WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT INFANTICIDE AND EUTHANASIA

by

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You and your wife have been joyously anticipating the birth of your “Gerber” baby for nine months. The big moment arrives. But your high hopes turn to horror when you hear the doctor grimly announce, “I’m sorry. Your baby is severely deformed. He will never be able to enjoy a normal life. I would recommend withholding normal feeding and care.”

He goes on to explain the tremendous financial and emotional burden your baby will place on you and on society should he live. He will require numerous operations. He will always be dependent on you or on an institution. There will be strain on you and your marriage, strain on your other children, and a tremendous strain on taxpayers’ money, which could go for other more productive causes. But the decision is yours. What would you do?

Or, your aging parent has a stroke and requires hospital care and life-support systems to survive. You visit him, but he doesn’t even seem to know you’re there. But he hangs onto life. The weeks pass with no change for better or worse. The hospital bills are rapidly depleting the family’s funds. When, if ever, is it right to pull the plug?

Our brave new world of medicine makes such agonizing ethical choices commonplace. Dr. C. Everett Koop (now Surgeon General) reported in 1978 that “some intensive care physicians in newborn nurseries claim that 14% of their patients die because treatment was deliberately withheld.” (Christianity Today, Dec. 15, 1978, p. 11.) A 1977 survey revealed that 77% of pediatric surgeons and 60% of pediatricians would “acquiesce in a parent’s decision” to deny a Down’s syndrome baby life-saving treatment (cited in a Christian Action Council brochure, Dec., 1983).

Dr. Koop describes a film, “Who Shall Survive,” put out by Johns Hopkins, which showed the decision-making process on the part of a medical staff and family to let a Down’s syndrome child
with an intestinal obstruction die. The intestinal problem could easily have been repaired by a 20-minute operation. But this child was put in a corner of the ward with a sign that said “nothing by mouth.” It took 28 days for the child to starve to death. (ibid.)

On the other end of life there is a growing “right-to-die” movement. Fifteen countries were represented at a world conference held in England in 1980. In 1982 a best seller in France, which is available in the United States, was titled, Suicide: Operating Instructions. According to the publisher, it shows potential suicides how to achieve “nonviolent deaths in conditions which do not degrade human dignity” (Newsweek, Sept. 6, 1982, p. 41). A Newsweek report (March 14, 1983, p. 77) on the common suicide deaths of successful author Arthur Koestler and his wife concluded, “His tumultuous life--and even his sad, dogmatic death--testifies to both his tragic sense of our century and his faith in the dignity of the individual.” Some dignity!

What does the Bible say about infanticide and euthanasia? While I cannot lay down rules to cover every conceivable case, I believe that the Bible does give us principles that apply and provide guidance through the morass. I want to give you three biblical principles plus a fourth, which is a logical deduction from the three. Then I want to apply those principles broadly to the areas of infanticide and euthanasia.

PRINCIPLES

1. All human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28).

The Bible clearly denies that human life is the evolutionary product of chance plus time. God created the human race as distinct from the animals. To be created in God’s image means that we have the capability of rational and abstract thought, personality, and moral choice. While marred by the fall, all human being nonetheless bear the divine image (Gen. 9:6; I Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). The bottom line of this doctrine is that every human being possesses dignity by virtue of belonging to the human race.

Of course, humanists who deny God and espouse evolution deny the teaching that man is created in God’s image. But ironically, in attempting to ascribe dignity to the human race, humanists
rob the race of all dignity and place us on a par with animals. There is a whole “animal rights” movement that seeks to stop experimentation on animals. Loma Linda hospital received numerous complaints from people who didn’t approve of killing a baboon to attempt to save a human. Philosopher Peter Singer, in his book Animal Liberation, argues that, in theory, every researcher should be willing to use a retarded human infant instead of a dog for experimentation. In his view there is no “morally relevant difference” between one species and another (Newsweek, Aug. 9, 1982, p. 61.)

While Singer is a rationally consistent evolutionist, I dare say that he does not live consistently with his theories. As I pointed out in my message on abortion last year a man like Singer would act quite differently if he ran over a squirrel in the road than if he ran over a human being. Why? Because even though he can mentally reject the truth that man is created in God’s image, he cannot behaviorally reject it. Nobody can.

2. God is the giver, sustainer, and taker of human life (Acts 17:25, 28a).

Human life is a gift from God. In Colossians 1:17, after affirming in verse 16 that Christ created all things, Paul says that “in Him all things hold together.” He not only gives life, He sustains it. If He chose to “let go,” creation would literally fall apart.

