



The IMPACT
of THEOLOGY



On ETHICAL
INSIGHT

by H. Dean Garrett, Ph.D.

We live in exciting times.

We have progressed in our knowledge and technology beyond some of our wildest childhood dreams. I can remember as a high school student the day the Russians put a satellite above the earth and the resultant space race between the two super powers of the time, trying to control space both militarily and scientifically. Not many years later, I stood with my wife looking at a big yellow full moon, wondering out loud to her if that lover's moon would ever be the same now that a man was leaving his footprints on it. Today we have people living in space for months at a time, and we are preparing to put humankind on Mars.

The same breakneck speed of discovery has taken place in medicine. In 1954 the first successful kidney transplant took place. In 1967, Dr. Christiaan Barnard performed the first heart transplant. I can still remember seeing a full, double-page photo in *Life* magazine of Dr. DeBakey holding the heart over an open, gaping chest, in full living color, and I remember again commenting as to whether things would ever be the same. Today we are dealing with the micro-science of gene mapping and splicing, manipulation and cloning, and wondering where it will all end.

With each new development, there comes a resulting challenge of implementation and the ethical decisions associated with that implementation. Discussion and debate rage over issues that cover the range of life — abortion, the cloning of animals and the potential of cloning humans, and assisted suicide. In between are many difficult and challenging decisions that must be made concerning the quality of life as well as the maintenance of that life. Often those decisions are determined by one's philosophy of the purpose of life and the ethics that come from that philosophy. The question therefore could be asked: How do one's religious or theological beliefs affect one's ethics?

Ethics is a system or set of moral principles used to govern human action, either individually or as a group or culture. E. E. Ericksen, the noted philosopher, wrote: "Unlike moral codes, which prescribe definitely what man shall or shall not do, ethical principles are the reasons justifying the moral life. Moral laws answer the questions of the what, while moral principles answer questions of the why in the ethical inquiry."¹ Ethics have always played a role in the decision-making process, particularly in the field of medicine. However, the role of ethics and the basis or foundation for ethical values have changed over time. Gilbert Meilaender observed in *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, "There was a time when philosophers and theologians, in their respective ways, thought about the moral life, and physicians reflected upon the moral meaning of their practice. Then ethics developed

as a specialized branch of philosophy or theology. Now we have bioethics, one branch of which is often called 'applied ethics'. One of the things that happens in the course of this development is that bioethical reflection comes to focus more and more upon public policy — which in our society inevitably means a minimal, lowest-common-denominator ethic capable — of securing public consensus."²

In society today, we have moved away from a theological basis for ethics to more of a cultural consensus. For some, what is best for the individual is more important than the dictates of moral laws. "Freedom" of individuals has replaced the good of the whole. In fact, in deciding an abortion case, the United States Supreme Court made this interesting observation: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."³

The impact of theology on ethics becomes more complicated as the acceptance of theology diminishes or as the theology becomes more fragmented. As the various religions of the world continue to de-emphasize doctrine and focus more and more on philosophy and sociology, ethics become more relative and less absolute. Ethics that are based on a wandering theology are not stable enough to use as guides in making difficult decisions. They are too sensitive to the times and circumstances. What one person declares ethical will be declared unethical by others. What might be ethical today will not be tomorrow because of shifting societal expectations. Some feel that we *Homo sapiens* are no more than animals who have learned to walk uprightly. This belief would dictate that our ethical decisions are based purely or primarily on inbred instincts and are controlled by the laws of nature. But, as Elder Boyd K. Packer indicated, "Our behavior is not totally controlled by natural impulses. Behavior begins with belief as well. Beliefs are born of philosophies, of doctrines. Doctrines can be spiritual or secular, wholesome or destructive, true or false."⁴ A belief that we are animals will dictate our ethical behavior as much as a belief in a living God. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: "Ethical principles are born of doctrinal concepts. To say 'We believe in being honest' is to testify that because we believe in Christ and his saving truths, we automatically accept honesty as a divine standard to which every true believer must conform. And so it is with all principles; they inhere in, are part of, and grow out of saving truths. It is the word, the everlasting word, the word of salvation — all of which expressions are synonyms for the gospel — that controls and governs the lives of men. Thus in a time of trouble and peril, the prophet Alma, in seeking to bring peace and prosperity into the lives of the people, 'thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God.' Why? Because 'the preaching of the

