



ISSUES FACING CHRISTIANS TODAY

REVIEWED BY JAMES PIETSCH

In the 4th edition of this important book, John Stott continues to urge Christians to engage with ethical issues, including new issues in bioethics.



Issues Facing Christians Today

by John Stott and John Wyatt (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006 (4th ed), 528pp)

The past 20 years has seen a growing interest among evangelical Christians in developing biblical responses to ethical and social issues. One of the leading evangelicals who has long argued for greater engagement with our society through presenting Christian perspectives on social issues is John Stott, the well-known British preacher and theologian. In his 1984 book *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Stott brought his theological thinking to bear on a wide range of topics that were current in 1984 and, for the most part, are still contentious today.

The 4th edition of this popular book was released in 2006 and covers much of the same ground as the original edition (with some minor changes of emphasis). As with the original book, this recent edition sets out a Christian framework for thinking through issues such as abortion, same sex marriage, environmental issues, poverty and business relationships. Each chapter acts as a conversation starter rather than the final word, encouraging further Christian thought about these matters. The conversation is certainly worth having in 2008—at which point in

history we are faced with the possibility of environmental catastrophe, challenges to traditional notions of family and parenthood and biotechnological advances that raise ethical questions that would not have been imagined a century ago.

The first part of Stott's book sets out the case for greater engagement on these issues. While there have been strong evangelical voices involved in movements for social change in previous centuries (such as Wilberforce, Wesley and Finney), during the 20th century (according to Stott), evangelicals were less involved in social action than at any time in the history of evangelical Christianity. Stott highlights a polarisation within the Christian community between those adopting theologically liberal positions, who became more concerned about social action and less concerned about gospel ministry, and evangelicals, among

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whom the exact opposite was evident. Stott's 1984 edition of *Issues Facing Christians Today* challenged evangelicals to consider whether this emphasis on one at the expense of the other could be justified from a biblical perspective.

Each of the following fourteen chapters includes a summary of current practice or the context within which opinions about these topics are formed, as well as an overview of relevant aspects of biblical theology. As Stott makes clear

in his preface to the original edition, his intention is to '... submit to the revelation of yesterday within the realities of today'. One may not agree with every conclusion Stott draws but this in no way reduces the importance or value of the enterprise he undertakes. And his analysis of where we are at the beginning of the 21st century provides every reader with a valuable overview of some of the major issues that challenge Christians and non-Christians alike.

Two of the chapters in the book acknowledge the input of Professor John Wyatt¹—the chapter on abortion (now expanded to include a discussion of euthanasia) and a new chapter on biotechnology. Stott's discussion of abortion is compelling—he presents the history of popular attitudes to abortion and the subsequent dramatic change in practice that has seen the number of

abortions grow to over 50 million worldwide every year. On this issue, it is hard not to agree with Stott that '... any society which can tolerate abortion on this scale has ceased to be civilised.' The chapter challenges Christians to do what they can to support women who feel unable to proceed with a pregnancy, thus providing them with viable options to termination.

Stott has incorporated much of Wyatt's thinking on the topic of euthanasia,

drawing ideas from Wyatt's 1998 book *Matters of Life and Death*. Stott outlines the different categories of euthanasia before addressing three aspects of the debate surrounding euthanasia—the questions of value, fear and autonomy.

He begins with the question of how we value a human life. Is it connected to our capacity for love and relationships or the capacity to experience a certain quality of life, or does it rest in something more fundamental—in our relationship with the Creator? If we accept that our value is inherent and linked to our relationship with God, then the decision to end someone's life on the basis of value or quality of life becomes untenable.

The second aspect addressed is that of fear. Stott identifies three fears that drive much of the debate concerning euthanasia—the fear of pain, indignity and dependence. In seeking to address these fears he argues that the services offered by hospices can allay many of these fears. Modern palliative care can assist in the management of almost all pain experienced by sufferers of terminal conditions. Yet this area of medical care receives minimal funding and is never likely to receive the same attention as

God and the secular values of freedom and autonomy. Stott (with Wyatt) argues cogently for a distinctly Christian position that acknowledges our dependence on God for every breath we take, rather than seeking to control our lives (and deaths).

The topic of euthanasia, like that of abortion, throws up questions that rarely have comfortable answers. However, this chapter enables the reader to grasp hold of what the driving forces are behind the debates and how the Christian world view stands apart from the secular view that is dominant in the public sphere.

The fundamentally Christian notions of human dignity and value positioned within a universe that is created and ordered by God also provide the foundation for the next chapter written by John Wyatt, examining the ethical challenges of the new biotechnology.

This is a chapter we need to pay attention to. It seems that every day there is some new innovation that promises healing—at the same time challenging our notion of what it means to be human. Consider how much has changed in this field over the past couple of decades. On the 25th of July this year, Louise Brown celebrated her 30th birthday. Despite

tests are often performed to determine whether or not to terminate a pregnancy.

