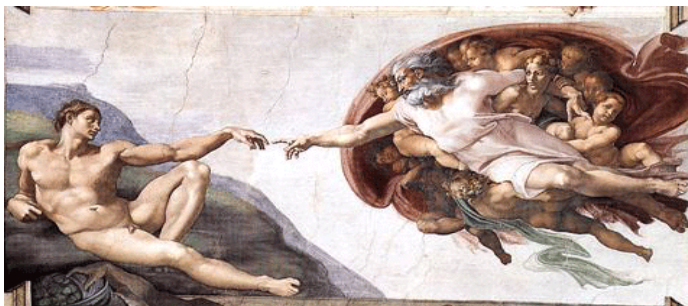


The Tree of Life

Thousands of years after ignoring God's command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, Mankind now pursues the arrogance of eating of the Tree of Life. The advance of modern medicine has dragged us into an ethical quagmire because of its ability to preserve some aspects of life beyond the point of traditional definition of death. Into the gap between religious dogmatism and practical realities, a small cadre of largely self-appointed secular bioethicists seeks to exploit and manipulate ambivalent public opinion and policy to downgrade our concept of humanity in order to advance a new utilitarian ethic. The battleground is decisions about abortion, euthanasia, cloning, and embryonic stem cell research, but the war is really about the reality of God and our relationship with Him.

Then

The Creation of Human Beings



"The Creation of Man" from the Sistine Chapel ceiling

The basic biblical teaching is that human beings are categorically different than the plants and animals God created for our benefit because only we are created in His image (Hebrew, **Tzelem Elohim**), according to His likeness (Hebrew, **Demuth**). The meaning of "in the image of God" is debatable and sometimes misunderstood. *Tzelem Elohim* does not refer to some physical resemblance since God is spirit (John 4:24). Nor does it seem to refer to the existence of a soul (Hebrew, **nephesh**) since the living creatures God created prior to human beings are also referred to as *nephesh*. The difference therefore probably lies in the spirit God breathed into humanity (Genesis 2:7) or in the integrated nature of human body, soul, and spirit that gives rise to our creativity, consciousness, personality, abstract thinking, and moral judgment. Human capacities in these areas are unique among God's creatures.

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Some have suggested that the Fall removed humanity's *Tzelem Elohim*, but Paul reinforces the concept in 1 Corinthians 11:7. Whatever *Tzelem Elohim* entails, it is a permanent aspect of mankind.

Skeptics mock *Tzelem Elohim* as a self-serving anthropocentrism, but being created in God's image does not imply that only we have value, for every part of God's creation is important and human beings carry a special responsibility because of our capacity for rational thought and moral judgments to be good stewards of God's creation. Nevertheless, it is manifestly evident that only human beings were created with a spirit that can sense God, worship Him, and have a relationship with Him. Worship goes back to the very dawn of mankind, but even the highest animals show no evidence of this capacity. God wired us for relationship with Him. It is this profound truth that answers the most basic of human questions, "Why am I here?" and establishes the value of human life.

The Sanctity of Life

The traditional position in the Judeo-Christian ethic has centered on the Sanctity of (Human) Life, but there is considerable biblical evidence contradictory to this doctrine. God Himself

commanded the execution of human beings guilty of various crimes. Murder, occultism, and sexual sin all merited capital punishment.

According to some theologians, capital punishment is based upon a belief in the sanctity of life, using Genesis 9:6, which says, "*Whoever sheds man's blood by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man.*" This justification of the Sanctity of Life seems like circular logic: violate the sanctity of life of someone who violates the sanctity of life, and the case completely falls apart when one considers crimes other than murder.

The Genesis 9:6 passage argues for a special value of human life, but not its sanctity. Furthermore, even granting that God is God and He can do what He wants, the fact that He once exterminated a rather large portion of the population certainly seems to indicate that He values something more than human life. Furthermore, if "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8), and "*the exact representation of (God's) nature*" (Hebrews 1:3), how could God establish the Sanctity of Life, only to violate it? God also did not consider the lives of Ananias and Sapphira sacred (Acts 5:1-11) when they lied about their contribution to the church in Jerusalem. If God ordained the Sanctity of Life, it is at least conditional.

While Jesus repeatedly endorses the value of individual human lives, particularly of those who could not defend themselves in the current culture, He does not demonstrate a belief in the Sanctity of Life. Despite the fact that He clearly had the power to do so, He did not save every human life during His lifetime. People still died. In fact, there are only three recorded instances of restoring life in the New Testament: the Ruler's Daughter (Matthew 9:18; Mark 5:22; Luke 8:40), the Widow of Nain's Son (Luke 7:11), and Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha (John 11:43).