word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just — yea it had had a more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else.’ (Alma 31:5).”⁵ Elder McConkie further observed: “Conformity to the highest standards is the natural outgrowth of believing the eternal truths that save.”⁶

The Nature of God

Ethics based on the philosophies of men and not the truths of God will not bring one to the highest standards, for they do not have that type of power over the moral development of the individuals. We must begin with the basic concept of the nature of God in order to understand the nature of man. The understanding of who and what God is and how He interacts with us will tell us much about who and what we are, and how we are to interact with one another. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught this very important concept: “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.” He then declared these beautiful doctrines concerning God:

What kind of a being is God? . . . God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make Himself visible, — I say, if you were to see Him today, you would see Him like a man in form — like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another . . .

It is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see.

These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are simple. It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did.

The Prophet Joseph then made this great application to these doctrinal verities:

Here, then is eternal life — to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power. And I want you to know that God, in the last days, while certain individuals are proclaiming His name, is not trifling with you or me.⁷

God is an exalted man, a Being we can converse with as one person converses with another. We need to learn to be gods ourselves.

Compare the impact of this doctrine on ethical behavior with the belief that man is nothing more than part of the animal kingdom and, therefore, behaves by animal instincts and natural desires. If you believe that anyone on this earth has the natural abilities of becoming like God you will view the value of that individual far differently and, therefore, will treat that individual differently than if you viewed him or her as of this earth only. We can rise no higher than our origins; our destiny is largely determined by the nature of Deity. This doctrine will have great influence on one’s ethical position and behavior. Note the attitude of those who do not have this knowledge as stated in the medical journal, *Pediatrics*:

*Whatever the future holds, it is likely to prove impossible to restore in full the sanctity-of-life view. The philosophical foundations of this view have been knocked asunder. We can no longer base our ethics on the idea that human beings are a special form of creation, made in the image of God, singled out from all other animals, and alone possessing an immortal soul. Our better understanding of our own nature has bridged the gulf that was once thought to lie between ourselves and other species, so why should we believe that the mere fact that a being is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* endows its life with some unique, almost infinite, value?⁸*

Compare this attitude with that of Benjamin F. Johnson after he had heard the Prophet Joseph Smith teach the true doctrines of the nature of God and our relationship with Him:

In [Joseph Smith’s] teaching us the ‘Fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man’ we could begin to see why we should ‘love God supremely, and our brothers as ourselves’. He taught us that God was the great head of human procreation, was really and truly the father of

both our spirits and our bodies; that we were but parts of a great whole, mutually and equally dependent upon each other, according to conditions.⁹

Our pre-earth life

The knowledge of who and what God is leads us to the knowledge of who and what we are: the offspring of God who lived with Him in a pre-earth existence. The First Presidency has proclaimed:

All human being — male and female — are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose. In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life.¹⁰

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a unique view of the purpose of life and the understanding of who we are and what we are. We have knowledge of the plan of salvation that gives us a distinctive understanding of life.

The knowledge of the pre-earth life is unique doctrine for the LDS. Much of what we do and the ethical behavior that is acceptable to the Church is rooted in that doctrine. We understand that this life is a continuation of a past life. Much of what we do in this life is based on our use of agency in the pre-earth existence. Elder Joseph F. Smith gave this opinion of the impact of the pre-earth spirit world on who and what we are in this life:

Our knowledge of persons and things before we came here, combined with the divinity awakened within our souls through obedience to the gospel, powerfully affects, in my opinion, all our likes and dislikes, and guides our preferences in the course of this life, provided we give careful heed to the admonitions of the Spirit.

