

# The *SBJT* Forum: Foundations for Ethics in a Secular Age

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Scott Hafemann, Stephen Wellum, Bruce Ware, James Parker, and R. Albert Mohler, Jr. have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

## **SBJT: How would you develop a Christian ethic from the standpoint of the Scriptures?**

**Scott Hafemann:** My greatest concern is that in approaching ethics from the standpoint of "problems" or "issues" (e.g., what is the Christian view of armed conflict, of abortion, of lending money at interest, of lying to save a life, of making babies in test tubes?, etc.), we are careful to avoid viewing people as independent, neutral figures who approach ethics as problem solvers. Nor should we reduce the pastor or counselor to an advice giver or a moralist, a cheerleader or an ethicist, so that the scriptures become a book of "case studies" in ethical dilemmas. This is not the way to go.<sup>1</sup>

I am not denying that we must work hard to determine our Christian response to the moral questions we face. In doing so, however, we must not turn to the commands and life-examples in the Bible as either advice or as ethical principles for living. To do so is to disregard their function and to deny their context. The commands of God are not "tips" or even "requirements for living," now that one believes in Christ, as if they are something

that needs to be added to our relationship with God. Nor are they natural laws to be obeyed as reflections of a natural theology. Rather, I am convinced more and more that the commands of God are expressions of His character as applied to His people within the covenant He made with them. The commands of God are theological statements, through and through. As such, they are not added to our life with Christ, they define our life with Christ. And taken together, the biblical commands make the one central, all-determining point of the Bible: God is the all-sufficient source and supply of our lives. Though inherently offensive to the self-reliance and self-glorification that is so much a part of modern culture (and every culture since the Fall), the heart of "ethics" is Paul's stark reminder that we cannot claim anything as coming from ourselves (cf. Acts 17:24-25; Rom 11:36; Eph 2:8-10). All things come from God (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 1:21). Nothing we have is earned; everything is a gift (1 Cor 4:7). As called by God and sealed by the Spirit, coming to know and depend upon this all-sufficient God becomes determinative for our lives. So the ethical question becomes,

**Scott Hafemann** is Hawthorne Professor of Greek at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. He is the author of *Suffering and the Spirit, Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel*, as well as several scholarly articles. He is currently at work on *2 Corinthians* for The NIV Application Commentary.

“How will God’s sufficiency for his people, as already declared in his commands, be expressed in this situation?”

I am not advocating a new form of “situation ethics,” with God’s sufficiency simply substituted for “love.” The concrete commands of God must be taken into account as foundational and determinative. Nevertheless, when talking about ethics, it is imperative (pun intended!) that we do not turn obedience to God’s commands into doing great things for God, into “being who we are” (I am usually not ethical!), or into an attempt to move from one way of relating to God (faith for justification) into another mode of operation (obedience for sanctification). Instead, Christian ethics, in order to make sense and to glorify God (an ethical goal!), must flow out of our covenant relationship with God, keeping in mind that the “new covenant” (*kainē diathēkē*) referred to in 2 Cor 3:6 is not an “agreement” or “treaty” (*synthēkē*) that is mutually initiated, arranged, or disposed. Hell can be filled with “ethical” people whose ethics derived from believing in themselves. We are not God’s “junior partners,” who are called to make our ethical contributions to his plans.

There is no synergism in the covenant, in which God contributes his part and we do ours in order to accomplish something together that is greater than either of us. God is not looking for help. Rather, Paul’s emphasis on the priority of the cross in salvation and on the work of the Spirit in justification and sanctification makes it evident that the initiative, inauguration, and sustenance of the new covenant, like the Sinai covenant before it, is due solely to the unilateral and merciful work of God on behalf of his people (cf. 1 Cor 1:17-31; 2:1-5; 15:3-4; 2 Cor 1:19-20; 3:5-6; 4:1-3;

5:18-9; etc.). Whatever we decide to do in any given situation, it should reflect our awareness that our “ethics” are an expression of the sufficiency of the Spirit in our lives, fleshed out in response to the concrete commands of God. One can swear allegiance to Christ and remain faithful to him only by the power of this same Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:9-13; 6:11; 12:3, 13; 2 Cor 3:3, 17-18; 4:13-14). Our covenant relationship with God is, from beginning to end, based on God’s previous act of redemption and continuing acts of provision, whether they be anchored in the exodus from slavery in Egypt or in the “second exodus” from our slavery to sin. This is the great indicative reality of the gospel.

