

Biblical Ethics: An Overview

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Biblical Ethics: An Introduction

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, God gives people specific instructions about how he wants them to conduct their lives. The study of these instructions and their wise application to life is known as the discipline of biblical ethics. These instructions from God about ethical living involve many commands, laws, moral standards, ideals, prohibitions, and principles of wisdom relating to moral judgment. They also concern matters of moral accountability, including rewards and punishments that provide incentives for pleasing God and avoiding what he abhors. From start to finish, ethical understanding in the Bible is about applying the holiness of God to human life on earth ([Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:14–16](#)). This article offers an overview of such biblical ethics as based on the totality of moral revelation in the Word of God, and several articles that follow it show the application of Christian ethics to specific moral issues.

An Overview of Ethical Instruction and Example in the Bible

The first example of ethical instruction in the Bible is seen when God gave Adam and Eve commands, both positively, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” ([Gen. 1:28](#)), and negatively, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” ([Gen. 2:17](#)). Later in the Bible God gave his people the foundational guidelines set forth in the Ten Commandments ([Ex. 20:1–17](#); cf. [Deut. 5:6–21](#)), and then he added the numerous, even more detailed laws that are found in large portions of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These laws not only prescribed and prohibited certain actions but also taught people about right attitudes of heart: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart” ([Deut. 6:5](#); cf. [Lev. 19:18](#); [Ps. 40:8](#); [119:16](#)). In addition to direct commands, the Bible also teaches about moral living through narrative literature (revealing what pleases or displeases God), wisdom literature (revealing characteristics of good judgment), and prophetic words (revealing how people and nations are accountable to God), all of which indicate the kinds of conduct, character, and goals that God either approves or disapproves.

When Jesus came, he lived a life of perfect obedience to God, for he said, “I always do the things that are pleasing to him” ([John 8:29](#)), and many passages affirm that Jesus' life was completely free of sin: He was “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” ([Heb. 4:15](#)), and he was “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” ([Phil. 2:8](#); cf. [John 15:10](#); [Acts 3:14](#); [2 Cor. 5:21](#); [Heb. 7:26](#); [1 Pet. 1:19](#); [1 John 2:1; 3:5](#)). Jesus employed three characteristic motifs in his ethical teaching. First, he often described moral living in terms of *God reigning as a king and his people's duty as citizens to obey the rules of his kingdom* (cf. esp. [Matt. 5:3, 10, 19–20](#);

[6:10, 33; 13:37–43, 47–50; 18:23–35; 21:31–32, 43](#)). Second, he frequently described moral living in terms of *the obligations, loyalties, and privileges of children in a family headed by God as a loving Father* (cf. esp. [Matt. 5:9, 16, 43–48; 6:1–4, 14–15; 12:50; 23:9; Mark 3:35; John 12:36](#)). Third, Jesus taught in terms of *disciples following, imitating, and obeying him as a beloved teacher, mentor, and role model* (cf. esp. [Matt. 10:24–25; 16:24; Mark 10:43–45; Luke 6:40; John 13:15–17; 14:15, 21, 23–24; 15:10, 12](#)). And at the end of his ministry he commissioned his followers to teach other disciples from all nations “to observe all that I have commanded you” ([Matt. 28:20](#)). In addition to his teaching, Jesus' life is also a pattern for believers to imitate, for “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” ([1 John 2:6](#)).

The Bible ends with a picture of the new Jerusalem, a city in which the only residents are those who obey God's moral standards, for “nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false” ([Rev. 21:27](#)), and those who are kept “outside” are “sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” ([Rev. 22:15](#)). Obedience to God's ethical standards brings him glory ([Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 6:20](#)) and is also best for his people ([Ps. 1:1; John 14:21; Rom. 12:2; Heb. 12:10](#)).

Justification by Faith and the Importance of Moral Obedience

The NT clearly teaches that justification, that is, pardon and acceptance with God, comes to people only through faith in Christ alone, who is offered to sinful humanity as Savior by God's grace alone: “by grace you have been saved through faith” and “this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works” ([Eph. 2:8–9](#)). But then Paul immediately says that God wants Christians to live in obedience to him: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” ([Eph. 2:10](#)). It is impossible to read the NT epistles, or to listen to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, without hearing dozens upon dozens of moral commands, standards, warnings, and promises telling Christians how they should live in order to please God in their daily conduct. Therefore it must be seen as a matter of great importance to God that his people, who have been justified by faith alone, live every day of their lives walking in obedience to God's moral standards ([Heb. 12:24](#)). In fact, in [John 14](#), Jesus four times stresses the essential connection between loving him and obeying what he commands ([John 14:15, 21, 23, 24](#)). Empowered by the Holy Spirit, daily obedience expressing faith, loyalty, and love toward Christ will have a transforming effect. The conscience will be clear ([1 Tim. 3:9](#); cf. [1 Tim. 1:5](#)); the heart will know great peace ([Phil. 4:9](#)); joy will abound ([Rom. 14:17](#)); assurance will be strong ([2 Pet. 1:5–10](#)); and distressing experiences will be taken in stride ([1 Pet. 2:18–24](#)).

God's Holy Character as the Source of His Moral Standards

God's moral standards are never arbitrary or capricious, but are all consistent with and derived from his own moral character. This is why Paul can say, “be *imitators of God*, as beloved children” ([Eph. 5:1](#)). This theme of imitating God's moral character is found throughout the Bible: “we love because he first loved us” ([1 John 4:19](#)). “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” ([Luke 6:36](#)). “You shall be holy, for I am holy” ([1 Pet. 1:15](#), quoting [Lev. 11:44](#)). The commands not to lie but to speak

truthfully are grounded in the imperative that believers should increasingly live out the image of their Creator, who does not lie ([Col. 3:9–10](#)).

Other commands also reflect the pattern of imitation of God. “Honor your father and your mother” ([Ex. 20:12](#)) is a reflection of the Son honoring the Father and being obedient to the Father's will within the counsels of the Trinity (cf. [John 4:34](#); [5:30](#); [6:38](#)). The command not to murder ([Ex. 20:13](#)) is grounded in the fact that God is the Creator and sustainer of life and places immense value on the lives of human beings created in his image ([Gen. 9:6](#)). The command “You shall not commit adultery” ([Ex. 20:14](#)) is a command to be faithful in marriage relationships, based on imitating God's faithfulness in all his covenant commitments. The command not to steal ([Ex. 20:15](#)) is grounded in a respect for the fact that a sovereign God has entrusted stewardship of possessions to various individuals, and people should respect that stewardship. The command not to covet ([Ex. 20:17](#)) is based on imitation of the fact that God himself delights in the excellence of his holy character and his providential arranging of things; therefore, we too should delight in his arrangements and never be discontented with them.

But if all God's moral standards are grounded in his unchanging moral character, it follows that he could not have given commands that were substantially different from these. He could not have commanded people, e.g., to be unfaithful, or to lie, or to murder others. Why? Because such commands would be contrary to the moral character of God himself, or would suggest that God's moral character changes so that he is sometimes actually unfaithful, or tells lies, or unjustly hates and destroys human lives. Anything contrary to the holiness of God is abhorrent and dishonoring to God because it violates his moral character (cf. [Prov. 30:9](#)). God cannot issue, and could never have issued, moral standards in contradiction to those he gave, not because God's sovereignty is limited by anything or anyone other than himself, but only because God can never be other than he is. He can never cease to be God. And he can never be untrue to his unchanging moral character.

If one understands the ethical system found in the Bible to be grounded in the moral character of God, this also provides an answer to the age-old philosophical question, “How can one ever reason from *what is* (a description of reality) to *what ought to be* (a prescription of right and wrong)?” If *what is* (that is, what exists in the universe) begins with God himself and his moral character, then *God's very being* determines the nature of the things that are right and wrong, and thus God's being determines, in an ultimate sense, *what ought to be*.

This understanding of the Bible's ethical system also implies that God's moral standards (when rightly understood and applied) are for all people and all cultures throughout all history, because they are the moral standards of the eternal Creator of the universe.

How Can People Discover God's Moral Standards?

It may at first seem overwhelming when someone is told, “Just obey the entire Bible as it applies to your situation in life.” The Bible is a large and diverse book and contains some stipulations (esp. in the OT) that hardly seem to apply today. Must all biblical commands be treated the same, or does the Bible itself provide reasons for classifying various commands in different categories? To address this, most Christian interpreters have agreed to some broad principles for determining how various biblical commands apply today. These principles of interpretation include the following:

1. *The NT is written directly for followers of Christ living under the new covenant.* Though “all Scripture” (including all of the OT) is “profitable” for the Christian ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)), immediate application to life is clearer when reading the NT, for these books were written to Christian believers who were in the same situation as Christians are today with respect to God's overall plan for the history of salvation; they were living in the new covenant age, and so are God's people today. Searching the NT is a good “first step” in resolving an ethical question.

