

The Aims of Ethicentre

Ethicentre was launched in Sydney, Australia on October 27 2022. Here is a transcript of the opening address by the Director, A/Prof Megan Best, who explained the reasons why *Ethicentre* was established.

As you came here tonight, I wonder how many of you thought, ‘Do we really need another Christian non-profit?’ I’d like to explain why I think Australian Christians DO need a bioethics centre. For the last ten years or so, I have regularly received emails, lots of them, from Christians who are struggling to work out what to do when faced with an ethical decision in their own healthcare. Questions like, ‘*What should I do with the frozen embryos left over from our IVF treatment?*’ Or ‘*My father is dying, is it ethically permissible to turn off his ventilator?*’ Or ‘*My unborn baby has a genetic defect, and we’ve been advised to have an abortion. What should we do?*’ These are people who are trying to live out lives of Christian integrity, but they just don’t know where to turn to get the guidance they need.

Christians have been called to live obedient lives. We are told to obey God’s commands as an expression of our love for Christ (John 14:15). God’s commands exist to help us flourish as human beings. But when it comes to bioethics, this seems to be an increasing challenge.

Bioethics is concerned with how to decide right from wrong when it comes to the biological sciences. Here are some hot topics in bioethics, just to help you get into my space. You can see fairly quickly that bioethics is often in the news, and often a topic of controversy.

HOT TOPICS IN BIOETHICS

- HEALTHCARE RESOURCE ALLOCATION
 - Age discrimination, Medicare funding, who gets access to ICU
- ASSISTED REPRODUCTION
 - IVF, surrogacy, leftover embryos, freezing eggs, egg and sperm donation
- CARE OF THE UNBORN
 - Abortion, adoption, contraceptives, pregnancy screening tests, disability, ROE v WADE
- END OF LIFE CARE
 - Euthanasia, assisted suicide, advance directives, withdrawing treatment
- GENDER
 - Transgender, conversion therapy, gender fluidity, nonbinary gender
- GENETICS
 - Antenatal testing, prophylactic surgery, genetic determinism, eugenics, genetic engineering, CRISPR
- VACCINATION
 - Mandatory vaccination, cell lines from aborted fetuses used in manufacture, herd immunity
- ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION
 - Definition of death, organ trafficking, living donors, resource limitations, animal tissue transplants

So, how are we going when it comes to bioethics in the church?

You don't have to look far to see that the Christian community is not all that different from the general public when it comes to bioethical views. During the recent local euthanasia debate, polls showed $\frac{3}{4}$ of all Catholics and four in five Anglicans supported legalisation of euthanasia. According to the Guttmacher Institute in the USA, $\frac{2}{3}$ of women in the United States who have abortions identify themselves as Christian. While we don't know the local numbers, we do know that 1 in 3 Australian women will have an abortion – so chances are there is someone in your local congregation who has had one.

Now, I do have issues on how some of these polls were conducted, but you get the drift. There appears to be a lack of understanding, or a lack of commitment to, biblical teaching in this area. Why is this?

Well, I think we are in very challenging times when it comes to expressing a Christian worldview in the public square. There are several reasons why this is the case in bioethics:

1. It can be quite difficult to understand the subject area

Areas of science such as genetics are developing rapidly, and you can't rely on your high school science knowledge to help you understand the content. Medical technology is moving quickly, and it is hard to stay informed, even if you are in the trade. Furthermore, our new ability to manipulate human biology is presenting us with ethical dilemmas we have never had to face before in human history. How do we classify an embryo that has been created with both human and animal cells? Is it equivalent to a human? Or an animal? Both? Neither?

2. It can be emotionally difficult to discuss

We are also confused because many new technologies which may be ethically troubling for Christians are actually seeking goods that we seek for ourselves. Things like a healthy child of one's own, freedom from suffering. These are good things. It is okay to want these things. It's not the goal of the technology that is wrong, it is usually the way it aims to *reach* the goal.