This indicative expresses itself in the moral transformation of those who trust in God to be sufficient for them in every moral situation (and which situation is not a moral one?). Keeping God’s commands is what trusting in God as the source and supply of our lives looks like in everyday life. There is no doubt that the Corinthians needed a course in “Christian Ethics 101.” But Paul does not give them advice, nor treat their “situations” (like incest, marriage, food offered to idols, use of money, sexual mores, etc.) as “cases” to be solved. His approach is theological. God’s people must keep the covenant stipulations as the natural expression of their continuing dependence upon God (cf. e.g., 1 Cor 3:1-3; 6:9-11; 2 Cor 5:10; 13:5). From Paul’s perspective, given God’s justifying and sanctifying work in the lives of his people as guaranteed and brought about by the presence and power of the Spirit, there is no excuse for habitually failing to trust God’s gracious provisions and promises in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:20; 5:7; 6:11, 19-20; 10:13; 13:1-3 [love as the work of the Spirit]; 2 Cor 1:22). The faith that trusts

God to meet one's needs invariably "works itself out" in love as the fulfillment of the Law (cf. Gal 5:6, 14; Rom 13:10). There is no doubt that it can take a lot of work, prayer, and debate to figure out what act of obedience is the loving act in a given situation. But whatever we decide to do, especially when we decide differently than other sincere followers of Christ, we must make sure that the imperatives we are following flow inextricably from the indicatives of what God has done, is doing, and will do for his people.

For example, God commands his people not to steal because he has committed himself to meet their needs. To steal is to disbelieve God's promise in this regard. God commands his people not to covet because he has already promised to satisfy their deepest longings, ultimately in himself (note Paul's equation of idolatry with covetousness in Eph 5:5 and Col 3:5!). To say, "All I need to be happy is Jesus and something my neighbor has," is to commit idolatry by failing to trust God's covenant commitment that he will be enough for us. Idolatry is looking to some thing or some one other than God as the source of our happiness and contentment for the future. In the same way, God commands his people not to retaliate against evil because he will vindicate the righteous and seek their vengeance. God commands his people to love others because he first loves them. In short, God commands the Corinthians to flee the life of sin described in 1 Cor 6:9-11 because they have been "washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11).

These examples could be multiplied indefinitely. The fundamental point concerning our covenant relationship with

God in this regard is that every command from God is a call to trust in God's promises and provisions, culminating in his greatest provision, namely, the purification and profound delight that come from enjoying God's presence. The ethical fruit in our lives is the fruit of the Spirit. This is why Paul consistently argues from the evidence of the Spirit to the legitimacy of one's faith. (For the argument from the evidence of God's work in the lives of believers to the genuine nature of their faith, see Gal 5:16-26; 1 Thess 1:3-6; Phil 1:6; 2:12-13; Rom 1:5; 8:3-4; 15:18; 2 Cor 13:5.)

My concern, then, is that in thinking about "ethics" we do not produce an "ethical way of life" that derives from a religious moralism or from a belief in human potential, rather than from the life-transforming reality of Christ, which Paul himself had experienced (2 Cor 3:4-6; 4:6; 5:16-6:2; Phil 2:12-13; 2 Thess 2:14-15). Paul himself can be so demanding "ethically" because, as the "worst of sinners" (1 Tim 1:15), he knows from his own life that there is no deception or pattern of behavior that God cannot overcome. For when everything is said and done, and the "problems" have been analyzed, much of ethics is not determining what is right, but having the power to do what has been determined to be right. As a result, our ethics are often determined not by what we think is right morally, but by what we think is possible for us to do. The condition of our hearts often determines our ethical hermeneutics. When confronted by things in the Scriptures that were difficult to understand, it was the "ignorant and [morally] unstable" who twisted the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:16). This is where the good news of the gospel rings out. For believers, proper

consideration can be given to every command of God, since they are merely promises of God's deliverance in disguise! In the end, then, our formal "ethics" become statements of our hope in God, and there is hope for all those who, by the Spirit, trust in Christ.

<sup>1</sup>What follows is adapted from my forthcoming work, *2 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). There is also a natural overlap between my central point here and my earlier Forum discussion of Paul's doctrine of perseverance in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* vol. 2, no. 1 (1998) 68-71.

**SBJT: What is the fundamental issue at stake in the debate over ethics today?**

**Stephen Wellum:** There is no doubt that we live in challenging days, especially in regard to ethical issues. But it is important to note the *nature* of the challenge. Ours is a day that not only furiously debates specific ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, genetic engineering, and so forth, but more importantly the crucial issue of our day is over the very basis and foundation of ethics. In large part, this is directly linked to the fallout of living in a "post-modern" world.