He continued with this insightful statement:

All those salient truths which come home so forcibly to the head and heart seem but the awakening of the memories of the spirit. Can we know anything here that we did not know before we came? Are not the means of knowledge in the first estate equal to those of this? I think that the spirit, before and after this probation, possesses greater facilities, aye, manifold greater, for the acquisition of knowledge, than while manacled and shut up in the prison-house of mortality.¹¹

The purpose of earth life

This understanding gives us a wholly different view of mortality and the purpose of life. It also allows us to understand some of the conditions of life and how God is a just God in spite of the seeming injustices that are about us. As an example, the knowledge of the pre-earth life and the individual's use of agency in this life allows us to have a greater empathy towards those who are mentally and physically challenged in this life because we know they have spirits that are well developed, are God's offspring, and have the full opportunity to become like God. This life provides a mortal experience in that advancement toward Godhood.

This knowledge greatly impacts our ethical behavior. We see with different eyes the purpose of life and the struggles of life. We have a distinct ethical code of conduct based on our understanding of the pre-earth life. Our comprehension of God and His purposes, and our relationship to Him, have tremendous impact on our ethical code of conduct.

Because we know of the pre-earth life, we have a far different view of the purpose of this earth life. Life's purpose is to continue in the path that leads to exaltation. It is not a time to seek "pleasure in unrighteousness" (D&C 56:15) but

rather a time to seek joy and happiness. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared: "Happiness is the object and the design of our existence and will be the end thereof if we pursue the path that leads to it, and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God."¹² A person cannot have a fullness of joy without the body (D&C 93:33-34). There-

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fore, we view the physical body as a gift of God and a very important element of our eternal progression. In fact, a major reason for coming to this earth is to receive a body. When an infant dies we understand that it has fulfilled the requirements of this second estate and will have opportunity to reach its full potential in the next life.

The nature of our bodies

The role of the physical body in our theology greatly influences the ethical values we practice. We understand that when the spirit enters the body, it gives it life; and when it leaves, the body dies. It is through the physical body that the spirit is able to express itself in mortality. We view the possession of a body as a blessed, eternal privilege. We are created in the image of God and will have a body throughout eternity. We view the body as a temple of God. We declare as the Psalmist declared: “[We are] fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14). Therefore, in our theology, any action that would have an adverse impact on the physical body is viewed very negatively. For example, we have been told that although the Word of Wisdom is a spiritual law, one of the reasons the Lord gave it was to help protect the physical body. Our doctrinal understanding of the pre-earth spirit world and the purpose of obtaining a body in this life has a great influence on practices that are widely accepted by society. Consider the practice of abortion as an example. To deny a spirit a body is a very grave decision. Our doctrines concerning the body give rise to our ethical values that drive decisions on abortions. Anyone who has an abortion, participates in, or encourages an abortion, except in cases where the health of the mother is endangered or in cases of rape or incest, is “committing one of the most...sinful practices of this day” and could face Church discipline.¹³

The purpose of death and suffering

Some of the ethical questions that come from these doctrines deal with how to treat sicknesses and diseases that invade this sacred temple of God. The doctrine of the Fall tells us that our bodies are not perfect and sickness and disease are part of the mortal life. Some sickness is the result of nature; other sickness is the result of bad decisions. All are part of earth life. As Elder Erastus Snow observed: “The various pains and sorrows to be endured in life are all necessary in their time and place; the trials as we term them, are all necessary in their place, they are all a part of the scheme of education or training to prepare us for the future. . . . It is measured out to you and me in the providence of the Lord. . . .”¹⁴ Elder James E. Talmage wrote: “No pang that is suffered by man or

woman upon the earth will be without its compensating effect...if it be met with patience.”¹⁵ We have been taught that “no pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven.”¹⁶