2. *Many details of the Mosaic law are either no longer binding or were never meant for everyone.* While some aspects of God's law delivered to Moses reflected God's standards of moral holiness for all time, many other aspects did not deal directly with morality but with procedures for conducting the Levitical worship system under the old covenant, or with ceremonies and rituals that showed Israel to be a distinct nation, or with administrating the civil government of Israel upon entering the Promised Land. Most interpreters agree, therefore, that what God ordered for the civil government of Israel (though wise) was never meant for other nations and other governments, and that the ceremonial requirements of the old covenant are not applicable today. Thus, e.g., laws concerning circumcision, sacrifices, unclean foods, and clothing are part of the “ceremonial” regulations that set Israel apart from other nations but are no longer binding today, in the NT (or new covenant) age (cf. [Heb. 9:1–10:18](#)). Similarly, many of the laws and penalties in the Mosaic law code were intended only for the civil government of the nation of Israel at that period of time (such as laws in Israel that applied the death penalty to the serving of other gods, witchcraft, persistently disobedient children, adultery, and homosexual behavior). But many other sections of the OT (e.g., Proverbs, but also other parts of the OT including many Mosaic laws) contain teaching that conveys God's wisdom regarding human conduct in general. (A detailed solution to the question of which, and in what way, OT laws apply to NT believers is beyond the scope of this article.)

3. *Some general principles must be applied with wisdom from the rest of the Bible.* There are some passages, especially in Jesus' earthly teaching, that are difficult to understand in terms of how broadly they should be taken and to whom they should apply. Passages like “Do not refuse the one who would borrow from you” ([Matt. 5:42](#)) are generalizations that powerfully address attitudes of the heart. But like every command, applying them to specific situations requires interpreting them in light of the whole of Scripture, including passages that command wisdom and good stewardship. Similarly, “Judge not, that you be not judged” ([Matt. 7:1](#)) must be interpreted in light of Jesus' other command to “judge with right judgment” ([John 7:24](#)).

4. Where it is necessary to apply a command under far different cultural circumstances, there is usually enough similarity between the biblical context and present circumstances for Christian readers to make an appropriate connection. For example, it is not difficult to move from “the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud” ([James 5:4](#)) to “the wages of the employees who work in your factory, which you kept back by fraud.” It is not difficult to move from “honor the emperor” ([1 Pet. 2:17](#)) to “honor government officials.” And it is not difficult to move from “You shall not covet your neighbor's ... ox” ([Ex. 20:17](#)) to “You shall not covet you neighbor's car or boat.”

Similarly adjusted application seems to be required in the case of three NT commands dealing with physical actions that carried symbolic meaning, when the meaning of the same action would be different today. In such cases, Christians should not apply the commands as first expressed unless situated in a similar cultural circumstance where the physical action would have the same meaning. Such physical actions with culturally-variable symbolic meaning include at least these: (1) Greeting one another with a holy kiss ([Rom. 16:16](#); [1 Cor. 16:20](#); [2 Cor. 13:12](#); [1 Thess. 5:26](#); [1 Pet. 5:14](#)) simply conveyed the idea of a welcoming greeting, and other actions (such as shaking hands, or bowing, or hugging) symbolize the same thing in different cultures. (2) Washing one another's feet ([John 13:14](#)) symbolized taking a servant-like attitude that can be expressed in other ways in settings where it is not customary for people to take off their shoes and wash their feet on coming in from the outside. (3) Women or wives wearing head coverings in worship ([1 Cor. 11:4–16](#)) apparently symbolized that a woman was married (see notes on [1 Corinthians 11](#)), which is similar to what a wedding band symbolizes in many cultures today. But while a few such physical actions, by their symbolic nature, are culturally relative, readers should understand that the number of commands in this category is really quite small, and that it would be a mistake to exaggerate their significance and begin to wonder if vast sections of the ethical teachings of the Bible are culturally relative. The vast majority of NT ethical teachings, together with those OT teachings that apply to NT believers, require the direct obedience of Christians today just as in the first century.

Developing a Framework for Ethical Decision Making

The overall goal for making ethical decisions should be to understand and then obey the teaching of the entire Bible with regard to any particular situation. Here are some steps readers should follow when having to make important ethical decisions: **(1) Pray.** All decisions should rely on praying for God's wisdom at the beginning and throughout the process ([James 1:5](#)). **(2) Study the Bible.** Search for and seek understanding of all biblical passages and their principles that have relevance for the situation under consideration. **(3) Study the situation.** Understand the situation by gathering and assessing relevant information (it is often impossible to make a wise decision until the facts become more clear). **(4) Study the people involved.** Try to understand the character, motives, and values of the people involved or affected by the decision to be made, including any relevant background, personal habits and characteristics, motivations, and relationships, as well as special interests that may be influencing the reactions of each relevant party. **(5) The goal.** Understand that the glory of God and the good of others are ever the twin purposes of moral action, and that the merely good or permissible must never be allowed to obstruct the quest for the best.

Wisdom is the skill of combining these factors so as to rightly apply the teachings of the Bible to real people in real-life situations, in such a way that one is truly thinking God's thoughts after him. Such wisdom is a skill that can be improved over time through repeated practice and nearness to God ([Heb. 5:14](#); [James 1:5–8](#)). Mature Christians who have grown through testing ([James 1:2–4](#); [2 Pet. 1:5–9](#)), pastors, and pastoral counselors are often especially skilled in doing this.

A good answer to an ethical question will not limit itself to a discussion of right and wrong actions, for good moral conduct in any situation will involve (1) *good ends* (that is, the results sought or achieved), (2) *good motives* (the desires and attitudes that people have in the situation), and (3) *good means* (the actions that are taken to achieve the ends). The Bible itself requires people to consider all three of these factors, for good ends are mentioned (see [1 Cor. 10:31](#); [14:26](#)), good motives are required (see [Ex. 20:17](#) and [Matt. 5:28](#)), and good means or actions are commanded while bad ones are prohibited ([Ex. 20:12–15](#)). A life fully pleasing to God will conform to each of these three standards set by Scripture.

The Beginning of Life and Abortion

The Image of God

The ethics of abortion, embryonic stem cell research, fetal tissue transplantation, and other issues at the beginning of life will not be fully and rightly understood apart from God's revelation about the origin and sanctity of human life. At the zenith of God's creative activity, he made man (as male and female) in his own image and likeness ([Gen. 1:26–27](#)). From the “dust from the ground” God made a “living creature,” Adam ([Gen. 2:7](#)), whose material body was absolutely earthly (cf. [Ps. 90:3](#) and [103:14](#)) but whose source of life was decidedly divine. Therefore, any view of origins that does not affirm that humanity began through a special creative act of God is sub-biblical.

Since God is the Creator of human life, all human beings belong to God. As the apostle Paul would later declare before the philosophers in Athens, “In [God] we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring’” ([Acts 17:28](#)). Thus, being created by God both *elevates* human beings in that they are not accidents of history and *humbles* them because God is gracious and sovereign over them.

Although God's words when he first created human beings were, “Let us make man in our *image*, after our *likeness*” ([Gen. 1:26](#)), the Bible nowhere explains precisely what constitutes the image of God (Latin, *imago Dei*). Interpreters have suggested that it includes: (1) humankind's upright bodily form, (2) human dominion over nature, (3) human reason, (4) human pre-fallen righteousness, (5) human capacities, (6) the juxtaposition between man and woman, (7) responsible creaturehood and moral conformity to God, (8) personhood, and (9) various composites of the above views. Because the Hebrew words for “image” (*tselem*) and “likeness” (*demut*) are used for things that are similar to, and representative of, something else, a combination of the above views is best: the image of God means that human beings are like God (in several ways) and represent God on the earth. The image of God is a rich relational and functional status that human beings enjoy by virtue of being God's creation.

It is clear from Scripture that *only* human beings are said to bear the image of God. Humans are unique. In fact, the covenant with Noah specifies that while humans may kill animals for food, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” ([Gen. 9:6](#)). Animals may be killed for human sustenance, but human beings may not murder other human beings. Thus the entire human race is morally distinguishable from other living species. Even before homicide was forbidden by a direct command not to murder ([Ex. 20:13](#)), unjustifiable killing was a violation of the special dignity vested in human beings by God himself (cf. [Gen. 4:8–16](#)). This is the foundation of the doctrine of the sanctity, or sacredness, of every human life.