Postmodernism, in contrast to modernism, is skeptical about any absolute or universal truth claims. And of course, tied to a skepticism over truth claims is a corresponding skepticism over all universal, objective ethical claims. This is not to say that all ethical discussion ceases, for it surely does not. But it is to say that in today's debate, there is a growing sense that to speak of *the* right action or *the* right way to live is not allowed. Instead we must speak of a "plurality" of options,

lifestyles, and behaviors, without any one of them being "better" or "more right" than other ways of living. That is why our society and culture is facing what many have called a massive "crisis of authority," and this is especially seen in the domain of ethics. Poll after poll reports that roughly two thirds of the American public do not believe in absolute truth, and correspondingly, absolute moral values.

Even though this kind of attitude is "new" in the last 30 years in this country, from a Christian view this should not really surprise us. In fact, we should have seen this "crisis of authority" coming many years ago. For how does one truly maintain universal, objective moral values unless one simultaneously affirms the existence and reality of the sovereign, personal, holy God of Scripture? It should not surprise us that so many people are skeptical about universal moral values when only 17% of people polled in America understand sin and morality in relation to God (see David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 29). "Moral" categories begin to crumble when they are not viewed in relation to a transcendent reference point, namely the God of the Bible.

Unfortunately, even though we as Christians should have seen this coming, instead of responding well to the growing crisis, we have often succumbed to it or not responded to it properly. First, we have often succumbed to it. At many, many points, we must admit that we have absorbed far too much of the cultural ethos, and as a result our voice has become muted. That is why in our evangelical churches, our moral life, tragically, often is no different than those outside of Christ. That is why, even in the preaching of the gospel, our message is often truncated and devoid of the power of the gospel. In fact,

**Stephen J. Wellum** is Assistant Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

even the terms we use reflect that the *moral* categories of sin, guilt, judgment, atonement, justification, and holiness are not part of our vocabulary today, or even if they are used, they often take on a meaning that is not biblical. We must sadly admit that we have been conformed to this world far too much and not enough transformed by the gospel.

But secondly, even if we have not succumbed to the moral crisis of our day, often we have not responded well to the *heart* of our contemporary problem. What am I referring to? I am referring to the fact that we have done a capable job arguing a Christian case on specific ethical issues such as abortion, the family, and sexuality. In fact, there are many excellent resources for Christians to read and use regarding many of these issues. But what we have not done as well, and what we need to do in the future, is to place specific ethical issues within a larger worldview (theological) framework. For if many are right that the nature of the ethical crisis of our day is directly linked to the “postmodern” shift in our culture, then to respond to this crisis properly and effectively means that we must also respond at a worldview level. In other words, the debate today is not just over this or that ethical issue; our debate ultimately is over the very theological-worldview framework upon which these specific issues are built. It is my contention that if we do not teach ourselves and our people to think and respond at the worldview level regarding these issues, then much of our discussion over specific ethical issues will be left hanging in midair or will simply fall by the wayside. We must, in the end, challenge the worldview of “postmodernism” and help the church to think and live in light of a Christian worldview rooted

and grounded in Scripture.

Historically, a person who has a lot to teach us in this regard is Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer, in the early 70s, was one of a few evangelicals who responded clearly and forcefully to the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* allowing for abortion on demand. Interestingly, if you read Schaeffer’s works (see *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*; *How Should We Then Live?*), you discover that he did not respond to this travesty simply as a single issue. Rather, he staked his name and reputation to stand against abortion, because he viewed it as the tip of the iceberg in an on-going movement of a culture away from a Christian understanding of truth and morality, to a “postmodern” relativism, even though he did not use the term “postmodern.” In other words, Francis Schaeffer saw the abortion issue *within* a larger life and death worldview struggle, and his response was to proclaim a whole theology, a whole view of reality, God, human beings, sin, and salvation. In a similar way, Chuck Colson has sought to do something similar as he has followed Schaeffer’s example in his recent work, *How Now Shall We Then Live?*

This, I contend, is something we must take very seriously if we are desirous of speaking effectively about ethics today. We need to see that the debate of the hour, at its heart, is a worldview debate, and as such it is theological to the core. What this means, then, is that we must better equip God’s people to think and act at a worldview level. We must teach them to understand and live in light of the “story” of Scripture so that, by God’s grace, we will speak with a voice that cuts to the heart of the debate and clearly proclaim the Christ of Scripture as the only hope for the ethical mess we now find ourselves in.