Furthermore, Bioethics has always been a sensitive topic to discuss. These are issues which touch on real lives, often in painful ways. Many people in our community have been hurt by judgemental attitudes in the church. Discussion of bioethics requires gentleness and sensitivity, but even when we think we are doing so, we may still have problems. This is because of our current political climate.

3. It is counter-cultural

The surrounding non-Christian culture tends to be hostile to Christian moral values and we can be criticized, (or fired), for expressing traditional Christian views on topics such as sex or abortion.

While laws are perhaps not the ideal way to resolve ethical dilemmas, when no consensus is possible, it is often the way a decision is made in our society. So we have a public debate, and with the prevailing woke culture, if you don't agree with someone it can be interpreted as hate speech.

Add to this the overwhelming presence of social media in our lives hitting back at any profession of faith, and anyone who discusses biblical ethics is likely to be criticized by unbelievers, and possibly believers as well. I personally receive hate mail from both sides of the debate. This can be very confusing if you're not well taught. It can be difficult to engage with Christian bioethics in the public square.

4. There are personal challenges

While in the past, approaches to decision-making in healthcare were fairly straightforward, things have changed. In a pluralistic society we have different worldviews leading to different values regarding what is right and wrong. This can lead to ethical dilemmas within the healthcare system, as Christian patients may be discussing issues with professionals who hold a different worldview, and different values, to them. The Christian patient may not know what to do. It's possible that new laws reducing the opportunity for conscientious objection by healthcare workers will reduce the number of Christians in healthcare, which will make these problems worse.

So, it's not straightforward. But we are called to live lives of personal holiness that will often be distinctly different from those of others in the secular culture. As Romans 12:1 tells us, we are to offer all of our lives as a sacrifice to God. This is how we worship him. In verse 2 we're told to not be conformed to this world, but rather be transformed by the renewal of our minds, that by testing we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

So, after 30 years in the business of teaching Christian ethics, it is such a thrill for me to be part of the team establishing *Ethicentre*. *Ethicentre* is a new Christian non-profit organisation that I hope will become the go-to hub for Australian Christians looking for bioethical information. We aim to provide reliable information about matters of Christian ethics within a Biblical framework.

I suggest to you that there are three levels on which knowledge of a Christian approach to bioethics, and other cultural issues, is important:

At an individual level, we need to understand a Biblical approach to medical issues to inform our own views and decision-making. It's helpful to do this *before* the event. For example, when a couple is first told that their child may have a possible defect, it can be difficult to calmly think through the Bible's approach to abortion.

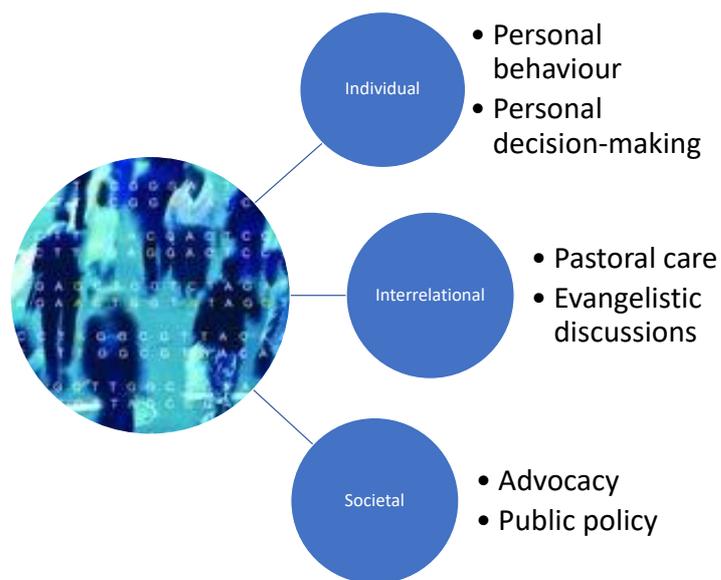
We want to educate Christians so that they can understand that, not only is there such a thing as a Christian approach to bioethical issues, but that it points to a good and healthy way of life. As we move further and further from the mainstream understanding of bioethics in our society, we all need to be part of a support network that keeps our 'minority' ideas alive. As one author has suggested, we need to make active efforts to nourish our beliefs in ways that make them plausible to us. That enable us to maintain our beliefs when the media describes them as morally dangerous and causing harm.