This being the case, would it be ethical for members of the Church to withhold care for those who are suffering? What role or what effort should be put forth to treat disease or to heal the sick? Throughout all scripture, examples can be found where the sick were healed, either through direct, divine intervention of God or through the actions of humankind. In fact, in the Law of the Church given in Doctrine and Covenants 42, we are under command to assist in the healing process. The Lord commanded that those who did not have the faith to be healed were to be given herbs and mild food (D&C 42:41). For those who have the faith to be healed, the command is that we call in the Elders who “shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in the [Lord’s] name” (D&C 42:44). We search diligently for ways to control or remove pain and suffering from our systems. Scientists are working around the clock in some instances to break the genetic codes to prevent diseases and physical disabilities. We are doing much to extend life and to fight off suffering and death. We also call in the Elders to use the priesthood of God to overcome the forces of nature with the desire to remove pain or to delay death. How do these efforts fit with the doctrine of pain and suffering and death as part of the plan of happiness?

President Brigham Young has answered this dilemma as follows: “You may go to some people here and ask what ails them. They answer, ‘we don’t know, but we feel a dreadful distress in the stomach and in the back. We feel all out of order and wish you would lay hands on us.’

“Have you used any remedies?”

“No, we wished the elders to lay hands upon us. We have faith that we will be healed.”

“That is very inconsistent according to my faith. If we are sick and ask the Lord to heal us, to do all for us that is necessary to be done, according to my understanding of the gospel of salvation, I might as well ask the Lord to cause my wheat and corn to grow without my plowing the ground and casting the seed. It appears consistent to me to apply every remedy that comes within the range of my knowledge and to ask my Father in Heaven in the

name of Jesus Christ to sanctify that application to the healing of the body. . . it is my duty to do what I have in my power to do.”¹⁷

In light of all of this, it is interesting to note that the Savior not only suffered for our sins, but in some unique way that we do not understand He also suffered for our sickness and pain. Note this interesting insight given by Alma as he prophesied concerning the coming of Christ in the flesh: “And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptation of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and sickness of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11-12). As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland explained: “Christ walked the path every mortal is called to walk so that he would know how to succor and strengthen us in our most difficult times. He knows the deepest and most personal burdens we carry. He knows the most public and poignant pains we bear. He descended below all such grief in order that he might lift us above. There is no anguish or sorrow or sadness in life that he has not suffered in our behalf and borne away upon his own valiant and compassionate shoulders . . . That aspect of the Atonement brings an additional kind of rebirth, something of immediate renewal, help, and hope that allows us to rise above sorrows and sickness, misfortunes and mistakes of every kind. With his mighty arm around us and lifting us, we face life more joyfully even as we face death more triumphantly.”¹⁸

Add to this the interesting doctrine taught in the Doctrine and Covenants that there might be a time appointed for death. The Lord said: “And again, it shall come to pass that he that had faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed” (D&C 42:48, emphasis added). He commanded the Prophet Joseph Smith to “hold on thy way, and the priesthood shall remain with thee; for thy bounds are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less” (D&C 122:9, emphasis added). At the funeral of Elder Richard L. Evans, President Joseph Fielding Smith observed: “And may I say for the consolation of those who mourn, and for the comfort and guidance of all of us, that no righteous man is ever taken before his time. In the case of faithful saints, they are simply transferred to other fields of labor.”¹⁹ Elder Spencer W. Kimball gave us additional insights as he offered this opinion: “Just as Ecclesiastes 3:2 says, I am confident that there is a time to die, but I believe also that many people die before ‘their time’ because they are careless, abuse their bodies, take

unnecessary chances, or expose themselves to hazards, accidents, and sickness. . . I believe we may die prematurely but seldom exceed our time very much.”²⁰

God, in His infinite wisdom, has not given us unlimited power to make decisions as to keep people from dying. As President Kimball observed, if we had that type of power, had we been present, we would have protected Abinadi from the flames of fire and therefore might have done irreparable damage to him. Had we been in Carthage Jail on the fateful day of June 27, 1844, we would have stopped the mob and prevented the death of Joseph and Hyrum, thus losing for them and for us the blood witness of the restoration (see D&C 136:39). Had we been in Jerusalem during that wondrous week we would have prevented the pain and suffering in Gethsemane and stopped the death at Golgotha and therefore made the biggest mistake ever in the history of this world.