**SBJT: Why is the biblical teaching on role differences between men and women a primary rather than a secondary issue for the evangelical church today?**

**Bruce Ware:** Complementarianism is the view that God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, yet different and complementary in function. Male headship in the home and believing community is part of God's created design. By claiming that complementarianism is in some sense central and primary, please consider what I am and am not here claiming. I am *not* saying that Scripture's teaching on an all-male eldership in the church, or the husband's headship and the wife's submission in the home, is central and primary *doctrinally*. No, I would reserve doctrinal primacy for such cardinal Christian beliefs as the triune nature of God, the substitutionary atonement, justification by faith alone, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and Christ's literal and physical return to earth one day yet future—doctrines that impinge on the very truth of the gospel itself.

This is not to say that male/female complementarity does not relate in important ways to these central doctrines. Indeed, the Trinity, for example, models equality of essence with differentiation of roles, which equality and differentiation are mirrored in man as male and female. And the substitutionary atonement was carried out by one who submitted freely to the will of His Father, thus demonstrating the joy and beauty both of authority (the Father who sent) and submission (the Son who obeyed).

Yet, while biblical complementarity is connected to central Christian doctrines, it is not itself central doctrinally. This is why I believe it is wrong to charge evan-

gelical egalitarians *qua* egalitarians as heretics. While I believe egalitarians err greatly in their rejection of male/female equality of essence and differentiation of roles, so long as they hold central doctrinal beliefs (as those mentioned above), this rejection is not in itself a departure from orthodoxy.

In what sense then is biblical male/female complementarity central and primary to the Christian faith? I believe this doctrine is central *strategically* in upholding the Christian faith within a culture all too ready to adopt values and beliefs hostile to orthodox and evangelical conviction. As one examines the pressure points in which our increasingly neo-pagan culture is attempting to overthrow Christianity, it is clear that today the battle lines are not primarily doctrinal. Perhaps this was the case in the days of liberalism's ascendancy, but it is no longer so. One might even long for the "glory days" in which arguments were thrown to and fro over such issues as the existence of God, Christ's virgin birth, the reality of the resurrection, the truthfulness of Scripture, and on and on. Today, instead, the primary areas in which Christianity is pressured to conform are on issues of *gender* and *sexuality*.

Postmoderns and ethical relativists care little about doctrinal truth claims; these seem to them innocuous, archaic, and irrelevant to life. What they *do* care about, and care with a vengeance, is whether their feminist agenda and sexual perversions are tolerated, endorsed and expanded in an increasingly neo-pagan landscape. Because this is what they care most about, it is precisely here that Christianity is most vulnerable. To lose the battle here is to subject the Church to increasing layers of departure from bibli-

**Bruce A. Ware** is Senior Associate Dean and Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Before coming to Southern Dr. Ware served as a professor at Bethel Theological Seminary, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the writer of a number of articles and served as the co-editor of *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Baker).

cal faith. And surely, it will not be long until ethical departures (the Church yielding to feminist pressures for women's ordination, for example) will yield even more central doctrinal departures (questioning whether Scripture's inherent patriarchy renders it fundamentally untrustworthy, for example). I find it instructive that when Paul warns about departures from the faith in the latter days, he lists ethical compromises and the searing of the conscience as the prelude to a full-scale doctrinal apostasy (1 Tim 4:1-5).

Shall not the complementarian and egalitarian simply agree to disagree, to live and let live, as it were? At one level, of course they should. As indicated earlier, egalitarianism is not, by itself, a heresy. Yet we must not be naïve about the strategic pressures brought to bear on the church by our secular (and neo-pagan) cultural elite so as to move her away from long-held and clear biblical guidelines concerning manhood and womanhood. This is not a matter of indifference. Until and unless the church follows the full cultural agenda in accepting the unqualified and fully equal ministerial practice of women with men, and in endorsing all forms of sexual expression as equally legitimate "preferences," there will be no rest for conservative, biblical Christians. So, to be at "peace," the temptation will be to cave in. When the name-calling and slanderous accusations mount against conservative Christians, the pressure will be on to give in on these issues of gender and sexuality. After all, we might reason, we have not given up anything central to the gospel. But what must be clear is that to the extent that this occurs, the church establishes a pattern of following cultural pressures and urgings against the clear

authority of God's written word. When this happens, even though the compromises take place on matters that are not doctrinally central to the faith, the church becomes desensitized to Scripture's radical call and forms, instead, a taste for worldly accolades. As Jesus taught, the one faithful with a little will be faithful with much. But the reverse seems also to hold. To compromise on a little thing will pave the way for compromises on much that matters.