When the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, took on human flesh through the incarnation, God sanctified humanity. In Jesus we see both perfect God and real humanity, and in his incarnation and resurrection we see the importance of the physical aspect of human nature. The affirmation of the Apostles' Creed that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary” entails that, like every other member of the human race, Jesus was once a human embryo. The creedal affirmations of “the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting” mean that the body is a constituent aspect of humanity from the beginning of life throughout eternity. Thus every human life—from conception to natural death—is to be received as a gift from the sovereign Creator, is to be treated with reverence and respect, and is not to be harmed without biblical justification.

OT Texts

God's people were warned not to imitate their neighbors who committed infanticide through child sacrifice. The law strictly instructed them to “not give any of your children to offer them to Molech” ([Lev. 18:21](#)), prescribing the death penalty for violating this command ([Lev. 20:2–5](#)). Child sacrifice was also known during Solomon's reign ([1 Kings 11:7](#)). The brutal practice spread to Moab ([2 Kings 3:27](#)), Judah ([2 Kings 16:3](#)), and the northern kingdom of Israel ([2 Kings 17:17](#)). But Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel condemned the practice, calling on God's people to repent of it ([Isa. 57:5](#); [Jer. 7:31](#); [Ezek. 16:20–21](#)).

It is in this context that the ethics of abortion should be determined. Like infanticide, abortion was not unknown in the ancient world. The most common means were mechanical methods and drugs delivered through pessaries (devices placed in the vagina).

OT Judaism always forbade abortion. Only one biblical text has been used to argue to the contrary ([Ex. 21:22–25](#)), and its interpretation is disputed. The text says, “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined” ([Ex. 21:22](#)). Some interpret “that her children come out” as a miscarriage (“so that there is a miscarriage, but there is no further harm”). According to this interpretation, unborn human life does not have the same value as someone already born, because the normal penalty for causing death is a capital sentence (a life for a life), and yet, in this passage, the one causing the injury is merely fined.

There are good textual reasons, however, for another interpretation, namely, that the Bible is describing a premature live birth (“so that she gives birth prematurely, but there is no injury”). First, the Hebrew word *yeled* is used for what comes from the womb in this case. This word is never used for anything other than for a child who can live outside the womb. Another Hebrew word, *golem*, means “fetus” and is used only one time in the OT ([Ps. 139:16](#), “unformed substance”). Furthermore, *yatsa’*, the verb that refers to what happened to the child, ordinarily refers to live births ([Gen. 25:26](#); [38:28–30](#); [Job 3:11](#); [10:18](#); [Jer. 1:5](#); [20:18](#)). The word normally used for miscarriage, *shakal*, is *not* used here (cf. [Gen. 31:38](#); [Ex. 23:26](#); [Job 21:10](#); [Hos. 9:14](#)). Finally, even if the text were referring to a miscarriage, it would not indicate that an unborn child is valued less than one who is already born, for this hypothetical situation refers to an *accidental* occurrence. Most societies, including ancient Israel, recognized that unintentional manslaughter should be distinguished from premeditated killing. In the latter case, the death penalty was imposed. In the former, cities of refuge were established (cf. [Num. 35:6](#)). Thus, more literal translations render [Exodus 21:22](#), “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that *her children come out*, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined” (ESV). This text then places great protection on the unborn child, for “if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life” ([Ex. 21:23](#)). The death of the baby is at least judged according to the same principles that apply to the taking of other human life (e.g., the death of the mother); see note on [Exodus 21:22–25](#).

[Psalm 139](#) speaks powerfully to the nature of unborn human life. David exults in God's omniscience and his omnipresence ([Ps. 139:1–12](#)). In [verse 13](#) he celebrates God's intricate involvement in his own fetal development: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.” The word *kilyah* is used to refer to the “inward parts” (lit., kidneys). In Hebrew poetry the inward parts were typically the seat of the affections, the hidden part of a person where grief may be experienced ([Job 16:13](#)), where the conscience exists ([Ps. 16:7](#)), and where deep spiritual distress can be felt ([Ps. 73:21](#)). God formed David's deepest being. He wove him, or colorfully embroidered him, in his mother's womb, so that he was “fearfully and wonderfully made” ([Ps. 139:14](#)). In [verse 16](#) the psalmist refers to his “unformed substance” being observed by God. David suggests that God's knowledge of him reached even to his earliest development *in utero* (in the uterus). No wonder the Hebrews found abortion and infanticide morally blameworthy. In addition, David's confession that he was a sinner from conception ([Ps. 51:5](#)) further testifies to his belief in personhood from conception, since only persons can be considered sinners.

God's judgment fell on those who killed the unborn. Elisha wept when he foresaw the crimes of the king of Syria, who would “kill their young men with the sword and dash in pieces their little ones and rip open their pregnant women” ([2 Kings 8:12](#)). Amos prophesied against the Ammonites because they “have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border” ([Amos 1:13](#)).

Extrabiblical Jewish Literature

The noncanonical Jewish wisdom literature further clarifies first-century Judaism's view of abortion. For example, the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* 184–186 (c. 50 B.C.–A.D. 50) says that “a woman should not destroy the unborn in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures as a prey.” Included among those who do

evil in the apocalyptic *Sibylline Oracles* were women who “aborted what they carried in the womb” (2.281–282). Similarly, the apocryphal book *I Enoch* (2nd or 1st century B.C.) declares that an evil angel taught humans how to “smash the embryo in the womb” (69.12). Finally, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that “the law orders all the offspring to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus” (*Against Apion* 2.202).

Contrast these injunctions with the barbarism of Roman culture. Cicero (106–43 B.C.) records that according to the Twelve Tables of Roman Law, “deformed infants shall be killed” (*De Legibus* 3.8). Plutarch (c. A.D. 46–120) spoke of those who he said “offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan” (*Moralia* 2.171D).

Early Christian Literature

Against the bleak backdrop of Roman culture, the Hebrew “sanctity of human life” ethic provided the moral framework for early Christian condemnation of abortion and infanticide. For instance, the *Didache* 2.2 (c. A.D. 85–110) commands, “thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born.” Another noncanonical early Christian text, the *Letter of Barnabas* 19.5 (c. A.D. 130), said: “You shall not abort a child nor, again, commit infanticide.” There are numerous other examples of Christian condemnation of both infanticide and abortion. In fact, some biblical scholars have argued that the silence of the NT on abortion per se is due to the fact that it was simply assumed to be beyond the pale of early Christian practice. Nevertheless, Luke (a physician) points to fetal personhood when he observes that the unborn John the Baptist “leaped for joy” in his mother’s womb when Elizabeth came into the presence of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus at the time ([Luke 1:44](#)).

More than merely condemning abortion and infanticide, however, early Christians provided alternatives by rescuing and adopting children who were abandoned. For instance, Callistus (d. c. A.D. 223) provided refuge to abandoned children by placing them in Christian homes, and Benignus of Dijon (3rd century) offered nourishment and protection to abandoned children, including some with disabilities caused by unsuccessful abortions.

Ethical Conclusions

Based on the consistent testimony of Scripture, the early Jewish and Christian tradition, and what can be known of God’s moral law through natural revelation ([Rom. 2:15](#)), the unborn child should be protected as a person from the moment of conception. A strong argument can in fact be made for this even apart from biblical revelation, for the only differences between babies *in utero* and babies that are born are: (1) their location; (2) their size; (3) their level of dependence; and (4) their level of development—but these are not morally relevant factors that would allow death for one set of babies (the preborn) and life for the other (those who have been born).

What then of the “hard cases” concerning pregnancy resulting from rape or incest? Christians should give compassionate care to those affected by such sins—including both the mother and the unborn child. But if it is wrong to put such a child to death

after it is born (and surely this is wrong), then surely it is wrong to put that same child to death before it is born. The preborn baby should be treated as a person in the image of God.

For this reason, embryonic stem cell research, which involves the creation of human embryos in order to harvest their stem cells for medical uses, should be viewed as the intentional creation and destruction of distinct, individual, tiny human lives. Other sources of stem cells should be used instead, where the removal of the cells does not harm a human being.

What if abortion is necessary to save the life of the mother? Here it is necessary to recognize that removing the unborn child (e.g., from the fallopian tube) is done with the direct intention of saving the life of the mother, not with the direct intention of taking the child's life (which, if the medical technology exists, should also be preserved). Nevertheless, in such a rare and tragic case the choice would be between the loss of one life (the baby's) and the loss of two lives (both the baby's and the mother's). This is the only type of situation in which abortion would be morally justified, as making the best of an extremely difficult situation.