Suffering and death are part of life, and we look at them as a blessing and an opportunity. Because of the atonement of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, we realize that they are temporary and for but the moment. Therefore, when dying becomes inevitable, it should be looked upon as a blessing and we should not feel “obligated to extend life by means that are unreasonable.”²¹

We are now being faced with other ethical challenges in society where there is a movement to assist others in moving up the event of death so that they will not suffer. Much discussion is taking place today concerning the rights of individuals to have access to assisted suicides. Courts are being asked to declare the legal standing of such actions. No matter what society decides, we can understand from the doctrines we have discussed why the leaders of the Church have stated that these practices violate the commandments of God.²²

Conclusion

We can see from this quick overview of the doctrines of the nature of God, our pre-earth life, the nature of our bodies, the purpose of this earth life, the fall of Adam, along with the purpose of suffering and death and the life after death, that an understanding of doctrine plays an important role in the development of our ethics and behavior. We know good from evil. We know what to call good and what to call evil. We also know that God governs by law, and it is by obedience to the laws of God that we receive blessings from God (D&C 130:20-21). True ethics are born out of understanding and applying the laws and revelations of God. Most of the world is guided by ethics that are based on cultural and societal demands driven by the fuel of individualism. As the belief in the existence of God and His role decreases in society, we will “behold the large increase in the numbers

of those who wish to play at being God. Such societal supervisors may deny the existence of divine ways but they are very serious about imposing their own ways. Those who disavow the existence of absolute truths must forego the disapproving of anything on moral grounds. They may try to evoke a response by using all the old words, but these went out of fashion with the old values. Words minus their moral content cannot for long be meaningfully appropriated. Once a society loses its capacity to declare that some things are wrong per se, it finds itself forever building temporary defenses, drawing new lines but forever falling back and losing its nerve. A society which permits simply anything will eventually lose everything!"²³

In spite of all this, there is legitimate research being conducted to ascertain the relationship between faith, prayer and scripture reading with healing.²⁴ There is also a movement to have medical schools teach potential doctors to include a spiritual history in their diagnoses.²⁵ It appears that in today's academic and social climate it is very important for those who have strong spiritual and religious beliefs to step forward and help shape the direction of the ethical decisions being made.

Many gray areas still exist that we must deal with, and as the knowledge of humankind continues to expand, we will be faced with interesting challenges that will test our ethical base. The day is coming when we will be faced with many difficult ethical decisions concerning the manipulation of genes, the changing of the fetus, even the sex of the fetus, as well as the cloning of the human body, which could lead to the use of the body parts of the clone. Both the health care receiver and the health care provider will be faced with these decisions. Many other dramatic advances in medical research will challenge us as we try to adapt these advances to our ethical standards. In future times the prophets of God might declare the Lord's position on some of these practices. Until that time, however, it will be imperative that we as health service recipients, as well as you as health care providers, know the doctrines of the revealed gospel of Jesus Christ. Only then will we have the anchor that will allow us to be stable in the wishy-washy world. Elder Boyd K. Packer taught: "True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior . . . that is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel."²⁶ The writer of Proverbs declared: "The fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). The Prophet Joseph Smith stated it another way: "We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the

intellect, and that the nearer a man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin."²⁷ We are truly a uniquely blessed people, for we do not only have research but also revelation! May we have the wisdom to use both.

H. Dean Garrett, PH.D., is a professor and former associate chair in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University.

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