And He not only sustains life, He takes it as He has ordained. In Psalm 139:16, David affirms that all of his days were ordained by God before he was even born. Job 14:5 states, “Man’s days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed” (NIV). Before Satan could lay a hand on Job’s children, he had to receive permission from God (Job 1:12). God specifically prohibited Satan from taking Job’s life (Job 2:6).

You may be wondering, “But what about deformed humans? Is God the author of such lives?” Two Scriptures plainly state that this is so. In Exodus 4:11, God tells Moses, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” In John 9, Jesus and His disciples encounter a man born blind. When the disciples ask the cause of the problem, Jesus replies, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents;
but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him” (verse 3). In other words, since the fall of the human race into sin, God allows the birth of deformed human beings to bring glory to Himself out of seeming tragedy.

Edith Schaeffer shares a very practical example of this in her book, Common Sense Christian Living ([Thomas Nelson], p. 202). Her daughter Debby and her husband Udo had a fellow living with them who seemed to be extraordinarily kind and considerate of the needs of others. So one day Debby asked him, “Could you tell me why you are so different from most young people? You really are so considerate.”

Listen carefully to his answer: “I guess it is because we have a Down’s Syndrome sister. We other children always thought of what we could do for her so that she wouldn’t be left out ... how we could take care of some need for her and encourage her. You know, we all love her very much, and so it is a genuine interest in her happiness. But, I guess it has made us more aware of other people in general.”

Was God glorified through that Down’s syndrome girl’s life? Obviously He was, in that a whole family developed a degree of kindness which otherwise they would have lacked.

God has given and sustains all human life. And, with the exceptions of a just war, self-defense, and proper capital punishment, He is the only one allowed deliberately to take human life. For us to kill an infant who, in our judgment, will not enjoy “meaningful life” or to kill an elderly person who is no longer capable of the same is to overstep our limit.

3. All human life is precious to God, but especially the lives of children, the elderly, and the disadvantaged.

The Old Testament views children as a reward from God, whereas barrenness is a curse (see Ps. 127:3; I Samuel 1). The Lord Jesus had a special love for children and scorn for those who did not (see Matt. 18:5,6; 19:13-15).

The Bible also teaches that we should respect the elderly. Leviticus 19:32 states, “You shall rise up before the grayheaded, and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the Lord.”
God brings an indictment against nations which did not respect the elderly (see Deut. 28:50; Isa. 47:6; Lam. 5:12).

Furthermore, the Old Testament prophets, speaking from the Lord, repeatedly blasted those who were rich and powerful and who used their power to oppress or disregard orphans, widows, the poor, and the disadvantaged (see Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:9-10, for example).

Thus if we claim to follow God, we must especially take a stand in defending those who are helpless or disadvantaged. University of Wisconsin pediatrician Norman Fost says, “The last person I want to decide whether I should live or die is someone for whom I’d be a burden” (Reader’s Digest, Dec. 1981, p. 94). We must defend these so-called “burdens.”

All of life is a continuum. If we deny life to the unborn, then it is a slippery slope into denying life to the disadvantaged infant, the aged, and the disabled.

Nat Hentoff, an agnostic Jew who writes for the liberal Village Voice and The New Yorker, sees the harmful implications of liberal abortion laws. In Newsweek (Jan. 14, 1985, p. 29) he is quoted: “I got into the abortion debate two years ago after listening to doctors tell me that perhaps parents ought to have a 30-day period--sort of a one-month guarantee--in which to see whether their newborn babies have any disabling defects. I know of women who have had abortions because their fetuses were the wrong gender. If fetuses have no rights, handicapped infants have no rights, can the aged and infirm be far behind?” He is quite right. As Christians we must put special value on the lives of children, the elderly, and the disadvantaged.

The final principle is a logical deduction from the first three:

4. There is no such thing as a life not worthy of being lived.

The talk about “quality of life” or “wrongful life” is not far from Hitler’s Third Reich. Shall we sterilize all people below a certain economic level because their children would probably suffer a lower quality of life than children of the affluent? Shall we eliminate the handicapped and the aged for the same reason? The whole quality of life premise has already moved us from the realm of abortion to infanticide and euthanasia. So the life you save by
fighting the abortion-infanticide-euthanasia movement quite literally may be your own.