The witness of Scripture, as confirmed by the testimony of the early church, is that every human being, from conception through natural death, is to be respected as a person created in the image of God, whose life has special dignity by virtue of his or her relationship to the Creator. Like the early church, Christians should be known as a people who protect, nurture, and cherish children as gifts from the Lord ([Ps. 127:3](#)).

Bioethics

Bioethics is a relatively new term that literally means “life ethics.” The umbrella category of bioethics generally includes the ethics of human medicine, the biosciences, and biotechnology.

The Ethics of Western Medicine and the Hippocratic Oath

Medicine has a long and laudable history. Western scientific medicine began with the Greeks, who developed much of the early knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and even modern symbols of medicine. From the start, both Jews and Christians have had a positive view of medicine. The healing ministry of Jesus, the Great Physician ([Matt. 4:23](#); [9:35](#); [Luke 9:6](#)), did much to provide the warrant for medicine among Christians.

The ethics of Western medicine reaches back to the Greek physician Hippocrates (460–370 B.C.). The son of a physician himself, Hippocrates practiced as an itinerant doctor in Thrace, Thessaly, and Macedonia. The philosopher Plato referred to Hippocrates as “a professional trainer of students” (*Phaedrus* 270C–D). The medical oath that bears his name was probably formulated by the Hippocratic school after his death. Jewish and Christian versions of the oath were produced after that time.

Over against the charlatans of the day, a Hippocratic physician could be counted on as someone who had mastered a particular set of skills and whose ethical standards were reflected in the oath he swore. Those who took the Hippocratic Oath promised

to use their skills to help the sick and pledged not to euthanize a patient, perform abortions, prescribe abortifacient drugs, or have a sexual relationship with a patient, among other things. They also promised to teach their skills to worthy apprentices. The so-called Hippocratic consensus dominated medicine for nearly 2,500 years. Jews and Christians rejected the polytheism of the Hippocratic school but affirmed its ethical and professional ideals. Medical historian Albert Jonsen writes in *The Birth of Bioethics*: “The Judeo-Christian religious tradition, with its strong emphasis on divine commands that enforce respect for the sanctity of life, enhanced the prohibitions of abortion and euthanasia that are obscurely expressed in the Oath and prescribed caring compassion for the poor and even enemies. The literature of medical duty is profoundly marked by these moral traditions” (p. 7).

Only a very few medical schools still require that graduating physicians affirm the original oath. In a recent survey of the schools that used some form of the oath, only 8 percent of the oaths forbade abortion and only 14 percent prohibited euthanasia. Thus, Christians today have the opportunity to revive life-affirming ethics amid a very pluralistic medical and scientific culture in which affirmation of life is frequently downplayed.

Contemporary Medical Ethics

Current discussions of medical ethics have arisen in large part from the Nuremberg Trials in post-World War II Germany (1945–1949), which focused on the way human subjects were abused in medical research, and from debates in the 1960s over the allocation of scarce medical resources, like kidney dialysis. Early ethics committees serving medical treatment centers were disparaged in the media as “God squads” because they determined who did and did not receive life-sustaining treatment. Today, hospital ethics committees meet regularly to consult on difficult moral questions that arise in patient care and to help fashion hospital policies that enhance overall medical care.

Increasingly, emerging biotechnologies are coming under the scrutiny of the bioethics community. Genetic engineering, human stem cell research, human and animal cloning, artificial intelligence, cybernetics, nanotechnology, robotics, and an ever-expanding array of technologies require wise ethical reflection and careful policy recommendations.

Theologian Nigel Cameron has helpfully categorized the issues in bioethics under the rubric of “taking life,” “making life,” and “remaking life.”

Taking Life

While Christians differ on the issues of euthanasia, assisted suicide, and abortion, which have long been within the realm of bioethics, it is accurate to say that in general Christians are life-affirming. In fact, as the article on [The End of Life](#) argues in more detail, the vast majority of Christians agree, for various reasons, that euthanasia and assisted suicide are not consistent with the biblical witness concerning the sanctity of human life (cf. [Ex. 20:13](#)) and the role of others in providing compassionate care. Likewise, most Christians believe that inducing abortion is wrong, except to save a mother's life (see [The Beginning of Life and Abortion](#)).

Christians are often at the forefront of alternatives to medicalized forms of killing. The early church, e.g., rescued children from infanticide by providing homes and building orphanages. Many contemporary Christians support pregnancy care centers that provide alternatives to abortion by offering pregnant mothers education, resources, and shelter as they await the delivery of their children. The hospice and palliative care movement was begun by a Christian nurse and physician, Dame Cicely Saunders (1918–2005), as a means of caring compassionately for the terminally ill.

Making Life

The range of ethical issues surrounding procreation and contraception fall under the category of “making life.” Contraception has been debated since ancient times. Christians generally divide into two camps. Those who affirm so-called natural family planning believe that every act of sexual union should be open to the possibility of procreation. From this viewpoint, no method of birth control is allowed that either presents a barrier to fertilization or introduces hormones that make the uterus inhospitable to a maturing embryo. Other Christians believe that contraception may be used to limit the number of children born to a family as long as the method is not abortifacient (i.e., something that causes an abortion).

Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) pose significant moral questions for Bible believers. Louise Brown, the world's first “test tube” baby, was born in 1979. Since then, in vitro fertilization (IVF, the fertilization of egg cells by sperm outside the woman's womb) has been quite controversial. Typically, IVF typically involves the fertilization of about a dozen ova in a medical laboratory. Only two or three ova are transferred to a woman's uterus, leaving the others to be cryopreserved (frozen) for later use. Given that the embryo is a human person with a right to life, many Christians have repudiated the practice due to the fact that 25 percent of these human embryos often die in the thawing process and many are likely to be discarded or used for research purposes. (However, it is possible that newer technology will allow the fertilization of only one or two ova that will actually be implanted in the woman's womb.)

Additional reproductive arrangements—like surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination using donor sperm, and sperm or egg donation—introduce third parties or their gametes into the reproductive relationship. The biblical ideal, however, is for procreation to take place within the context of a one-man, one-woman union (see [Marriage and Sexual Morality](#)). Intentionally causing conception outside of that framework and introducing third parties into the procreative relationship raises significant ethical, legal, social, psychological, and familial concerns. The intrusion of the sperm of a man other than a woman's husband into the intimate process of pregnancy and birth, e.g., can introduce significant difficulties into a marriage relationship. The relationship of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the OT illustrates the tensions that may be present in even “low-tech” reproductive relationships ([Genesis 16](#)).

Even more ethical objections arise when a human embryo is conceived and allowed to develop for a short time solely for the purpose of harvesting its stem cells for the purpose of scientific research. In such cases, a new human life is created (see [The Beginning of Life and Abortion](#)) solely so that it would be destroyed for research

purposes. This is inconsistent with the Bible's view of the sanctity of human life (cf. [Ex. 20:13](#)). Other sources of stem cells (such as those taken from adults or from umbilical cord blood) can be used in medical research without destroying a human life.

Adoption has always been commended as an ethical option for Christian couples facing infertility, and is a practical way to care for orphans (cf. [James 1:27](#)) and to provide a living parable of the Christian's spiritual adoption by God. A particular form of adoption seems morally commendable for Christians, in which a husband and wife decide to adopt a so-called “snowflake baby” (a previously frozen embryo that would otherwise have been discarded). The embryo is implanted in the adopting wife's womb, develops as a normal baby, and is born as a normal, healthy child. In this case, conception of the baby had already occurred as a result of the decision of others, and the couple who adopts such a baby is actually saving a life. (However, the potential “third-party” difficulties mentioned in the previous paragraph should be fully taken into account.)

Remaking Life

Researchers are increasing exploration into new ways to either repeat or reconstruct God's fundamental design for human life. These new scientific technologies are laudable when used for healing purposes. Thus, e.g., Christians should affirm the use of implantable computer chips to assist the blind to see, and the development of high-tech prostheses to replace limbs lost in accidents or war. But using these technologies for reasons beyond healing to allegedly “enhance” human capacities is problematic.

Using pharmaceuticals (such as steroids) or genetic engineering to create higher-than-normal IQs or faster-than-normal athletes not only raises profound ethical questions about justice in academics or sports respectively but also challenges the understanding of what it means to be human and who has the authority to alter the human species.