At an inter-relational level, our understanding of bioethics can be needed when friends and family ask our advice as an issue of pastoral care. But it will also lend an evangelistic edge to

our discussions with non-Christians, as we explain things like why we value the lives of all human beings, because they are made in the image of God. When we live our lives with integrity, it helps others to understand the gospel of Jesus and the great love our Father God has for each one of us.

At the societal level, if we truly believe we were made by a creator God, it is a service to our community to let them know how we can flourish as human beings, by giving them the guidelines which come from the one who formed us.

Jesus calls us to be salt and light in our community. Salt to delay decaying of values in our society. Light to illuminate the truth by living out Kingdom values and bringing glory to the Father in Heaven. This is what motivates me to become involved in advocacy for vulnerable groups in the political sphere.



Where are we now?

There are signs that teaching about ethics has been neglected in many churches. One example is found in a study I conducted in collaboration with colleagues at the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity at Trinity International University in Chicago, published in the Journal of Human Reproduction. It was an international survey of over 1500 Christians, asking them about their attitudes to assisted reproduction. One interesting point that came out was that, while most participants would want to make personal choices consistent with their

faith, there was no sense that they thought a similar approach would be of benefit to the wider community. No sense that our creator God would have advice that would benefit the common good.

I recently heard an American theologian asking on a podcast, *'Wouldn't we expect evangelicals to be a little more political at the moment?'* Look at the culture around us. Society is changing. Basic creation order norms are being overturned. We're not debating taxes, we're discussing what makes a man a man and what makes a woman a woman and who gets to live. And so, necessarily, you're going to expect Christians to address those issues. We can criticise how some Christians do it. I certainly wouldn't endorse how all Christians talk about bioethics. But the idea that these topics should not be discussed by Christians and not discussed in church because they are controversial or it's going to get you into trouble, is evidence of an underdeveloped theology. A theology of engagement, a theology of order. All politics is a reflection on order. If we believe order is given to us by a creator, we're necessarily going to want that order reflected in our common lives together. We're seeking to figure out how to live our life together in ways to seek the common good, that all would flourish. We do not seek public engagement to dominate, it's because we genuinely want to see people thrive, and that thriving is a reflection of that theological order that we think really exists.

This may or may not surprise you, but in all the years I have spoken on Christian bioethics – I have *always* found secular empirical research that supports the biblical view. For example, research shows that children are better off with a male and a female parent. It's not that gays can't be good fathers or lesbians can't be good mothers. Of course they can. It's that women can't be fathers and men can't be mothers, and children are better off with one of each.

Ethicentre is a registered charity with the Australian Government. We have developed a website, *Ethicentre.com*, which aims to meet the needs of individuals and churches. We will provide reliable information about Christian bioethics within a Biblical framework, available at Introductory, General and Academic levels. We aim to build a community that brings Christian ethics to the centre of life through initiatives such as family discussion guides, discussion groups, bible studies and opportunities for advocacy. We want to support

churches by providing education for ministry staff and a Speaker's Bureau, supplying speakers on bioethical topics who can talk to Christian groups. We hope to be involved with raising up the next generation of Christian bioethicists, to take this work into the future, through providing mentorships.

Ethicentre has been built to serve you and the wider Christian community. We hope that it will also have a positive impact on our society as a whole. We would appreciate your prayers as we start out on this voyage, and, as we want to cater for both individuals and churches, and it would be wonderful if you could take the time to let us know how we can help you.

Dr Megan Best is an Associate Professor of Bioethics and the Institute for Ethics and Society at the University of Notre Dame Australia, and Director of *Ethicentre*.