While testing for genetic abnormalities (and the potential termination of the pregnancy when such abnormalities are detected) has considerable support among the general population, testing for other characteristics remains controversial. Pre-implantation genetic testing has made it possible to select embryos for implantation with specific characteristics. As a consequence, for example, embryos can be screened to create 'saviour siblings'—that is, choosing an embryo with genetically matched tissues to a child already born with a condition requiring ongoing transfusions of bone marrow or blood (Jodi Picoult explores this issue in her novel *My Sister's Keeper*). Since 2001, sex selection of embryos has become an option for prospective parents in the U.S.

Deciding which embryos to keep and which to destroy on the basis of gender shares many parallels ethically with the feticide practised in developing countries. Wyatt cites a report appearing in the *British Medical Journal* in 1994 that estimated that 50,000 female fetuses per year were aborted in India on the grounds of sex identification procedures. In some regions of India there are now fewer than 800 girls for every 1000 boys born.

In discussing these issues, Wyatt manages to make complex areas of medicine and ethics accessible for those (such as myself) with no training in this field. Yet, he also sets out the ethical challenges these new technologies present and a biblical framework for developing a Christian response. How do Christians

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other areas of care that promise longer, healthier lives for those of us fortunate enough to live in the developed world. Palliative care is an aspect of medical care where Christians have a long history of involvement (the hospice movement was originally a Christian movement) and Christians will need to remain involved if this is to remain a viable option for the dying.

The third issue is that of autonomy—within our society many feel they have a right to autonomy, the right to determine how they will live and, if necessary, how they will die. Here again there is a line in the sand between the Christian world view that emphasises our dependence on

living a quiet life with her family in England, each successive birthday milestone for Louise attracts world attention—she was the first baby born using IVF technology. Today, the practice of IVF is common place and the number of IVF babies born since 1978 has passed 1 million. One in 33 children born in Australia are now conceived using IVF.²

Today there also exists many other procedures available to parents that can determine choices after conception. Amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling are two procedures that can be used in early pregnancy to detect genetic abnormalities that could result in Down Syndrome or spina bifida. Such



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respond to these possibilities? Does the alleviation of suffering as a moral imperative override other concerns about the potentialities of embryos? And if we have the resources to make use of such technologies why not take steps towards securing our health in the future?

Wyatt's framework for considering such issues is carefully constructed, covering similar themes as those addressed in the chapter on abortion and euthanasia. This framework is first and foremost based on a biblical understanding of God and humanity. God is the source of all order, meaning and purpose within creation; wisdom involves living in accordance with this order, meaning and purpose. Our human bodies are no exception—wisdom is found in understanding God's purposes for our bodies and working in accord with these purposes.

How, then, do we characterise humanity? Wyatt argues that humans, as God's image bearers, have purpose and value that do not disappear with any loss of capacity. This is in stark contrast with the source of value imputed to humans by secular ethicists who see a human's value in terms of function. Ethicists such as Peter Singer have perhaps been more active in promoting this distinction than Christian apologists, and yet it is one Christians should not be ashamed of. The inherent value of every human being, irrespective of their capacity, is something to be cherished. It has prompted Christians over many centuries to work with those who are marginalised—the sick, the frail and those unable to speak for themselves.

Human beings are also flawed—we are imperfect and broken as a consequence of choosing to live out of step with our creator. Within our physical experience, a consequence of this rebellion is that we all face death. According to Wyatt, death represents one of the boundaries or limitations God has set within our physical existence—part of the order of creation God has brought about in response to human rebellion. As instantiations of the sinfulness of humanity death, decay, sickness and

brokenness represent enemies—evils that have entered our world. We might have the capacity to alleviate some of the suffering we experience in this fallen world, God-willing, but in the end death must be acknowledged as a part of our physical existence.

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Wyatt's final theological point revolves around the restorative and redemptive work of Christ. At the heart of the Christian message is the incarnation of God in human form and the reality of a physical resurrection. Bodies matter, and God's plan for humanity involves the restoration of physical bodies in heaven. Wyatt describes our bodies as *flawed masterpieces* that medical practitioners are to approach as preservers and restorers, working with respect for the artist, God Himself. He contrasts this activity of restoration with enhancement. It would be entirely inappropriate for the art restorer to try and improve on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* or Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*. Instead, her work aims to be true to the intention of the original artist, to restore what has been damaged. I found the distinction between restoration and enhancement a useful starting point for thinking about these complex issues, although Wyatt admits that sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a certain procedure is primarily designed to restore or enhance.

This is a challenging chapter—the questions that are raised by these new technologies are not easy to answer and they touch on our most fundamental beliefs about who we are and what we are capable of. It is also challenging in its theology—do our attitudes towards

sickness and death reflect a true understanding of God's world? The difficulty we face answering this question reflects the complexity of the Christian view of suffering and death—death is not to be feared, yet nor is it to be embraced. We work to alleviate suffering and pray for healing, knowing that suffering and eventually death will be part of our existence. Much more could be said on these issues and again, as with Stott's chapters, we have here the beginning of a conversation that we are encouraged to participate in. I hope that many might continue to wrestle with these issues inspired by writers such as Wyatt. For one thing is certain—these issues are only going to increase in complexity in the years to come. ©

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END NOTES

- 1 John Wyatt will be presenting the New College Lectures in 2009.
- 2 Benson, Kate (2008). IVF turns 30. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/parenting/a-shower-of-babies-as-ivf-turns-30/2008/07/24/>