Some suggest that life-prolonging technologies might enable people to live forever, either in their physical bodies or in some other way. Again, while few question the morality of using technology for therapeutic purposes, many worry that enhancement technologies entail a sort of hubris, sometimes described as “playing God.” The Bible warns against the sin of questioning the Creator. “Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” ([Rom. 9:20](#)). After all, Christians know that they are already guaranteed immortality through the resurrection of Jesus Christ ([1 Cor. 15:12–20](#)) and that physical death will be followed by a resurrection to a renewed, eternally healthy physical body freed from the ravages of disease and death. This hope does not totally nullify health-enhancing and life-prolonging technologies, but it does mean that they should never be the believer's ultimate hope ([1 Cor. 15:51–54](#); [Rev. 21:4](#)). The wise use or nonuse of new technologies—medical or otherwise—must be seen as part of Christian discipleship.

Science and Ethics within a Christian Worldview

Christians have often been at the cutting edge of science, medicine, and compassionate care. Because they believe that all truth is God's truth, there is no arena excluded from the lordship of Christ, including the biological sciences. At the same time, Christians are “people of the Book” and bring a Christian world- and life-

view—including ethical perspectives—into their thinking about science. The world cannot afford the development of science without ethical reflection. Ethical reflection must be developed in the context of accurate information. Therefore, Christians should see it as an expression of their discipleship to celebrate biological sciences that enable them to better understand just how fearfully and wonderfully made humans are ([Ps. 139:14](#)). Christians should seek to be good stewards over the opportunities that these developments offer ([Gen. 1:28](#); [1 Cor. 4:2](#); [1 Pet. 4:10](#)). At the same time, Christians should affirm that science is to serve the glory of God and the good of his creatures ([1 Chron. 16:24](#); [Ps. 96:3](#); [Isa. 6:3](#)), not to provide yet another opportunity for the self-aggrandizement that constitutes idolatry. Finally, Christians must continue to demonstrate love for God and neighbor that extends itself in compassionate care of those who are suffering ([Luke 10:33–37](#)).

The End of Life

The Origin of Death

God did not originally create human beings to be subject to death, but “sin came into the world through one man, and *death through sin*, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” ([Rom. 5:12](#)). This refers to the sin of Adam recorded in [Genesis 3](#).

God had previously instructed Adam, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” ([Gen. 2:17](#)). Therefore when Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately experienced *spiritual “death,”* that is, a separation from God. In addition, the just sentence of *physical death* began to be gradually imposed on them in that they experienced aging, leading eventually to death. God told Adam, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” ([Gen. 3:19](#)). Since the time of Adam, all human beings have been subject to aging and inevitable physical death (except Enoch in [Gen. 5:24](#); cf. [Heb. 11:5](#); and Elijah in [2 Kings 2:11–12](#)).

Why Do Christians Die?

Although Christians have been forgiven of their sins and are no longer under sentence to suffer the penalty of death for those sins ([Rom. 6:23](#); [8:1](#); [1 Cor. 15:3](#)), they are still subject to physical death because God has not yet applied to their lives all of the benefits that were earned by Christ for his people. In fact, Paul says that death will be the “last enemy to be destroyed” ([1 Cor. 15:26](#)). For this reason, believers today, living in a fallen world, are still subject to aging and death.

Yet death does not come to believers because God is punishing them, for, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” ([Rom. 8:1](#)). Rather, death is the final outcome of living in a fallen world. Just as Christians are not kept from all sicknesses, floods, and earthquakes, etc., and just as the agricultural fields of Christians still grow as many weeds as the fields of non-Christians, so Christians will experience death as well.

However, Christians should have confidence that God will use even the experience of final illness and death as one of those events that “work together for good” for those who “love God and are called according to his purpose” ([Rom. 8:28](#)). Jesus Christ, who himself experienced physical death as a human being, often seems particularly near to Christians as they die, for they “suffer with him” ([Rom. 8:17](#); cf. [Phil. 3:10](#); [1 Pet. 4:13](#)). Paul hoped to honor Christ in his death as he had in his life: “it is my eager expectation and hope that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” ([Phil. 1:20](#)). The risen Lord Jesus encouraged Christians in Smyrna, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” ([Rev. 2:10](#); cf. [Heb. 11:35](#); [Rev. 12:11](#)).

What Happens When People Die?

When Christians die, their physical bodies are buried in the earth, but their spirits (or souls) go immediately into the Lord's presence in heaven. Paul said, “My desire is to depart *and be with Christ*” ([Phil. 1:23](#)), and “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” ([2 Cor. 5:8](#)). When Stephen was dying, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” ([Acts 7:59](#); cf. [Gen. 35:18](#); [Eccles. 12:7](#); [Luke 23:43](#); [Heb. 12:23](#); [Rev. 6:9](#)). Then at Christ's second coming, when he returns to the earth, believers' bodies will be raised from the dead, made perfect, and reunited with their spirits ([1 Cor. 15:23, 51–52](#); [1 Thess. 4:16–17](#)).

When unbelievers die, their bodies also are buried in the earth, but their spirits go immediately to experience separation from God and punishment for their sins. “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” ([Heb. 9:27](#); cf. [Luke 16:24–26](#); see also notes on [1 Pet. 3:18](#); [4:6](#)).

Funerals and Burial

It is not wrong for Christians to grieve deeply over the loss of fellowship with those who have died, even if the deceased were believers and there is great confidence that they are with the Lord in heaven. Grief at loss of any sort is natural. Although the apostles themselves were present in the early church in Jerusalem, and the believers in Jerusalem were sure that Stephen was in heaven with Christ (cf. [Acts 7:59](#)), they still expressed profound grief: “Devout men buried Stephen *and made great lamentation over him*” ([Acts 8:2](#)). Although Jesus knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead, when he came to the tomb of Lazarus, “Jesus wept” ([John 11:35](#)). These examples indicate that it is right and proper to grieve at the death of a Christian loved one. But Christians should not “grieve as others do who have no hope” ([1 Thess. 4:13](#)), that is, their grief should not be the grief of despair, but grief mixed with joy and hope for future reunion (see [1 Cor. 15:55–57](#); [Rev. 14:13](#)).

When unbelievers die, if there has been no indication of saving faith in the person's life, it would not be right to give the person's loved ones assurance that the one who has died is in heaven. But it is still right to recall and speak of pleasant memories, and to remember the good things that the person did in his or her lifetime, much as David did after hearing that Saul had died (see [2 Sam. 1:19–25](#)).

The Bible does not give any direct commands about how to treat the body of a person who has died, but there are recurring instances in Scripture of treating a

person's body with dignity and respect, up to and including the time of burial (cf. [1 Sam. 31:11–12](#); [1 Kings 13:29–30](#); [Mark 6:29](#); [Luke 23:56](#); [John 19:38–42](#)). This can be done in a variety of ways according to what is understood in each culture as signifying respect and honor to the memory of the person who has died.

Regarding cremation, Christians have held differing views. Some object that cremation (which entails destroying the physical body) undermines the expectation of a future resurrection of the body when Christ returns. (When Jesus rose from the dead, it was his same body that was raised and made perfect, and so it will be with Christian believers; see [1 Cor. 15:35–45](#).) Others, however, think cremation is sometimes the wisest choice, perhaps for economic reasons, because burial land is scarce, or for other reasons. The body is eventually going to die and disintegrate in any case, and God will raise it from the dead and re-create it in its more perfect condition (i.e., in its glorified prime), no matter how scattered it is. If cremation is chosen for a Christian who has died, care should be taken to make clear that the family still should expect a future resurrection of the very same body that has died and now returns “to dust” ([Gen. 3:19](#)). But many Christians still prefer a simple and dignified burial of the person's body in the ground, in part because this gives a clear picture of awaiting the resurrection on the day Christ returns.

Euthanasia

The sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder” ([Ex. 20:13](#)), prohibits any act that would intentionally, or through carelessness, take the life of another human being (see note on [Deut. 5:17](#); the exceptions of capital punishment, killing in war, and self-defense are not in view here, nor are they implied by the meaning of the Hebrew terminology in the passage). The expression most frequently used for violating the sixth Commandment is “shedding innocent blood” (cf. [Ex. 23:7](#); [Deut. 19:10, 13](#); [Ps. 10:8](#); [Prov. 6:17](#)).

This prohibition against murder applies to all human beings, including: the elderly, those who are terminally ill, and those who wish to die. Intentionally taking the life of any of these people would break the commandment, “You shall not murder” (cf. also [2 Sam. 1:10, 14–15](#)). Nations that have allowed for physician-assisted suicide find that a society can quickly move from merely *allowing* “the right to die” to the belief that there is “an *obligation* to die” on the part of the elderly and the very ill people who are “draining resources” from the society. In such situations it becomes likely that a number of elderly people will be put to death against their will.

