director, and one secretary in the divinity school contributed a tenth of her time to assist him. "It was a chicken-and-egg situation," Kilner says. "How can you do things to attract donors to make money for the Center without having any money? But the vision was so compelling. Christians had never had a vehicle that could provide the opportunity to work together on bioethical challenges."

What Kilner began to discover in his new role as director of The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity was that there were Christians all over the country in strategic positions to influence bioethics. These men and women, who’d often never had a formal opportunity to connect their work with their beliefs, were happy to participate in CBHD's annual conferences. The head of the Human Genome Project, Francis Collins, addressed issues in genetics at one of CBHD's earliest conferences. After he finished speaking, Kilner noticed him sitting in the back of the room, listening to the other presenters. "I said to him, ?You're so busy in Washington, D.C. Why are
you still here?" Kilner recalls. "He told me something like this: ?I read the Bible, and I go to church. But what I'm missing is the opportunity to meet with other Christian leaders to connect my faith with the tough genetic questions."

While CBHD began to draw distinguished leaders in bioethics into its work, simultaneously it was contributing to the development of new leaders through its partnership in Trinity Evangelical Divinity School's Master of Arts in Christian Thought since 1993 and, beginning in 1997, Trinity Graduate School's Master of Arts in Bioethics--the only programs of their kind among evangelical schools. Students in the program, often employed as full time as healthcare professionals, complete their degrees through modular classes offered during CBHD's annual conferences in Deerfield and throughout the year. Trinity College students are also given an opportunity to earn the degree in a dual degree program unique among Christian schools. Graduates of the program range from established professionals like Dr. William Cheshire of the Mayo Clinic to emerging leaders like Jennifer Lahl.

Back in 1999, as Lahl listened to the closing session of CBHD's summer conference, she realized that God was calling her to found her own center for bioethics. The career nurse and mother of four was in the midst of completing her master’s in bioethics at Trinity Graduate School while her husband finished a Master of Divinity at TEDS. A recent convert to Christianity, Lahl had always been passionate about educating patients on life-and-death issues, and now, as she listened to the closing charge of the conference, she knew what God wanted her to do. Instead of writing a final paper for her degree, Lahl gained permission to research founding a center back in her California hometown during her remaining four months on campus. Lahl graduated in May 2000, and three months later launched the new Center for Bioethics and Culture. The Center has hosted conferences, events, and even two high-profile debates with the controversial Princeton professor Dr. Peter Singer. Lahl travels all over the world, speaking out particularly about reproductive technology and against the use of women's eggs for cloning and embryonic stem cell research. That practice has led in some places to the abuse of women to obtain and sell their eggs. "The church is not happy to wake up to these things," she says of reproductive technology. "We're happy to have the technology to help us have babies. Everyone is so excited about in vitro fertilization. But there are half a million frozen embryos in the U.S. alone. Some of those are evangelical embryos." Lahl is only one of several Trinity bioethics graduates who have founded new centers for bioethics, as well as seminary bioethics programs.

A decade after its inception, The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity had a staff of eleven, two program directors, two graduate assistants, thirty-seven fellows, a twelve-member governing board, and a twenty-one member advisory board. Their four websites garnered fourteen million hits a year. They'd hosted eleven major conferences, each offering multiple days of bioethics training, with up to three hundred participants a year. Fifty regional conferences provided additional opportunities for education, with about six thousand total attendees. CBHD's list of endorsers has included former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. Kilner, Mitchell, and CBHD Senior Fellows responded to media requests from the likes of Tom Brokaw and Bill O'Reilly and testified before U.S. Congressional House and Senate subcommittees. "We wanted to become known as a responsible and intellectually astute voice, to provide thoughtful and respectful engagement," Kilner says. But there was more to come. God was about to open two significant doors on an international level.
In the early months of 2004, South Korean researchers at Seoul National University stunned the world when they announced that they had, for the first time in human history, successfully cloned human beings, allowed those embryos to develop in their laboratory, then taken them apart to produce embryonic stem cell lines. Nearby, a fledgling bioethics center—the Seongsan Center—heard of the breakthrough with concern. The Seongsan Center was working with CBHD to develop their own bioethics programs. Together the two centers had planned an April 2004 bioethics conference at Seoul National University, considered an international leader in stem cell research. When the Seongsan Center heard of the cloning breakthrough, they responded by arranging a quiet meeting during the conference between one of the people responsible for the research and Dr. Kilner. The two men met privately to discuss the ethics of stem cell research and concluded with an agreement that more careful consideration of the ethical issues involved in this research was needed. Energized by the joint conference with CBHD, Seongsan Center personnel continued to pursue these issues at the university during the weeks that followed. Just a few months after the conference, more news spread worldwide from Seoul National University. The cloning research had been fabricated, and all related research was halted.

Later that same year, the Lausanne World Evangelization Movement invited Kilner to facilitate its first global bioethics task force. Every fifteen years, the Lausanne network conducts extensive research in more than two hundred metropolitan areas around the world in order to identify the greatest evangelistic opportunities. When, after six months of preparation, the bioethics task force met in Bangkok, Thailand, they attracted a lot of attention from the other thirty issue groups. "Many people were being exposed to the new opportunity to reach the world through bioethics for the first time—and they were quite excited about it!" Kilner says. "Leaders from some of the other groups, such as Joni Eareckson Tada from the Persons with Disabilities group, requested the opportunity to sit in on some of the work of our group in order to get a better sense of how the emerging bioethics evangelistic opportunity might connect to their own group's work."

A new chapter began for The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity when, in July 2007, they announced a merger with Trinity International University. Now almost fifteen years after CBHD's inception, its leaders saw the kind of possibilities that could bring CBHD to the next level in its development. "It's an opportunity to integrate the wonderful theological resources at Trinity with the work of the Center, to bring all the various disciplines to bear on the issues we face," says Ben Mitchell. Kilner, who left the administration of CBHD a few years ago to teach bioethics full time at Trinity, is delighted with the merger as well. "Now that CBHD is established as a national and international resource, and Trinity has established what continues to be a cutting-edge bioethics program, we can bring the two more closely together," he explains. "It is good synergy."
The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity continues to foster the kinds of conversations that need to happen as new technologies emerge and, often, are uncritically adopted. Last October, CBHD leaders traveled to the Capitol Building Complex in Washington, D.C., to host a private consultation on "Healthcare and the Common Good." There Ben Mitchell and CBHD's managing director and research scholar Michael Sleasman conferred with several current and former members of the President's Council on Bioethics and other leading thinkers in public policy organizations and governmental offices. The dialogue helped to contribute to the ongoing healthcare reform discussion, while providing CBHD with direction for its summer 2008 conference in Deerfield.

"Part of our role is to educate, to think about technology," Mitchell says. "We want not to be alarmists but to help people think: Where is technology pushing us? Then we can make informed decisions. We can know the social and the spiritual costs."

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