In all three of these cases, Jesus seems to be motivated not by the plight of the individual who died, but by those who suffered as a result of that death. Jesus' mission was not to eliminate all suffering in the world, nor to bring an end to physical death, but rather to bring hope to all humanity, regardless of their circumstances, and the healings He did perform served the purpose of certifying His identity and His authority.

Paul certainly did not believe in the sanctity of his own physical life; otherwise, he could not have claimed "*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21). Death, in fact, releases us from physical life to the sanctity of eternal life. Second and third century Christians did not consider their physical life sacred, as evidenced by the fact that many leaders accepted, welcomed, or even sought martyrdom.

The Value of Human Beings

The degree to which God values human beings requires little discussion and is best stated in the familiar verse, "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). Furthermore, Jesus' enduring compassion toward the most vulnerable in society—children, widows, lepers, prostitutes, etc.), often in opposition to the religious elite of His day, demonstrates that God values people over rules.

In the story of the man born blind (John 9:1-34), we often focus on the controversy that followed. Because Jesus healed the man's blindness on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accused Him of being a sinner for breaking the Law of the Sabbath. When some Pharisees comment "*This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath,*" (v. 16) the healed man has a simple, but profound, response: "*Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see*" (v. 25).

In this story, we may miss the preliminary conversation between Jesus and His disciples when they first encounter the blind man. "*Rabbi,*" the disciples ask. "*Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?*" (v. 2) Their question reveals the attitude prevalent in the Jewish culture of the time—that disabilities and misfortune were a direct result of sin. Jesus' response destroys that attitude and refers to His mission on Earth: "*It was neither that*

*this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was **so that the works of God might be displayed in him**. We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world"* (vv. 3-5, emphasis added).

The Idolatry of Sanctity of Life

"Sanctity" is the end result of the process of sanctification (becoming holy or sacred). Our sanctification comes from faith in Christ Jesus and a life of discipleship whose outcome is eternal life (Romans 6:22). Therefore, if there is such a thing as the Sanctity of Life, it must apply to eternal life, not physical life. In fact, the doctrine of the Sanctity of Life, when it refers to physical life, is effectively idolatrous in the absence of faith.

Now

In discussing secular bioethicists, I am going to focus primarily on Peter Singer because he is arguably the most notorious. He has become a media darling and holds a major chair at one of America's most prestigious universities. Singer is controversial, even among some secular bioethicists, but he has a significant and growing group of followers. Like Singer, most secular bioethicists are often atheists and Darwinians operating from the premises that there is no God (or at least no personal God) and that man is nothing more than a higher form of animal. Their misanthropic conclusions are consequently inevitable.

Ironically, secular bioethicists sometimes reach appropriate conclusions, but they usually do so for the wrong reasons and using intellectually dishonest logic that amounts to classic propaganda. Singer, for example, describes the Sanctity of Life position as unviable in our modern world because of "the decline in religious authority and the rise of a better understanding of the origins and nature of our species" (*Rethinking Life and Death*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 1994, pg. 4). He does not define what he means by religious authority, provides no evidence of its decline, and fails to explain the connection between Sanctity and religious authority. Presumably, Singer equates "religious authority" with current churches and their human leaders, but all authority comes from God and there is no evidence of His decline in authority. What Singer probably means here is a decline in people's recognition of and submission to God's authority.



More often, not surprisingly, bioethicists' premises lead to ludicrous conclusions. To justify his radical "animal liberation" position, Singer assumes that Darwinism represents "a better understanding of the origins and nature of our species" (*ibid*, p. 4). He then uses secular arguments to counter outmoded secular arguments. Claiming that the distinctiveness of humans has always been based on tools, language, and genetics, he gleefully attacks these theories by citing legitimate research that demonstrate chimpanzees using tools (insect-routing sticks), gorillas learning language (Koko), and humans sharing 98.4% of our DNA with chimpanzees. He uses this information to conclude that humans are just a variety of "African apes" (pg. 177) and that "the possibility of human and chimpanzee interbreeding cannot be ruled out" (p. 180). By the extension of Singer's logic, we might as well recognize chimps as potential bioethicists and let them make decisions about human life and death. The fundamental problem with Singer's argument is that he has completely missed the distinction between humans and other animals. It does not lie in tools, language, or genetics. It lies in the distinctiveness of our

creation, in our unique ability to make moral judgments, and in the purpose of our lives.