It is important, however, to maintain a clear distinction between *killing a person* and *letting someone die*. Killing in the wrongful sense of murder, as prohibited in [Exodus 20:13](#), means actively doing something to a patient that hastens or causes his or her death. But “letting someone die” means allowing someone to die without interfering with the process that is already taking place. In cases where it is clearly known to be the patient's wish to be allowed to die, and when there is no reasonable human hope of recovery, and where death seems imminent—then it does not seem wrong to allow such a person to die, rather than either to initiate an artificial life support system or to prolong the natural dying process by artificial means. For such situations, nothing in Scripture would prohibit a dying person from praying for God to take his life. On the other hand, where there is a reasonable human hope of recovery, and

where there is a realistic, practical ability to help, the obligation to “love your neighbor as yourself” ([Matt. 22:39](#)) implies that active measures should be taken to save the person's life. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus indicated that the priest and the Levite were both wrong for neglecting to do what could be done to save a badly injured man, who with care was able to recover ([Luke 10:30–37](#)).

The hardest end-of-life decisions are often related to removing a dying patient from artificial life support, which can involve various measures from an artificial lung to simply providing artificial hydration and nutrition. Christians hold different positions over exactly when in such cases the moral line is crossed from *letting someone die* to *killing*. When considering the proper course of action, Christians should remember that while death is an enemy to resist ([1 Cor. 15:26](#)), natural mortality is still part of living in a fallen world (cf. [Gen. 2:17](#); [Rom. 5:12](#); [Heb. 9:27](#)). There is therefore nothing wrong with accepting natural mortality by removing a dying patient from artificial means that are only slowing the natural death process.

There are more complex cases where medication given to alleviate a patient's pain may also have a secondary effect of hastening a person's death. In such cases, some Christian ethicists say that the two most important considerations are: (1) the primary purpose for giving the medication and (2) the patient's own wishes regarding the alleviation of pain. Other Christian ethicists claim that, in such cases, the moral value of improving life quality is always less than the moral value of honoring the sanctity of human life, and, while doing what they can to alleviate pain, Christians should never give higher priority to improving the quality of life (reducing pain) over honoring the sanctity of life (not killing a person).

Wherever possible, it is both wise and loving for people who are still in good health to complete the appropriate legal and medical forms to make known their wishes regarding medical care at the end of life. These decisions should also be verbally communicated to those who will likely have to make end-of-life decisions about each person.

Suicide

Suicide is murder of oneself, and it is prohibited by the command, “You shall not murder” ([Ex. 20:13](#)). It is a serious sin against God and brings immense, lifelong grief to loved ones who are left, but the Bible nowhere teaches that suicide is a unique and unforgivable sin that prevents a person who has lived by faith in Christ from being saved.

Christ's Victory over Death

Finally, Christians need have no fear of death: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The verse continues, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” ([1 Cor. 15:55–57](#)).

Marriage and Sexual Morality

What Is Marriage?

Marriage is the fundamental institution of all human society. It was established by God at creation, when God created the first human beings as “male and female” ([Gen. 1:27](#)) and then said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” ([Gen. 1:28](#)).

Marriage begins with a commitment before God and other people to be husband and wife for life. In [Malachi 2:14](#), marriage is viewed as a “covenant” commitment in which God stands as a “witness.” And Jesus says that a married couple constitutes a unity that “God has joined together” ([Matt. 19:6](#)). Therefore when a marriage occurs, a man and woman have a new status before God: he now considers them to be husband and wife together.

Some kind of public commitment is also necessary to a marriage, for a society must know to treat a couple as married and not as single. Sexual intercourse alone does not constitute a marriage, as was evident from the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria, where he said to her, “For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband” ([John 4:18](#)). She was living with a man but that did not mean she was married to him, for there had been no public commitment recognized by God or by the community (cf. also [Ex. 22:16–17](#)).

Both [Genesis 2:24](#) and [Matthew 19:5](#) view the “one flesh” unity that occurs as an essential part of the marriage. That is why sexual intercourse after a marriage ceremony is often said to “consummate” the marriage, and (except in cases where it is physically impossible, because of disability, injury, or advanced age) it is thought that a marriage has not fully begun until sexual intercourse has occurred.

Marriage is a picture of the covenantal relationship between Christ and the church, with the husband representing the former and the wife representing the latter: “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” ([Eph. 5:32](#)).

Some Will Not Be Married

The Bible also recognizes that not everyone will be married, and even among those who are married some will be widowed or divorced and therefore will become single again. In [1 Corinthians 7:7–40](#), Paul sees advantages to both being single and being married. Jesus himself was never married, and Paul was not married at the time of his ministry (see [1 Cor. 7:7; 9:5](#); it is impossible to know whether he was previously married or not). Jesus and Paul are examples of godly singleness coupled with wonderful effectiveness in ministry. But Paul says, “Each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another” ([1 Cor. 7:7](#)), and therefore both remaining single and becoming married are morally permissible choices depending on the kind of life that God has called each person to live (see [1 Cor. 7:17, 27–28, 36–38](#)).

Polygamy

Why did God allow polygamy in the OT? Nowhere in the Bible did God ever command polygamy or tell anyone to marry more than one wife. Rather, God temporarily allowed polygamy to occur (he did not give any general prohibition against it) without giving it any explicit moral approval. Nevertheless, in the OT narratives, whenever a man has two or more wives, it seems to lead to trouble (see [Genesis 16; 29–31](#); [1 Samuel 1](#); [1 Kings 11](#); note the prohibition in [Deut. 17:17](#)). In addition, polygamy is horribly dehumanizing for women, for it does not treat them as equal in value to their husbands, and therefore it does not recognize that they share fully in the high status of being created “in the image of God” ([Gen. 1:27](#)) and of being worthy of honor as “heirs with you of the grace of life” ([1 Pet. 3:7](#)). The requirement that an elder be “husband of one wife” ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)) would exclude polygamists from being elders (evidence for polygamy among Jews in the 1st century is found in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.14; Mishnah, *Yebamoth* 4.11; *Ketuboth* 10.1, 4, 5; *Sanhedrin* 2.4; *Kerithoth* 3.7; *Kiddushin* 2.7; *Bechoroth* 8.4; and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 134; for polygamy among non-Jews, see *2 Macc.* 4:30; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.19; Tertullian, *Apology* 46). This has practical application today in missionary contexts in cultures where polygamy is still practiced: the Bible would not encourage a husband to divorce any of his multiple wives when this would leave them without support and protection. But it would not allow a man with multiple wives to be an elder. This restriction would provide a pattern that would generally lead to the abolition of polygamy in a church in a generation or two.

Sexual Intimacy and Moral Standards for Marriage

The Bible views sexual intimacy in marriage as a blessing from God. God said to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” ([Gen. 1:28](#)), which implies that God created them so that they would have sexual intercourse together and thereby bear children (cf. [Gen. 1:31](#)). Sex is seen within the context of marriage (“his wife,” [Gen. 2:24](#)) from the very beginning of creation. After the fall, sexual intimacy in marriage is still viewed positively (see [Prov. 5:15–19](#); Song of Solomon; [1 Cor. 7:2–5](#)).

Why is adultery wrong? (1) Because God says it is wrong: “You shall not commit adultery” ([Ex. 20:14](#)). (2) Adultery pictures unfaithfulness in the relationship between Christ and the church, giving a picture of Christ being unfaithful to his people and abandoning them, and not keeping his covenant with them, or else picturing the church as worshipping other gods and being unfaithful to Christ (cf. [Mal. 2:14](#); [Eph. 5:31–32](#)). (3) Adultery intrudes another person into the “one flesh” relationship of marriage (cf. [Gen. 2:24](#); [Eph. 5:31](#)). (4) Adultery destroys trust within a marriage because it is the most serious kind of violation of a marriage vow. (5) Adultery often leads to children being born without two parents to raise them or else leads to abortion to end an unwanted pregnancy, both of which consequences contradict God's ideal. (6) Adultery is thus frequently and understandably pictured in Scripture as destroying a person's life: “He does not know that it will cost him his life” ([Prov. 7:23](#); cf. [5:3–14](#); [6:27–29](#), [32–33](#); [7:21–23](#)).

