

## A CHRISTIAN FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGING IN SCIENCE POLICY

MICHELLE KIRTLEY, PHD

CONSULTANT ON BIOETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY



Central to the mission of The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity is an effort to analyze and interpret bioethical issues with a view towards cultural transformation. While several key Christian thinkers have rightly challenged the Judeo-Christian world to think broadly about the tools we use to engage culture, public policy, and science policy more

specifically—whether upstream or downstream of broader cultural change—remains an important means of securing the common good and affirming the human dignity of our fellow citizens.

But what is science policy and how should Christians approach science policy? ‘Science policy’ includes public policy *about* science—federal funding for scientific research, clinical trial regulations, public health policy, or science, math, and engineering education policy. The term ‘science policy’ is also invoked to talk about how science is used to craft public policy, as in the case of using fetal pain research to craft abortion policy.

In order to develop a sound approach for Christian engagement in science policy, we first need to develop a framework for thinking about how to integrate faith with our view of science and our approach to political engagement.

The church has a checkered history of relating to the scientific community. Some of history’s best known scientists—including Sir Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday, and William Thomas Kelvin—were themselves devout believers, and yet, some of the church’s darkest moments involve the persecution of scientists thought to be at odds with church doctrine (Galileo being perhaps the most famous example).

Of course, science need not be in conflict with Christian faith. The entire universe is part of God’s created order, and Scripture clearly speaks of God’s desire to reveal Himself to us through creation. Science can be a means of glorifying God by reflecting His creative nature, revealing the beauty and complexity of his created order and providing tools for participating in His work of renewal and for achieving justice and

affirming the dignity of all humanity. Christians need not fear scientific progress. “All truth is God’s truth,” as the saying goes (though this legitimate insight needs to be handled with care). Christians should be supporting and participating in scientific efforts to uncover truth about our world, working to ensure that science in the service of the common good, can flourish.

Integrating our faith with our view of politics is equally important. Political communities play a vital, God-ordained role in His work of redemption and renewal of all creation. Government exists to uphold public justice for all citizens, not to privilege Christianity or any other faith. Responsible citizenship includes helping to shape the political community to conform to the demands of justice and human dignity. Justice, while Christian in its origin, should be extended to all people, believers and non-believers alike.<sup>1</sup>

A Christian approach to science policy, then, includes several

*Christians need not fear scientific progress.  
“All truth is God’s truth,” as the saying goes  
... Christians should be supporting and  
participating in scientific efforts to uncover truth  
about our world, working to ensure that science  
in the service of the common good, can flourish.*

key principles. Because, as Christians, we have a high regard for the truth, science policy decisions should be evidence-based. Yet because we also have a keen awareness of our human limitations, policy decisions should involve mechanisms for transparency regarding the biases and conflicts of interest inherent in the application of scientific evidence to public policy. Science must be viewed as one of many tools used to develop policy but should not be seen as the final arbiter of policy debate. Data can be biased even at its point of acquisition and are always interpreted by fallible researchers, used to develop models that approximate, rather than mirror,

reality. Even the most understood scientific principles and dogma are subject to revision, and so science must be used with caution and never in a vacuum.

Instead, science should be evaluated, among other things, in the context of the value our republic places on human dignity, public justice, and the common good. The role of the federal government is both to provide incentives (funding) and set boundaries around the pursuit of science to ensure that science serves the common good and upholds human dignity.

In the particular arena of bioethics policy, Christians, while working to ensure that our federal laws protect and affirm human dignity, should also be thinking strategically about how to enable science to flourish. We should encourage college students to pursue principled careers in the sciences. And policymaking should not be left to “professional” politicians. Fulfilling our God-given calling as citizens includes political engagement—whether through contacting political representatives, writing letters to the editor, or submitting public comments to the many proposed rules issued by federal agencies. In so doing, we will be making a small contribution to broader cultural transformation. ●●●

1 Adapted from principles outlined by the Center for Public Justice at [www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org).

## QUESTIONS?

Would you like to offer comments or responses to articles and commentaries that appear in *Dignitas*? As we strive to publish material that highlights cutting-edge bioethical reflection from a distinctly Christian perspective, we acknowledge that in many areas there are genuine disagreements about bioethical conclusions. To demonstrate that bioethics is a conversation, we invite you to send your thoughtful reflections to us at [info@cbhd.org](mailto:info@cbhd.org) with a reference to the original piece that appeared in *Dignitas*. Our hope is to inspire critical dialogue between our readers and those who contribute material to this publication.

# SAVE THE DATE! JULY 12-14 2012

THE CENTER FOR BIOETHICS & HUMAN DIGNITY  
presents the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer Conference



**REGISTER BY VISITING**  
[www.cbhd.org /conf2012](http://www.cbhd.org/conf2012)