

Personal Issues: Life and Death

Understanding Ethics: A Christian Perspective

A 5 step approach

- 1) What is the issue and why is it relevant?
- 2) How can we understand the issue better?
- 3) What are the key principles and values at stake?
- 4) What is the distinctive contribution from a Christian ethical perspective?
- 5) How should the ethical response be – e.g. from (a) Christian journalists in mainstream news media? (b) Christian communication workers in church media? (c) Christian local churches?

Step 1: Identifying the issue

What is the issue and why is it important?

There are (at least) four related «life and death issues»:

- 1) *Abortion* - the deliberate termination of a human pregnancy.
- 2) *Infanticide* – the act of killing (unwanted) children after birth.
- 3) *Euthanasia* – the practice (illegal in most countries) of killing without pain a person who is suffering from a disease that cannot be cured.
- 4) *Biotechnology* – the use of biological processes, organisms, or systems to manufacture products intended to improve the quality of human life.

These issues are relevant globally to an increasing number of individuals, families, communities and societies.

Step 2: Understanding the issue

How can we understand the issue better?

There has been a revolution in public attitudes in the West on these issues since the 1960s.

1. We need to be aware of the very high number of abortions:

-Estimated number of abortions carried out globally: 43 mill (2012). This should be compared with 57 million human deaths every year from all other causes.

-This has resulted in an «abortion industry».

-In addition comes the abortions resulting from «the morning pill».

2. We need to understand the reasons for legalizing abortion:

-to reduce the number of illegal and unsafe abortions

-to give the woman / the mother the right to decide (human rights / feminism)

Step 2 – cont'd

3. We need to be aware of the deeper connections between different issues.

E.g. Francis A. Schaeffer's *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1978) compared:

- Previous attitudes towards the black slave and the Jew
- Present / emerging attitudes towards the unborn child, the newborn child and the very old / the terminally ill.

4. We need to be aware of the very rapid developments within biotechnology: both really helpful and deeply problematic...

Step 3: Analysing the issue

What are the key principles and values at stake in this issue?

- 1) When does human life start and end?
- 2) What is a (human) person?
- 3) What is our view of human life and dignity when faced with highly vulnerable and non-productive human beings such as human embryos, human infants and the terminally ill?
- 4) How to compare the rights of the mother and her right to choose with the rights of the unborn child and his or her right to live?
- 5) Do we have the right to autonomy?

Step 4: Contributing to the issue

What is the distinctive contribution from a Christian ethical perspective?

1. Human life has an inherent value and dignity.
2. The sanctity of human life is a fundamental Christian ethical value.
3. Human life begins at conception and ends at (natural) death.
4. Therefore, from a classical Christian ethical perspective...
 - ... abortion is only a justifiable option in extraordinary circumstances
 - ... infanticide is never a justifiable option.
 - ... «active» euthanasia is never a justifiable option (whether «voluntary» or «involuntary»); «passive» euthanasia may be justified in special / extreme cases.
 - Biotechnology is (almost) like «playing God», therefore need for real discernment.

Step 5: Responding to the issue

How should our ethical response(s) to the issue be?

Three case studies:

(a) Christian journalists in mainstream news media?

- To what extent would that response be different from other journalists?

(b) Christian communication workers in church media?

(c) Christian local churches?

The ethical responses should be both in terms of (1) reflections, (2) attitudes, and (3) actions.

Reflections / discussions

- What is the role of «the prophetic tradition» (cf. OT), whether in mainstream media or within churches...?
- The church:
 - When the church take a prophetic stand against abortion, it also need to provide real support to pregnant women and young families.
- How to make young Christians (and others) aware of these ethical issues?