Sexual intercourse between unmarried persons is also consistently viewed as morally wrong throughout Scripture, from the laws of Moses ([Ex. 22:16–17](#); [Deut. 22:13–21](#)) to the teachings of Jesus, who implicitly rebuked the woman at the well for living with

someone to whom she was not married ([John 4:16–18](#); cf. also [Gen. 38:24](#); [Matt. 15:19](#) [*porneia* or “sexual immorality” is distinguished from adultery, and the 1st-century understanding of the word would certainly include any sexual intercourse outside of marriage]; [John 8:41](#); [Acts 15:20](#); [1 Cor. 6:18](#); [7:2, 9](#); [1 Thess. 4:3](#); note the imagery in [2 Cor. 11:2](#)).

God requires not only right conduct but also purity of heart: “You shall not covet ... your neighbor's wife” ([Ex. 20:17](#); cf. [Prov. 6:25](#); [Matt. 5:27](#)). The opposite of desiring to commit adultery is having a deep love for one's wife or husband and a strong desire for a positive sexual relationship within one's own marriage, as well as a sense of revulsion at the thought of embracing anyone else in the same way. This purity of heart, like other inward virtues, needs prayerful cultivation if it is to be sustained.

Looking at pornography is a direct violation of Jesus' command against gazing at a woman “with lustful intent” ([Matt. 5:28](#); cf. [Job 31:1–2](#)). Pornography attracts a man's affections and desires away from his marriage and away from his wife. It inevitably brings moral uncleanness in the heart, long-lasting harmful memories, and destructive consequences to one's marriage relationship (the same is true for the future marriage of those who are single). It ultimately leads in many cases to other sins, such as prostitution, rape, and other kinds of violence against women, because it dehumanizes them and fails to recognize and respect them as persons made in God's image and valuable in his sight.

Differing Roles in Marriage

The Bible clearly affirms that both men and women are created in God's image and have equal value and dignity in God's sight and for the work of his kingdom on earth ([Gen. 1:27, 31](#); [Acts 2:17–18](#); [8:12](#); [Gal. 3:28](#); [1 Pet. 3:7](#)). At the same time, the Bible indicates that husband and wife are called to different roles in marriage. God gives to the husband a responsibility for loving, humble headship (or leadership) in the marriage. Husbands are to love their wives “as Christ loved the church” ([Eph. 5:25](#)), and “the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church” ([Eph. 5:23](#)). God has given to the wife a responsibility for joyful, intelligent submission to her husband's headship and support of her husband's leadership role (though never to comply if her husband tells her to sin against God). The NT says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” ([Eph. 5:22](#)). These distinct roles are affirmed in a number of NT passages (cf. [1 Cor. 11:3](#); [Col. 3:18–19](#); [Titus 2:5](#); [1 Pet. 3:1–7](#)). Since these responsibilities are patterned on the relationship between Christ and the church, they are not due to particular circumstances in individual cultures or societies but are applicable for all marriages, for all cultures and all time. They are a part of the “very good” creation that God established from the beginning. In addition, such “equality in value” but “difference in roles” between husbands and wives reflects the equality in deity but differences in roles between the Father and the Son in the Trinity (see note on [1 Cor. 11:3](#)).

Are there other distinctive roles for men and women in marriage? Husbands and wives will often share in responsibilities and help each other as partners in establishing a household and raising a family. Yet a number of passages suggest that the primary responsibility for providing for the family and protecting the family belongs to the husband, while the primary responsibility for caring for the home and children belongs

to the wife. See, e.g., [Genesis 3:14–19](#) (note that pain is introduced into Eve's responsibility of childbearing and Adam's responsibility of tilling the ground to raise food); [Isaiah 4:1](#) (a reversal of the normal order in a time of God's judgment); [1 Timothy 5:3–16](#) (widows, not widowers, are to be supported by the church); and [Titus 2:5](#). There is a pattern of men having responsibility to protect women and children in [Numbers 1:2–3](#); [Deuteronomy 3:18–19](#); [20:7–8](#); [24:5](#); [Joshua 1:14](#); [23:10](#); [Judges 4:8–10](#); [9:54](#); [1 Samuel 4:9](#); [Nehemiah 4:13–14](#); [Jeremiah 50:37](#); [Nahum 3:13](#). Yet these passages (concerning men providing for and protecting their loved ones, and women caring for children) present narrative patterns rather than direct commands (as with headship and submission), so it seems that Scripture gives somewhat more freedom for individual differences in these areas.

Divorce and Remarriage

God's Original Plan

God's original plan for the human race, as indicated in his creation of Adam and Eve as husband and wife, is lifelong, monogamous marriage. Jesus affirmed this in responding to a question about divorce:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female [from [Gen. 1:27](#)], and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ [from [Gen. 2:24](#)]? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” ([Matt. 19:3–6](#)).

In this reply Jesus rebukes and corrects a first-century practice of easy divorce for trivial reasons. For example, the Mishnah said, “The school of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her. ... And the school of Hillel say [he may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him. ... Rabbi Akiba says, [he may divorce her] even if he found another fairer than she” (Mishnah, *Gittin* 9.10). Rather than entering into this debate among rabbis, Jesus first affirms God's original plan for marriage and shows that it remains God's ideal for all marriages.

Malachi views marriage as a “covenant” between a husband and wife, a covenant to which God was a witness and to which therefore God will hold people accountable: “the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” ([Mal. 2:14](#)). Therefore marriage is an especially serious commitment (1) between husband and wife, (2) to the society in which they live, and (3) before God himself (whether or not he is explicitly acknowledged in the marriage ceremony).

But What If One Spouse Is Unfaithful?

In marriage, a man and a woman commit to live with each other as husband and wife for life. In order for them to keep this commitment, both parties have to remain in the marriage. But when one party decides to leave the marriage for another partner,

it becomes impossible for the remaining spouse to faithfully fulfill his or her commitment (a husband, e.g., cannot live with and act as a husband to a wife who is living with another man). Because of such cases, it seems that in both the OT and the NT God allowed divorce, in order to give some relief to the one spouse when the other has deserted the marriage or desecrated it by adultery.

Although divorces took place in OT times (assumed by [Lev. 21:7, 14](#); [Num. 30:9](#); [Deut. 24:1–4](#)), the only OT law concerning divorce is found in [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#) (see [note](#)). It envisions a situation in which a man divorces and sends away his wife, she subsequently remarries, and then becomes divorced or widowed. In such a case the law forbids the first husband to marry her again.

Jesus' Teachings on Divorce

Many of the first-century rabbis expanded on [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#), using it to justify divorce for many reasons, even trivial ones (see above). This fact lies behind the remainder of the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus in [Matthew 19](#):

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” ([vv. 7–9](#)).

Jesus' statement, “Because of your hardness of heart,” should not be understood to imply that only “hard-hearted” individuals initiate divorce but rather, “because your hard-hearted rebellion against God led to serious defilement of marriages.” The presence of sin in the community meant that some marriages would be deeply harmed, and God therefore provided divorce as a solution in those cases.

When Jesus says that anyone who divorces his wife “*except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery*” ([Matt. 19:9](#)), he implies the converse: divorce and remarriage on the ground of one's spouse's sexual immorality are *not* prohibited and do *not* constitute adultery. It is the one exception Jesus makes to the requirement that marriage be lifelong, for sexual immorality seriously defiles, indeed disrupts, the “one flesh” union ([Matt. 19:5](#)). When Jesus says, “and marries another,” he implies that both divorce and remarriage are allowed in the case of sexual immorality and that someone who divorces because his spouse has committed adultery may marry someone else without committing sin (see notes on [Matt. 19:3–9](#)). Therefore, if “sexual immorality” (Gk. *porneia*, which included any sexual intercourse contrary to the moral commands of Scripture) occurs, then divorce is allowed but not required. In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation, restoring the marriage, should always be the first option.

Where divorce was allowed—in Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture—the right to remarry (another person) was always assumed in the first century. For example, the Mishnah says, “The essential formula in the bill of divorce is, ‘lo, thou art free to marry any man’” (Mishnah, *Gittin* 9.3).

But in [Matthew 19:1–9](#) where Jesus allows divorce on the grounds of *porneia*, Jesus was simultaneously prohibiting divorce on the numerous other grounds that were being invoked in the first century. If divorce is secured for other reasons (but see a further exception below), then God does not count the divorce as valid (for such divorcers would be committing adultery should they marry someone else; see [Matt. 19:9](#)).

In [Matthew 5:32](#), Jesus affirms essentially the same teaching:

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus says that the husband who wrongfully divorces his wife “makes her commit adultery” because in that society, it was assumed that a divorced woman would usually need to marry someone else for financial support and protection, and yet Jesus still says this new relationship is, at least initially, “adultery” because there was not a proper reason for the divorce. But Jesus places most of the blame on the husband who wrongly divorced her, saying that he thereby “makes her commit adultery.” In the last sentence of the passage, “whoever marries a divorced woman” should be taken in context with the preceding sentences, and so it means, “and whoever marries such a wrongly divorced woman as I have just spoken about ...” (see note on [Matt. 5:31–32](#)).

