

# Editorial: The Importance of Ethics

Editorial: Thomas R. Schreiner

**Thomas R. Schreiner** is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a position he accepted after a decade of teaching at Bethel Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law*, the Baker Exegetical Commentary on *Romans*, and several other scholarly publications.

Pastors and Christian leaders might be forgiven for thinking that they can ignore the complex ethical questions that arise in today's technological world. Perhaps they might be tempted to employ a referral service, so that they can direct members of their congregations to specialists when questions arise that exceed their wisdom. Obviously, busy pastors and laypersons cannot keep up on the issues in the same way as scholarly ethicists. Consulting experts on ethical questions may indeed prove to be of significant assistance as we contemplate the best course of action. Reading articles and books, after all, is one of the means by which we seek the help of those who have reflected deeply on matters in which we are novices. Indeed, we are including an issue on ethics precisely because pastors, Christian leaders, and interested laypersons need assistance in understanding ethical questions in a world with technological virtuosity.

Nevertheless, while we may seek assistance, we should not forsake our responsibility. We should not relinquish ethical questions to experts who are supposedly neutral, nor should we expect their judgments to be flawless. Ethicists, like all other human beings, are prone to error, and they may begin to assess ethical questions in ways that violate the gospel and contravene the scriptures. We are grateful for ethicists who live under the authority of the scriptures and appraise ethical questions from a biblical worldview. We must, however, grow in knowledge ourselves so that contemporary ethical debates are not assigned to a priestly elite, to experts in white coats,

who hand down their pronouncements to the masses. If ethical matters are relinquished to scholarly ethicists, how will we know if they veer off course? Therefore, we must live in a balanced way by learning from ethicists who have acquired an in-depth knowledge of their field, and by learning enough about the issues to assess whether their specific advice is in accord with the scriptures.

Nor will it do to say that we will never face complex ethical decisions. Medical advances are inevitable, and hence we will surely face more and more people in our congregations struggling with ethical decisions. They will wonder about the legitimacy of *in vitro* fertilization and artificial insemination. Difficult decisions regarding the end of life will doubtless increase with the aging of the baby boomers and advancing technology. The culture of death that promotes euthanasia, under the guise of compassion and personal rights, may confuse some in our churches. Even believers may wonder if those suffering from Parkinson's should avail themselves of using tissue that was cultivated from aborted babies. Perhaps some will even denounce abortion but then rationalize that we should use whatever is available since we cannot prevent abortions from occurring. Issues of cloning, sex selection, or specifying the transmission of certain traits are all before us. Pastors and laypersons should not deceive themselves. Ordinary people are asking questions about such issues and will do so increasingly.

I do not want to give the impression that the only important ethical questions

are complex and difficult to understand. Debates continue over abortion, but the evidence that human life begins at conception is decisive and known. Increasingly sophisticated medical treatments are only verifying such a conclusion. I think here of the astounding photograph of the twenty-one week old baby, whose hand suddenly emerged from the uterus and touched the hand of the physician, while the doctor was performing *in-utero* surgery (see *SBC Life*, Vol. 8, No. 5, February/March 2000, p. 23). The perfectly formed little hand confirms again what the scriptures teach and science has verified—babies in the womb are fully human. We need, therefore, to continue to proclaim and defend in the public square moral absolutes that are controversial in our society. Matters like pre-marital sex and homosexuality come to mind. The forces against the biblical worldview are strong, but we must courageously teach God's way.

Finally, we also acknowledge that an ethical life cannot be lived apart from the gospel. The letter of the law kills, and only the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6). Laws in the public square certainly restrain evil (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 1:8-11), but we should never think that public morality, under the influence of common grace, is the fulfillment of the gospel. The gospel reminds us that we all fall short of God's law, and that moral perfection will be ours only at the day of resurrection. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to please God in our daily lives, and even so we all fall short in many ways (Jas 3:2). The kingdom of God will not be established on earth, for it will only be realized in the heavenly city. Nonetheless, we believe that pleasing God in our daily lives and contending for righteousness in the public square is worthwhile. Even if we can-

not produce a perfect world, some worlds are better than others. The United States is preferable to Hitler's Germany, despite our many weaknesses. We live, then, in faith, believing that a world in which righteousness reigns is coming. At the same time, we are persuaded that we should contend for righteousness in the days before Christ returns.