Singer is also profoundly disrespectful of positions opposed to his own. He admits that his views "are very different from the ethical views most people hold today," but claims that "is not ground for dismissing them" (pg. 5). Yet this is precisely what he does with just about any position based on biblical evidence, dismissing it with a figurative wave of his hand. On the issue of abortion, for example, he suggests that since (1) society has accepted the legitimacy of abortion (a highly debatable premise), and (2) there is no effective difference between a fetus and a newborn (a premise most pro-life advocates would heartily endorse), it is permissible, even morally commendable, to terminate a newborn under circumstances he and other bioethicists claim the right to determine.

Many Christian institutions attempt to counter this assault with a Sanctity of Life position but, as I have suggested, that position is not biblically supported. In addition, it is often applied selectively and inconsistently, and it fails to address the new reality posed by medical science. Dogmatism that ignores new evidence and situations does not serve to discern God's will. Dogmatism that no longer provides guidance for difficult moral issues often leads Christians to wonder if science has the answers their churches fails to provide. One problem the Sanctity ethic faces is the definition of death and, for that matter, life. Because modern medicine is able to maintain at least a semblance of life signs (heart, circulation, etc.) in people who would have died just a few years ago and because medicine can also rescue babies (both in and out of the womb) who would not have survived, new ethical considerations must be faced. The very definitions of life and death are currently under intense debate, and Christians seem as divided as the secular world.

When it comes to making the life and death issues created by the advance of medical science, the **Sanctity of Life** camp too often seeks to prevent the death that would come without machines, simply because a heart is beating. By contrast, the **Quality of Life** camp too often seeks to prevent the continuation of a life deemed not worth living by a team of doctors, lawyers, and self-styled bioethicists. Given a choice between those polemic positions, I would side with life, but they aren't the only choices. I would therefore suggest a different position based on the **Purpose of Life**.

A Purpose of Life position on life and death decisions would be based on the biblical principles surrounding human life. With grateful acknowledgment to Rick Church ([The Purpose- Driven Life](#), Zondervan, 2002), the purpose of life is (1) to develop a relationship with our Maker (worship), (2) to strive for Christlikeness in our lives (discipleship), (3) to share with a community of fellow believers (fellowship), (4) to serve others (ministry), and (5) to share the hope that exists in Christ (evangelism). Since it is only in these five purposes that our lives find meaning, the capacity for these can be a guide to the life and death decisions we face. The shortcoming of a Purpose of Life position is that it only works for believers, who accept a purpose greater than self-gratification. We cannot expect those who do not share this view of life to accept it. Just a Christian have no right to judge the morality of unbelievers (see [ET&N 24](#)), it would be inappropriate to make an attempt to force a Purpose of Life framework on others.

The issues before us are primarily abortion, euthanasia, cloning, and embryonic stem cell research, but there will be others in the future. It is easy to condemn abortion in all circumstances, but what about a fetus that is found to be anencephalic (no brain or only a brain stem)? Sanctity of Life demands that a woman carry that fetus to term, knowing that it will be born dead, die shortly, or only kept alive through medical machinery. Quality of Life demands an abortion because that will bring more overall happiness into the world by allowing the woman to have a normal child sooner.

Secular bioethics frequently divides euthanasia into voluntary, non-voluntary, and involuntary categories. Voluntary euthanasia is a euphemism for suicide. Non-voluntary euthanasia is the killing of someone unable to make the decision. Involuntary euthanasia is the killing of someone against his or her wishes, essentially a euphemism for murder. Sanctity of Life demands condemnation of all three. Quality of Life justifies the first two and sometimes the third.

Embryonic stem cell research involves the use of the brains of embryos lost through miscarriage or abortion, or of embryos expressly created for that purpose. Sanctity of Life prohibits such use, regardless of the good it might bring, based on presumption that the embryo represents human life. Quality of Life demands such use, regardless of the abuses it might create, based on the good the research might do for others.



Dolly

Cloning involves the use of cells to create biologically identical life. The most famous instance of cloning was "Dolly," the sheep manufactured by the Scottish research center, the Roslin Institute, in 1996. Dolly was euthanized in 2003 after she developed a progressive lung disease. Her death at a relatively young age sparked speculation about premature aging that would have a profound impact on the ethics of cloning. When a post-mortem determined that her condition was the result of virus-induced tumor, the question of pre-mature aging could not be resolved.

Once a mammal was cloned, it was not a question of if human would be cloned, but when. Woo Suk Hwang of Seoul National University in Korea announced in February 2004 that he had successfully cloned healthy human embryos, removed embryonic stem cells and grown them in mice, and other researchers are involved in similar research.