Complementarianism, then, is central and not peripheral, primary and not secondary—not doctrinally but strategically. Where the church is called on to withstand cultural pressures and maintain its commitment to counter-cultural revealed truth is, for us today, on issues of gender and sexuality. May God give grace to believe, embrace and practice the clear, wise, and good teaching of God's inspired word. Nothing else will serve the well-being of the church, and anything less will lead, in time, to its demise.

#### **SBJT: What is the fundamental problem with moral relativism?**

**James Parker:** Last night I was watching a recent episode of *Star Trek Voyager* (which I rarely do) and was particularly interested in a discussion of ethics. It seems that *Voyager* was trapped in orbit around a planet and had to interact with the people of that planet (against the prime directive). They disliked some things happening on the planet, but one of the characters argued that "that's what they believe in their culture and we have no business imposing our values on them." The assumption was that one culture's mores and values were as good as any other's and that there is no way to adjudicate between the two. Therefore,

**James Parker, III** is Professor and Associate Dean of Worldview and Culture at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has been on the faculty of several institutions including Criswell College, Dallas Baptist University, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the Director of The Trinity Institute, a Christian study center and think tank that specializes in reaching those in the academic world. He also serves as the editor of *FOUNDATIONS*, a journal for theological students.

two different people (or groups of people) can believe mutually contradictory ethical assertions and both be right. The slogan of the day “it’s true for you but not for me” becomes the only undisputed absolute. Of course, the upshot of all of this is that the primary virtue is tolerance.

On the surface moral relativism appears to be the epitome of tolerance. But what are the real implications of moral relativism? First, if values are individually or culturally determined, then how does one make a choice between two opposing alternatives? For example, are we really prepared to affirm that ethnic cleansing, racism, and genocide are just “cultural” behaviors? If a teacher gives you a failing grade without cause or a judge imprisons you without any reason whatsoever, on what basis would you be able to argue that those actions were “wrong”? The most you could say is that you did not like it! But what if the other parties do like it? Too bad for you if they are bigger or stronger.

We must ask, however, whether moral relativism is actually tolerant. If someone says that you should not impose your morals on others, what are the assumptions behind such an affirmation? First, that moral imperative (command) itself constitutes a moral absolute, because presumably they mean that all persons at all times in all cultures should never impose their values on others. On what basis can they defend issuing such an absolute moral edict? What they are really saying is that my view of ethics is wrong, and theirs is right. Are they not trying to impose their view of values on me so that I will conform to their view? Second, why is their view “right” and mine “wrong”? On what basis do they make those distinctions? Do they speak “ex cathedra”? The

words “should” or “ought” imply a moral judgment, and it is always appropriate to ask moral relativists for the basis upon which they make those demands. (And if you get an answer along the lines like “so society can get along” or “as long as no one is hurt,” then follow that up with a simple question like, “Why is it good that society gets along” or “why is it a bad thing if people get hurt.” In other words, track down the grounds for defining the good.)

A few years ago I was visiting a major university campus and got involved in a spontaneous conversation with a student on campus about “imposing morals” on people. He was basically railing against preachers (and his parents) and others who sought to “impose their morals” on others. I found the discussion ironic because this student who advocated “tolerance” and “letting people make up their own minds” about ethics worked as an intern in a drug half-way house for juveniles (he was a psychology major). I asked him if the program in which he worked had a certain set of values that the administration and staff agreed upon and that he attempted to impose on the students with or without their consent. I asked him if he himself was guilty of trying to ram a certain set of moral beliefs down the youth’s throats! (He had used that exact expression to describe his parent’s actions.) He was, in fact, doing just that, and with the full backing of the entire legal system.

