

# WHAT IS BIOETHICS?

By James W. “Bill” O’Clock, Doctor of Humane Letters in Christian Ethics

*And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. (2 Thessalonians 3:13)*

Bioethics is a relatively new term in the English language which is not well understood amongst the general public. *The World Book Dictionary* describes bioethics as the study of the ethical problems involved in biological or medical research such as organ transplantation and genetic engineering. Gilbert Meilaender, a professor of theological ethics at Valparaiso University, defined bioethics in his book entitled, *Bioethics – A Primer for Christians*, as follows:

Bioethics is not just about the difficult moral problems we face, or the decisions we must make in one moment or another. More fundamentally, it invites us to think about the way we live toward death in a world marked by illness and suffering.

John F. Kilner in his article entitled, “Why All the Fuss Over Bioethics?” provides a much simpler definition. He states, “Simply put, bioethics involves distinguishing between what we should pursue and shouldn’t pursue in matters of life and health.” In other words, bioethics deals with what we “ought” and “ought not” to do in matters pertaining to medicine or medical scientific research.

It should be noted that science deals more with the “is” factor, i.e., this is what *can* be done versus this is what *ought* to be done. Many in the medical and scientific communities believe they deal appropriately with the “ought” and “is” factors. However, today’s bioethics is influenced by a strong, secular mindset that clouds the decision-making process of what ought to be done versus what can be done.

Though bioethics is a relatively new discipline which has spawned individuals who call themselves bioethicists, the idea of bioethics or medical ethics can be traced back to at least 400 B.C. when Hippocrates and the Hippocratic Oath set the standard for medical care throughout Western societies, providing the basis for modern-day health care. The history of medical care and its inevitable link to bioethics in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century will be discussed in later chapters, but for now the following list gives a reasonable depiction of several bioethics topics that are currently facing our nation and the world:

- Abortion
- Euthanasia
- Doctor-assisted Suicide
- Reproductive Technologies
  - Surrogate Mothers
  - In Vitro Fertilization
  - Cloning
  - Prenatal Genetic Testing
- Human Genome Project
- Human Stem-cell Research
  - Embryonic Stem-cell Research
  - Adult Stem-cell Research

- Genetic Therapy
  - Somatic Gene Therapy
  - Germ Line Gene Therapy
- Genetic Counseling
- Genetic Patenting
- Human Engineering
- Nanotechnology
- Xenotransplantation

Christians need to understand that the future of American culture as well as Western civilization is on the cusp of a great transition concerning bioethics and the challenges that surround it. This time of transition could usher in great scientific breakthroughs or an “anything goes” mentality that ushers in unthinkable wickedness. One of the leading bioethicists in the world, Dr. Nigel Cameron, has divided the era of bioethics into two groupings: Bioethics I and Bioethics II. Dr. Cameron calls Bioethics I the age of killing human beings by abortion, euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. Bioethics II he calls the age of making and designing human beings. Many Christian bioethicists believe the move into Bioethics II will eclipse abortion and euthanasia, and advance into new capacities for evil, if secular bioethics has its way and the greater Body of Christ ignores the signs of the times. Will the Body of Christ try to counter the “enlightenment” of the secular movement in bioethics by following a strategy built on Matthew 10:16? Or will Christians take a more traditional, biblical approach of proclaiming “Thus saith the Lord” without reservation or worry about the harsh criticism that will surely come from those who believe “religious” points of view are invalid when addressing bioethical issues?