Religious opinions about human cloning are somewhat divided. The Roman Catholic position categorically condemns human cloning, primarily because it co-opts God's creative authority. Jewish and Protestants sometimes justify human cloning on the basis of its potential benefits

but are concerned with the ethical risks. Islamic scholars are divided. Some are opposed based on questions about the kinship—a key concept in Islam—while others contend that since all knowledge comes from God, cloning can be justified.



Issues of cloning and embryonic stem cell research are related because of the likelihood (probably a certainty) that laboratories would clone human embryos just supply parts, furthering denigrating human life (if, in fact, a clone could be properly understood as human).

The problem with both positions is that they too often supply simple solutions to complex problems, ignoring the nuances of the situation. A Purpose of Life position does not necessarily provide clear answers, but it does provide a meaningful framework in which to seek answers.

That framework would ask two questions:

1. Can the life in question fulfill any of the five purposes of life?
2. Can the life in question help others to fulfill any of the five purposes?
Note: this second question gets at the lesson of John 9: 3-5 and challenges us to consider if "the works of God might be displayed" through that life.

Let's examine the kinds of situations that are facing us with increasing regularity, either personally or through the media.

Case 1 - To abort or not to abort

A 35-year old woman is 18 weeks pregnant with her third child, the last she and her husband intend to have. Blood tests on the mother indicating low levels of maternal serum alpha-fetoprotein (MSAFP) and estriol, along with high levels of human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) and Inhibin -A suggest an increased risk of Down syndrome. Amniocentesis confirms the diagnosis. Both parents work and feel ill-equipped to deal with a Down's child, particularly with two other children under age five. Would this couple be justified in aborting this high-risk fetus?

On the surface, this seems an easy one. After all, a human with a chromosomal disorder is still a human, capable of a long, happy life. However, bioethicists like Singer argue that abortion is justified in such cases because a Down child is burdensome and stressful for parents and therefore reduces the happiness of the family. Aborting would then give the couple the opportunity to try for a normal child.

The **Sanctity of Life** position would say absolutely not because the life of the human fetus is sacred.

The **Quality of Life** position would say yes because the overall happiness in the world would be increased.

The **Purpose of Life** position would say no because Down Syndrome people are fully capable of fulfilling the five purposes. After all, didn't Jesus say that kingdom of heaven belongs to children (Matthew 19:14)?

Case 2 - To kill or not to kill

Beth, a 25-year old mother gives birth to an anencephalic baby girl possessing only a brain stem. The medical staff at the hospital is unanimous in the opinion that the child will never be conscious and is likely to die within a few days. Down the hospital hall, Theresa has given birth to an otherwise-healthy child with a fatal heart defect. The hospital ethics committee convinces Beth to petition the courts to declare her daughter "dead" in order to allow them to harvest her baby's organs in order save Theresa's. Is this a justifiable request?

The **Sanctity of Life** position would say absolutely not because the life of Beth's child is sacred.

The **Quality of Life** position would say yes, arguing that she has a moral obligation to do so. Former Colorado governor Richard Lamm claims "(t)here is something fundamentally unethical about keeping an anencephalic baby alive" (as quoted by Wesley J. Smith in Culture of Death, Encounter Books: San Francisco, 2000, p. 145).

The **Purpose of Life** position would permit weighing the moral options. Perhaps Beth's anencephalic child was born in order for Beth to demonstrate compassion for Theresa and her child. The decision would require careful, prayerful consideration. What would serve to more glorify God? Preservation of the brief life of Beth's daughter or the perhaps divine provision of a heart just when Theresa's needed one?

The problem, however, is the undeniable slippery slope this creates, despite the disclaimers by most secular bioethicists. As Dr. Paul C. Fox points out, "declaring anencephalic babies "dead" at birth can be applied with equal logic to any other baby whose deformities might have moved its parents to abort it, had they but known of them" (*Babies and Body Parts* at leaderu.com).

Case 3 - To feed or not to feed

A Florida woman lingers in what doctors call a "permanent vegetative state" (PVS) years after suffering a massive heart attack and resultant brain damage. She is nourished through a feeding tube but otherwise free of medical assistance. Her husband wants her euthanised by removal of the feeding tube, but her parents fight through the legal system to preserve her life. The case garners national media attention and millions see images showing the woman clearly severely disabled but at least minimally responsive. Should the courts grant her husband's request?

The **Sanctity of Life** position insists that the feeding tube be maintained and she be allowed to live until natural death occurs.

The **Quality of Life** position maintains that her life is not worth living and lobbies for non-voluntary euthanasia.