One increasingly popular way of trying to have a secular foundation for ethics is based upon Darwinian biological evolution or social conditioning. Social conditioning can only tell us why we may behave in a certain way—not whether we should behave in a certain way. If our beliefs are indeed based exclusively on cultural conditioning, then so is that

belief itself. Why should I trust it? Why should that belief have any normative value? And if ethics is simply a result of biological adaptations and evolutionary development, then ethics can only provide an imperative to behave in a certain way “if we want to survive as a species or civilization.” It could never tell us why it is good that our species or culture survives. It simply assumes that premise without discussion or debate. This secular approach to ethics can never give us an objective standard for the good, and until we have that, we do not have any basis to make any kind of adjudication between competing and conflicting moral truth claims. The famous atheistic philosopher Kai Nielson knows that naturalism cannot give a solid basis for ethics: “The point is this: Pure, practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.” However, if we have a sure word from God from outside the human flux, then we have an objective criterion to adjudicate between competing and conflicting moral truth claims. Thankfully, we do have that sure and certain word, and, therefore, have a basis to know what is good and true and right.

**SBJT: What ethical issue do you think deserves more attention from Christians?**

**R. Albert Mohler, Jr.:** The development of a human embryo from a cloned cell—as claimed by a group of South Korean scientists—has pushed the clock of genetic engineering toward the midnight moment of full human cloning. Quickly pushed into the background by the rush of other news, this development signals a new urgency and the need for serious debate on the cloning of human beings before the technology is fully upon us.

At present, the debate is limited to elite

sectors where scientists, theologians, philosophers, and governmental officials have attempted to keep their discussions as close as possible to the fast-paced front lines of technological experimentation. In less than two years the cutting edge of clonal experimentation has moved from Dolly the cloned sheep to the cloning of monkeys, mice, cattle, and now human cells.

The South Korean scientists claimed to have aborted their experiment only after the cloned embryo had experienced cell division, and was ready for implantation in a human womb. Though some scientists have disputed the Korean claims, few informed persons doubt that the technology to clone fully-developed human beings is very close at hand.

For some, this is a most welcome development. Advocates of human cloning point to the benefits of custom-designed and replicated human beings, free from unwanted genetic features, and blessed with optimal health, intelligence, talents, strength, and appearance. Others simply make the argument from inevitability. Human cloning will eventually be an accepted feature of modern medicine and reproduction, they argue, if for no other reason than that it has happened and will be available. Technologies will be used, the argument goes, and morality will adjust.

Cloning has its evangelists, too. Richard Dawkins of Oxford University is an unabashed proponent of human cloning, and he has admitted that he would like to have himself cloned, just out of curiosity. Critics of the technology include those, like Leon Kass of the University of Chicago, who respond with moral repugnance. Such revulsion, he admits, is not an argument, but “the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason’s

**R. Albert Mohler, Jr.** is President and Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and has edited and contributed to important volumes on theology and culture. Dr. Mohler’s writing is regularly featured in *World* magazine and Religion News Service. This piece is an abridgment of an article that appeared in *Homelife* 53 (June 1999).

power fully to articulate it.” This is sometimes called the “Yuck factor,” implying that some acts and practices are too grotesque for human acceptance.

The problem is that the “Yuck factor” fails to sustain moral objection over time. Human beings and the cultures we create are amazingly—and frighteningly—adept at losing the “Yuck factor.” A quick look at the collapse of medical ethics under the Nazi regime should be sufficiently sobering.

In the case of new scientific discoveries, familiarity breeds moral apathy and acquiescence. Professor Dawkins is well known as a militant atheist and evolutionary theorist. So far as he is concerned, the idea of cloning human beings is not repugnant at all, and those who argue otherwise are sentimentalists. Dawkins gets right to the point: “In the case of human cloning, if some people want to do it, the onus is on those who would ban it to spell out what harm it would do, and to whom.”

Setting aside the scientific hubris of his statement, his point still stands. It is up to those of us who oppose human cloning to make our arguments clearly . . . and quickly. We must move beyond emotional arguments to answer “what harm it would do, and to whom.”

Such an answer would start with a denial of human beings as sovereign lords and masters of our own fate, and detail the damages and evil wrought by those who have sought to redesign the human race to their own liking. It would proceed to demonstrate the damage of separating procreation from sexual reproduction, the disastrous consequences of genetic imbalance, the danger of raising a race of “customized” children, and the dismantling of the family.

In the end, we must be honest in admitting that the only compelling arguments arise from the biblical worldview of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the end, the limits of our sovereignty are explained only by our status as creatures, made in the image of God. Our decision to set such a technology aside can be justified only by our acceptance of our creaturehood, and our dreadful knowledge of how human evil could employ this technology in the creation of a living nightmare.

It may be too late. Our secular age may have little interest in God-talk when such a commercially attractive technology presents a powerful temptation. On the other hand, we have a small window in which to make our case—and we had better get busy. We will have to do better than the “Yuck factor.”