



# gospel & culture

GOSPEL & CULTURE: BIOETHICS  
WEEK 8 | PAIGE CUNNINGHAM, JD

## Gospel & Culture: Bioethics

On Sunday, August 14, Paige Cunningham, JD, PhD (Cand.), Executive Director, The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity, guided us through a discussion of bioethics. She considers different questions in order to guide our thoughts on how the church addresses abortion.

### What IS Bioethics?

- Bioethics is “where medical research meets moral reflection” (Dr. Christine Pohl)
- Bioethics is “the study of the moral implications of the life sciences” (Dr. James Thobaben)

One way to think about bioethics is culturally: what’s going on in the world? The other way to think about bioethics is personally: what decisions do I have to make in my own life? Every person must make bioethical decisions at some point in their lifetimes.

### Taking Life, Making Life, Faking Life

- **Taking:** Taking life includes things like abortion, physician-assisted suicide, end-of-life issues such as terminal sedation and stem cell research using human embryos.
- **Making:** Making life includes things like IVF and other assisted reproductive technologies (ART), organ donation and transplantation and clones and human-animal hybrids.
- All of these technologies involve the taking of life as well as the making of it, especially destruction in the early stages of life.
- **Faking:** Aging and life-extension technologies, genetic engineering (genetic testing, genetic privacy, gene editing) and emerging technologies (nanotechnology, cybernetics, synthetic biology and artificial intelligence.)

### Transcendent Issues

Some transcendent issues in bioethics involve issues of human dignity and personhood, clinical ethics, disability ethics, healthcare, public health and research ethics. These transcendent issues get at the foundation of our understanding of who we are: human beings made in the image of God.

### The Two Big Questions

1.) What are the boundaries of human life?

This is essentially asking, who gets a seat at the table of the human family? Who are the vulnerable, who are being pushed away? Generally the people making these decisions are not the ones about whom the decisions are being made.

2.) What does it mean to be human in the biotech century?

This raises questions about human flourishing and the boundaries of human nature. What is the reality of the world we are living in, and how are we called to live in such a world?

Ultimately, these questions are about **taxonomy**: how do we classify what is human and what is not? The philosopher Immanuel Kant says that we must never use other people as means to achieve our own ends (instrumentalism), but always see them as their own ends in of themselves.

We must continually ask ourselves how far we are willing to go to improve and extend our life on this earth. What resources are we willing to spend to stave off death? American culture is so afraid of death; Christian culture is often afraid of dying. These fears impact the way we consider the resources we use.

### Thinking Bioethically as a Christian

“When we do Christian ethics, we are indeed working with a particular understanding of God, life, humanity and the world, and we are responding out of a specific relationship with God.” -Dennis Hollinger, *Choosing the Good* (2002), 21.

Christian ethics is grounded in the *nature* and *actions* of God. It is both internal, reflecting our relationship with God, and *external*, reflecting our relationship with humanity and the world.

### Bioethics and the Bible

One of the complicated aspects of considering bioethics as Christians is that we want to find answers in Scripture, but we cannot make it fit with today’s technology:

“Scripture was written in a very different time, and bioethical issues are

often tied to technological advances; it's a very different world. Many people either ignore Scripture or try a kind of test." -Christine Pohl

The bible is intensely relevant to how we think about bioethics, but it is not an answerbook. It can illuminate our thinking, however, even without clearcut answers, especially as we pursue wisdom. We must ask ourselves how we can be morally reflective--how we can wrestle with things we don't know and that make us uncomfortable.

In this vein, the bible is not our primary source from which we must think about bioethics, but it is our ultimate source. Being saturated in the bible, in fact, is a prerequisite for thinking about bioethics well.

We properly use the bible when we concentrate on developing biblical principles rather than looking for explicit commands. The primary framework is obedience to clear commands, but we can also ask questions about purposes and goals, especially by paying attention to details. We must also commit to thinking theologically when resolving ethical dilemmas.

Some questions that the bible can help us consider: are there boundaries to human nature? What is the nature and meaning of death? Is it the ultimate enemy or the ultimate evil? How should the providence of sovereignty of God play into these issues? What is the role of human agency? What are the natures and meanings of family and human sexuality?

Deontology: the moral framework that we must obey when considering bioethical questions.

Teleology: The purpose or goal to be achieved with modern bioethics.

Our goal should be to always promote good--but there are many kinds of good. Health and flourishing are good, but they are not the ultimate good. Our ultimate good is to enjoy God and worship him forever. There are also harms we want to avoid--pain, disease, injury and death. But these are not ultimate harms. The ultimate harm is eternal separation from God. We have to keep this in mind because otherwise we'll see death as the enemy that we devote everything in order to prevent.

## Ethical Judgments as Christians

Some ethical issues are complex or ambiguous, and the answer may not be clear. For this reason, we need to have charity for each other in our understandings of these issues, as we may not always come up with the same conclusions as each other.

God's covenant with us means that we are to live differently than the world, while contributing to the common good. We are covenantal people. We are held to a higher standard. We must ask ourselves how much our decisions look like something the world is telling us to do, and how much they look like something God is calling us to do. It's hard for us to see our own culture, and sometimes it takes people standing outside to point it out for us.

### Example Scenario:

Greg is 92 years old. He has had a relatively healthy life. He had a double knee replacement at 62 and a hip replacement at 83. Now, he has heart disease and cancer. Greg has a heart attack. In the hospital, while Greg is unconscious, the doctor suggests comfort care only. Greg's son demands that his father be put on the heart transplant list.

1. What is the ethical question(s)?
2. What more do you need to know?
3. What is the goal of treatment?
4. Is there an applicable explicit command?
5. What biblical principles or theological statements are relevant?



