

BIRTH AND DEATH

Until about 200 years ago, medicine did not present many moral problems. Couples who could not have children never became parents. Others often had 10+ children as there was no proper contraception. Serious diseases, illnesses or accidents often led to death. People could die peacefully or in pain. There was not very much anyone could do about life and death. Life and death were left in God's hands, because there was no other choice.

Medicine has made huge progress since Bible times. People can control the number of children they have by using contraception. Couples unable to conceive can have medical help. Pregnancy can be ended safely by abortion. Serious illnesses can often be cured. Illness can be slowed so that sufferers live for much longer. People can be kept alive artificially on life-support systems. Drugs can ensure that most people die painlessly.

All of these advances may raise moral issues, for Christians and others. Should we now make our own decisions about life and death, or let God decide "the time to be born and the time to die"?

"Playing God"

Some believe that when doctors make life and death decisions, they are "playing God". Should they step back and "let God decide?" But if we do this many would die even though doctors could help them. When should we help life? When should we end life? When should we leave it alone?

Christians believe it is important for people to use medical knowledge, and not just let nature take its course every time someone is ill. In the Gospels, Jesus healed people, not just let them suffer.

"While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' And immediately the leprosy left him."

Christians see medicine as something positive, and healing is believed to come from God. However, Christians also believe that some aspects of medicine raise moral problems. Christians do not always agree about the right answers to these problems.

Christians and Ethics

See notes on "Sanctity of Life". The Sanctity of Life affects the way Christians approach medical issues, e.g. contraception, abortion and euthanasia. However, not all Christians agree on these issues.

Some Christians base their ethical decisions on rules that are either written in the Bible or part of the way God designed us (Natural Law). According to Natural Law it is wrong to kill - a **moral absolute** (a principle that applies in all circumstances), which explains the Catholic Church's rejection of Abortion and Euthanasia.

Other Christians are more interested in the consequences of their actions. They follow Jesus' example in trying to act in the most **loving** way in any situation (a theory called Situation Ethics). This explains why many churches accept abortion in the case of rape - even though abortion is an 'evil' act, it may be the lesser of two evils when you look at the consequences of not having an abortion.

THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

There are few people, religious or not, who do not value the gift of life. People value life even though at times it seems very difficult. Sometimes people may curse at life, especially when they are ill or have disabilities. However, the belief in the importance of preserving life is worldwide

Christians believe in the "sanctity of life": There is something special and holy about life. For Christians, human life is different because we share something of the nature of God. Genesis describes how God made Adam, and "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." (*Genesis 2:7*). This did not happen with the animals and the plants, but only with the human.

Genesis also says that people are made "in the image of God":

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." *Genesis 1:26-27*

This means people are in some way reflections of God. In humans, something of God himself can be seen. Christians believe that humans have a soul which lives on after the body has died. The soul will be judged by God, and can join God for ever in Heaven. Because people have souls, they must be treated as special; they are different from other species.

Some Bible passages teach that God plans each individual human life, and knows everyone completely. This quote says God has an intimate knowledge of each person, even before they are born:

"You created every part of me; you knit me together in my mother's womb. When my bones were being formed, carefully put together in my mother's womb, when I was growing there in secret, you knew that I was there - you saw me before I was born. The days allotted to me had all been recorded in your book, before any of them ever began." *Psalms 139:13-16*

- Christians believe that human life is sacred - it is more special than other kinds of life.
- Other animals do not have souls, and are not made in the image of God, although they deserve to be treated with kindness and respect.
- Christians believe that God knows and plans every human life.

Valuing human life

- God makes and loves each person, so everyone has value: new-born, elderly, healthy, ill, useful members of society or in need of care. So Christians should treat all human life with respect. Some Christians become doctors or nurses because of their Christian Faith: they want to put into practise their beliefs about the value of human life.
- Because God has given life, this means that Christians have a responsibility to take care of themselves. They should do something useful with their lives, not just waste it, and they should take care of their own health and other people's. Some Christians, therefore, will not smoke, overeat, drink or take drugs, because it shows ungratefulness for God's gift of life.

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's Temple and that God's spirit lives in you?"

1 Corinthians 2:16

Jesus showed in his actions and teaching that all people should be valued.

"Love your neighbour as yourself." *Mark 12:31*

"A new commandment I give to you : love one another as I have loved you." *John 13:34*

Christians believe that when considering issues on life and death such as abortion, genetic engineering, embryo technology, contraception, euthanasia, suicide and life support, their belief in the sanctity of life should influence their decisions.