Leon R. Kass, M.D. again reveals how he thinks through bioethical issues in Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics. He also reveals why we can be thankful President Bush appointed him as Chair of the President’s Council on Bioethics. Written in the tradition of C. S. Lewis, Hans Jonas, and Paul Ramsey, Kass delves deep in his exploration of the values, beliefs, and visions that underlie bioethical issues. Kass does not limit himself to bewildering principles, juggling values, and weighing consequences. Rather, he takes on the challenging task of exploring the meaning of such difficult topics as technology, liberal democracy, and human dignity. Kass forces us to reflect at a level beyond the surface, his literal style drawing us deeper and deeper into the center of the issues. Beginning with stem cell research and cloning and continuing on to the sealed human organs, assisted suicide, and life-extension therapies, he astutely addresses various topics and themes within bioethics. Each time, Kass provides us with a different angle on what is meant by human dignity. Each time, he shows us how this specific dilemma presents us with a choice.

On the one hand, we can choose the new technology, or the new liberty (understood as “self-indulgence,” not “self-rule”), taking us ever closer to Huxley’s Brave New World. Not content merely to refer to such a scenario, Kass seeks to unveil what disturbs us about Huxley’s world and shows how we have already accepted many of its beliefs, values, and goals. What is most repulsive about the Brave New World is not inequality or lack of freedom, but dehumanization and degradation—and, worst of all, that their posthuman estate is neither recognized by anyone, and that they aspire to nothing humanly richer or higher.

But we can instead choose against the technological “superhighway” and stand in defense of human dignity. Human cloning, for example, affords a unique and vitally important opportunity to do just that. “In a truly unprecedented way, we can strike a blow for the human control of the technological project, for wisdom, or prudence, for human dignity.” Today, we must choose whether we shall be “slaves of unreconstructed opinion—or whether we shall remain free human beings who guide our powers toward the enhancement of human dignity.”

Kass’s style is refreshing, offering an approach that is both deeply insightful and challenging. He critiques bioethics as it has developed over the last thirty years, being largely focused on the therapeutic and philosophical. He asks whether patients are better treated and whether hospital staffs are more civil as a result of bioethical intervention. According to Kass, the problem is that bioethics neglects people’s deeper moral concerns. Kass’s challenge is clear: “Will it be said of us that we ethics fine-tuned our theological foibles while modern Rome rocked and rolled its way back to barbarism?” Christians, especially, should be well equipped to take up this challenge, as our goal is not just to answer difficult bioethical questions but to help shape people into those who better reflect the image of God.

Having read this book once, I felt compelled to go back and re-read it, giving each argument the careful meditation it deserves. That’s what makes this book essential reading—and Kass one of the most important thinkers of our day.