

Through a Glass Darkly: Coping with ethical and theological uncertainty

Has medicine gone too far? Are medical scientists leading the human race down a path of destruction and self-immolation? Has the divine been displaced from everyday life? Has prayer been replaced by technological gadgetry, drugs, and microsurgery?

A recurring temptation for Christians is to strive to maintain the ethical and legislative *status quo* on the premise that the *status quo* represents a more acceptable position than anything that might emerge from current discussions.

Theological guidance

John Rogerson:

... the use of the Bible is not a matter of selecting texts and of trying to apply them as though they were legislation for modern situations. ... the Bible's primary function is to bring us to faith and to keep us in faith. The faith which we confess is faith in a God who responds to human need, who justifies the unrighteous and who seeks the outcast. The Bible lays upon us imperatives that derive from the heart of our salvation, and our task is to work out those imperatives in the situation in which we find ourselves.

Allen Verhey's interpretive rules: Scripture is read humbly, avoiding interpretive arrogance, and within the context provided by the Christian community.

The memory of Jesus does not provide any neat and easy resolution to such conflict. It does not usher in a new heaven and a new earth, either. Here and now there is ambiguity.

Neil Meser's diagnostic questions:

Is the project good news to the poor, the powerless, those who are oppressed or marginalized in any way?

Is the project a way of acting that conforms to the *imago dei*, or is it an attempt to be 'like God'?

What attitude does the project manifest towards the material world (including our own bodies)?

What attitude does the project manifest towards past human failures?

What sort of assistance does the Bible provide?

1. the Bible alone provides a complete guide to ways in which Christian decision-making should be framed, making scientific input irrelevant;
2. the Bible is one of a number of sources of concepts and information, but is the major determinant whenever there is conflict or confusion;
3. the Bible is one of a number of sources of concepts and information, and helps to inform decision-making, but may not be the major source;
4. the Bible is irrelevant and hence can provide nothing of any interest to scientists or ethicists.

A real life scenario

Child with cystic fibrosis (CF)

Option 1. They could take a chance, and hope their next child will be unaffected. Whatever eventuates they will continue with the pregnancy even if it means having a second child with CF.

Option 2. They could take a chance, knowing that they can have an abortion if the fetus when tested turns out to be affected.

Option 3. They could go in the direction of IVF and PGD (pre-implantation genetic diagnosis).

How far does the Bible take us? / Theological perspectives

Sorting out the options; striving to find ways forward that integrate science and faith; technology and trust in God.



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His principal areas of specialisation are in neurobiology and bioethics, in which he has published over 20 books and monographs, and 200 refereed papers. He has held visiting academic positions in universities in Australia the UK and the USA, has given seminars in many countries.

Before coming to the University of Otago, Gareth worked for several years at the University of Western Australia. Within the University of Otago, Gareth has served on a range of senior committees; he was Founding Director of the Bioethics Research Centre, was Director of the Neuroscience Research Centre, and established medical ethics teaching in the Faculty of Medicine. Outside the University, he has served on Ethics and Neurological bodies. He is currently a member of the Advisory Committee on Assisted Reproductive Technology (ACART) in New Zealand.