So the four principles are: (1) All human beings are made in the image of God. (2) God is the giver, sustainer, and taker of human life. (3) All human life is precious to God, but especially the lives of children, the elderly, and the disadvantaged. (4) There is no such thing as a life not worthy of being lived.

APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLES

How do we apply these principles in specific situations? Obviously I cannot cover every conceivable case, but let me spell out certain applications.

1. All infanticide is wrong.

Period! The only rare exception that I can imagine where it would be morally right to kill an already-born baby would be in a case of Siamese twins, where to save the life of one twin required taking the life of the other. But obviously that is extremely unusual.

2. All active euthanasia is wrong.

By active euthanasia I mean directly killing a human being whether through drugs or through withholding proper food and water. Sometimes doctors refer to the withholding of food and water as passive euthanasia, but it is not passive. In the case of Baby Doe, who starved to death while the Indiana Supreme Court refused to hear the case, the euphemism used was “treatment to do nothing.” But quite obviously they did something: They starved the baby to death!

3. Much of what is called passive euthanasia is wrong.

Passive euthanasia refers to allowing a person to die by withholding or discontinuing treatment that would prolong life. Sometimes, of course, this is the right thing to do.

For example, Dr. Koop tells of his mother, who was 86, a Christian, a widow, who was arthritic, ridden with cancer, and wanted nothing better than to go to heaven. At a hospital where she finally died of kidney failure, it would have been possible to have kept her alive in a coma for another month on dialysis. By
withholding that treatment, she died. (Christianity Today, Dec. 15, 1978, p. 13.) It would have been wrong to prolong her death.

But then there are many cases where withholding treatment is morally wrong. Phillip Becker, a boy in California with Down’s syndrome, was denied (by the courts) a standard, low-risk heart operation because his parents argued that his life is inherently not worth living.

The real issue boils down to motivation. Is the reason for withholding treatment because the prolonged life of the patient would be an economic or emotional hardship? That is wrong motivation! It is no different than the people in the Old Testament who sacrificed their children to the god Molech in order to placate him and incur his favor.

The hard question is to determine whether living is being prolonged or the act of dying. There are no simple formulas to decide all cases. Dr. Jeanne Blumhagen gives some wise counsel: “We must be careful as Christians not to allow ourselves to be drawn into accepting euthanasia on the supposed grounds of compassion. Every decision to draw the line on what seems to be further useless treatment should remain a difficult one.” (Christianity Today, Feb. 5, 1982, p. 30)

I would also caution you about what are called “Living Wills.” These are documents where a person states that he does not wish to be kept alive by “heroic” measures if there is no reasonable chance of recovery. The problem is that such wills are vague and subject to gross misinterpretation and abuse. They could easily be used to deprive you of treatment that could save your life.

**Conclusion**

What can we do about infanticide and euthanasia in our country? First, be involved in the pro-life movement. Disregard for life in the womb is the starting place for the disregard of the lives of handicapped infants and the elderly. Obviously we are not all called to be involved in the pro-life movement to the same degree, but we must all be involved to some degree. We can all write to legislators and give financially. Most of us can volunteer some time. And we must pray for those in authority.
With regard to infanticide, we must offer support and help to families who resist letting their handicapped child die after birth. They could probably use help in the home. The parents might enjoy an evening or weekend away, if we would offer child-care. We cannot push the whole burden onto the state. We must demonstrate Christian compassion in such situation, and that often involves work, time, and money.

With regard to the aged, we must also show our love and concern. While it may be necessary in some cases to place an elderly person in a nursing home, it is never right to abandon him there.

I’m not offering pat formulas or easy solutions. But I am saying that we must resist the godless and immoral current in our land. Proverbs 24:11,12 is quite clear: “Deliver those who are being taken away to death, and those who are staggering to slaughter, O hold them back. If you say, ‘See, we did not know this,’ does not He consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?”

**Discussion Questions**

1. Some evangelical theologians say that a seriously deformed child is “sub-human” or does not fully share the image of God, and thus abortion is permissible in these cases. How would you respond to such thinking?

2. Suppose you have an aged friend who is in constant pain, bedridden, and unable to carry on normal body functions. He tells you he wants to die. What would you say to him?

3. Suppose you and your mate feel God’s leading to go to the mission field. Before you go, the wife gets pregnant. She also gets the German measles. The doctor predicts that your baby will be severely handicapped and will require intensive long-term medical care. Would it be wrong to abort the baby? Why?

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