The **Purpose of Life** position would argue that while she may be no longer capable of fulfilling her purpose, her life may serve as the source for displaying the works of God. We cannot rule out a miraculous recovery but that is not really the point. If sanity prevailed, one of the judges appealed to in the case might simply award custody of her to her parents. Through their loving self-sacrifice, God might be glorified.

Whatever else we may conclude, there can be no legitimate excuse for the neglect or abuse of sick and dying people. The value of a society is revealed not by its wealth, sophistication, or

utilitarianism, but by how it behaves towards its most unfortunate members. Note: for much more on changing medical ethics in America, I highly recommend Culture of Death by Wesley J. Smith (Encounter Books, ©2000).

Case 4 - To heal or not to heal

At some point in the very near future, medical science has succeeded in creating and maintaining cloned human embryos. All these human embryos are quickly "harvested" for embryonic stem cells that offer enormous potential for curing disease and reducing the resultant suffering in the world. Following removal of the stem cell materials, the embryos are destroyed. Is the use of artificially-created human embryos justified?

The **Sanctity of Life** position absolutely precludes human cloning and is represented by these August 22, 2004 comments by Pope John Paul II: "Respect life itself and individual lives: everything starts here, for the most fundamental of human rights is certainly the right to life. Abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, for example, risk reducing the human person to a mere object: life and death to order, as it were! When all moral criteria are removed, scientific research involving the sources of life becomes a denial of the being and the dignity of the person."

The **Quality of Life** position mandates therapeutic human cloning for this purpose because it increases overall happiness in the world.

The **Purpose of Life** position is not so simplistic. Almost no one questions the use of human organs for transplant purposes when the source is either living volunteers or deceased individuals. Transplantation is not viewed as reducing a human being to a "mere object." In addition, few oppose the use of transplanted organs or other medical procedures to extend the life of an individual who would otherwise die and who has a reasonable chance of recovery. The problem in this case lies in the source of the potential cure. Should man-made embryos be considered human beings? The answer, it seems to me, lies in the argument used by Sanctity of Life proponents: man-made embryos are not "created in the image of God." Consequently, the potential of this medical technology seems to outweigh the potential abuse (see next case). The apparent curative power of embryonic stem cells is a gift from God, comparable to the pharmaceutical miracle of many plants and herbs. The use of man-made embryonic stem cells, under carefully controlled conditions, can therefore bring glory to God and perhaps lead more to discover and pursue the real purposes of their lives.

Case 5 - To create or not to create

In a science fiction scenario that is anything but far-fetched, a rogue nation uses human cloning technology to create a warrior race, bred for aggression, stamina, and fearlessness. After United Nations condemnation and sanctions, these efforts are eliminated, but several hundred clone warrior children have been found in a special preparation camp. What should be done with these man-made children?

I suspect there is little difference between the three positions in this case. All would probably concede that there is no justification for the extermination of these children. Efforts would be made to farm them out for adoption in the hope that their in-bred characteristics can be channeled or ameliorated. The deepest problem, I would suggest, is related to the creative authority of God: just what is the nature of cloned humans? Created by men, do they lack a God-breathed spirit? Do they lack the knowledge of eternity (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and therefore be unable to recognize or worship God? Should they be considered "children of a lesser god" (humans) and therefore subject to discrimination and abuse? The greatest potential for abuse, ironically, might come specifically from within religions that hold strictly to a Sanctity of Life position. Radicals would probably consider them essentially the spawn of Satan and call for their extermination, while more "liberal" faiths would insist on compassion, ignoring the theological implications of man-made humans. I have no solutions to offer for Case 5. Thankfully, we have some time (I hope) to consider the most appropriate course of action.

Cases 1, 2, and 3 are real. Case 1 probably happens every day in this country. Case 2 mirrors the 1992 Florida case of Baby Theresa. Case 3 involves the essential elements of the Terry Schiavo case that created such a media frenzy this year. Case 4 probably isn't reality yet, but it is coming soon. The nightmare of Case 5 seems almost inevitable.

Christians need to be prepared to provide meaningful solutions to these and other moral dilemmas we will all face. Dogmatic, simplistic insistence on the Sanctity of Life will not solve the problem. The world already mocks such an assertion based on utilitarianism, biology, and genetics. That would not matter if the Sanctity of Life were a biblically defensible position, but I suggest it is not, and the genie is already out of the bottle. Unless we can do better, we'll leave the genie and its masters in charge.

Discussion

Wow! Not a single comment on *The Tree of Life*. Since there were many in response to the "Christian Affirmation Statement" perhaps *The Tree of Life* got set aside, or maybe just nobody cared.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Rome

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