In the parallel statements about divorce in [Mark 10:11–12](#) and [Luke 16:18](#), Jesus does not include the exception clause, “except for sexual immorality.” The most likely reason is that there was no dispute or disagreement among Jews, or in Greek or Roman culture, that adultery was a legitimate ground for divorce, and Jesus is not addressing that issue (see notes on [Mark 10:10–11](#) and [Luke 16:18](#)). This does not invalidate the more extensive teaching given in Matthew, because Jesus' acceptance of the exception for adultery, though not stated explicitly by Mark and Luke, was assumed as being beyond question. (Other interpreters think that [Mark 10:11–12](#) and [Luke 16:18](#) prohibit all divorces and they then understand [Matt. 5:32 and 19:9](#) to refer to special circumstances of some kind, not divorce in general.)

Does Paul Add a Second Reason for Divorce?

Many interpreters hold that Paul adds a second legitimate reason for divorce in [1 Corinthians 7:12–15](#). Paul is facing a new situation that was not addressed by Jesus—the situation of a Christian and non-Christian married to one another. (In the context to which Jesus was speaking, Jewish people only married other Jews, and both husband and wife therefore were part of the Jewish religious community.) When a believer has an unbelieving spouse, Paul says that they should remain married if the unbeliever is willing to do so ([1 Cor. 7:12–14](#)). “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace” ([1 Cor. 7:15](#)). Most interpreters think this implies the freedom to obtain a legal divorce and the freedom to marry someone else. When an unbelieving spouse has deserted the marriage, God releases the believing spouse from the twin unending stresses of (1) a lifelong vain hope of reconciling with an unbeliever who has left, and (2) a lifelong prohibition against enjoying the good blessings of marriage again.

(But some interpreters hold that remarriage is never allowed after divorce. On that view, Paul is saying only that the believing spouse is not bound to continue to seek reconciliation.)

Would this passage apply to desertion by someone who professes to be a Christian? In such cases, a question arises as to whether the person is genuinely a believer or is making a false profession of faith. Each situation will be different, and a Christian involved in such a difficult circumstance should seek wise counsel from the leaders of his or her church. Where possible, the steps of church discipline outlined in [Matthew 18:15–17](#) should be followed in an attempt to bring reconciliation to the marriage. If that process results in the final step of excommunication from the church, then it would seem appropriate to treat the deserting spouse as an unbeliever (“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”; [Matt. 18:17](#)). But it must be emphasized that, if reconciliation of the marriage can at all be brought about, that should always be the first goal.

Are There Other Grounds for Divorce?

In addition to the two grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbelieving spouse, are there any other legitimate, biblical grounds for divorce? Some interpreters have argued that repeated instances of physical abuse should be seen as an additional legitimate ground for divorce. Others would respond that many other means should be used to bring the abuse to an immediate halt, including separation (for the eventual purpose of bringing restoration along with the complete cessation of the abuse), church discipline, confrontation and counseling, police action, a court order, and other kinds of intervention by church members, family, and friends. But these would stop short of adding a reason for divorce that neither Jesus nor Paul specified.

Some have argued that a prominent school of rabbinic interpretation in the time of Jesus allowed divorce in cases where a husband did not provide enough material or emotional support to his wife. This was based on their interpretation of a law concerning a slave woman in [Exodus 21:10–11](#). Since Jesus did not explicitly correct this view, they argue that he must have allowed the legitimacy of some other kinds of divorces, such as divorce for prolonged, unrepented physical or emotional abuse. But an argument from what Jesus did *not* say is of dubious validity, especially since Jesus' words “whoever divorces his wife” ([Matt. 19:9](#)) are so extensive in scope and seem to rule out additional exceptions not specified in the Bible itself.

What should be done if someone has been divorced for other reasons than those given in the Bible and then has married someone else? Jesus says that in such a case the person has committed “adultery” ([Matt. 19:9](#)), so the marriage began with adultery. But when Jesus says, “and marries another” in that same verse, he implies that the second marriage is in fact a true marriage. Jesus does not say, “and *lives outside of marriage* with another” (which was possible, see [John 4:18](#)), but “and *marries* another.” Therefore, once a second marriage has occurred, it would be further sin to break it up, for it would be destroying another marriage. The second marriage should not be thought of as continually living in adultery, for the man and woman are married to each other, not to anyone else. The responsibility of the husband and wife in such a case is to ask God for his forgiveness for previous sin, and then for his blessing on the current marriage, and to strive to make the current marriage a good and lasting one.

With respect to the phrase “husband of one wife” in [1 Timothy 3:2](#) and [Titus 1:6](#), some argue that this means that a person has never been married more than once, and therefore that it excludes from the office of elder all men who have been divorced for whatever reason and also all whose wives have died and who have subsequently married someone else. But a better understanding of this passage is that it refers to the *present status* of a man, either to his character of being faithful to his wife, or else to the fact that he does not have more than one wife (see note on [1 Tim. 3:2–3](#)). In either of these better interpretations, the verse does not prohibit all divorced men from being elders, but each case should be evaluated on an individual basis.

Since marriage is not an institution only for Jews and Christians but is an institution established by God at creation, it is for all people, believers and unbelievers alike, and is in fact universal in the human community. The standards expressed here for divorce and remarriage are therefore applicable to all people. The church, where it has opportunity, should encourage non-Christians as well as Christians to abide by God's high moral standards regarding divorce and remarriage. However, in cultures where rampant divorce for all sorts of reasons is common and has been occurring for decades, individual Christians as well as churches should seek to support and minister to the many women and men and children who have been hurt by divorces in the past, as well as the casualties of divorces in the present.

The principles expressed in this article represent the most commonly held view among Protestants since the time of the Reformation (e.g., see the 17th-century *Westminster Confession of Faith* 24.5, 6). Other views are also held by some evangelicals, however. Some hold that the exception clauses in [Matthew 5:32 and 19:9](#) apply only to sexual immorality committed during the betrothal period (when a couple was legally pledged to be married), and do not apply to marriage proper, and therefore there are no legitimate grounds for divorce. Others argue that, where a divorce has occurred, for whatever reason, remarriage is never allowed. And others have argued that there should be some additional, but limited, grounds for divorce. But these views have not gained majority support among evangelical interpreters of the Bible.

Homosexuality

God's Original Design

In God's original design, human sexual conduct was to occur within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. The first chapter of the Bible says, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” ([Gen. 1:27](#)). Differentiation of the human race into two complementary sexes (“male and female”) is the first fact mentioned in connection with being “in the image of God.” In [Genesis 2](#), which describes in more detail the process summarized in [1:27](#), God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” ([Gen. 2:18](#)). Genesis then applies the example of Adam and Eve to all marriages: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” ([Gen. 2:24](#)). This “one flesh” sexual union was thus established as the pattern for marriage generally, and

Jesus cites [Genesis 1:27 and 2:24](#) as the normative pattern that God expects all marriages to follow (see [Matt. 19:4–6](#)). Furthermore Paul, as a good disciple of Jesus, likewise strongly echoes [Genesis 1:27 and 2:24](#) in his two primary texts on homosexual practice, [Romans 1:23–27](#) and [1 Corinthians 6:9](#). Jesus and Paul both assume the logic of sexual intercourse implied in Genesis: a sexual bond between a man and a woman requires two (and only two) different sexual halves (“a man” and “his wife”) being brought together into a sexual whole (“one flesh”).

This is further emphasized in the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's side:

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh ([Gen. 2:22–24](#)).

The word “therefore” connects the making of Eve from a part of Adam's body with the “one flesh” sexual union between a man and a woman in marriage: it is the reunion of the two constituent parts of a sexual whole. It is not another man who is the missing part or sexual complement of a man, but rather a woman. (Jesus emphasizes this connection between the two different sexes, “male and female,” in [Matt. 19:4–6](#) and [Mark 10:6–8](#).)

Prohibited Sexual Relations

Consistent with the pattern in [Genesis 1–2](#), sexual intercourse outside of the marriage relationship between one man and one woman is prohibited. For example, “You shall not commit adultery” ([Ex. 20:14](#); reaffirmed by Jesus in [Matt. 19:18](#); cf. [Rom. 13:9](#); [James 2:11](#)). In addition, other specific kinds of sexual intercourse outside of marriage are also prohibited, such as prostitution ([1 Cor. 6:15–18](#)), incest ([Lev. 20:11–21](#); [1 Cor. 5:1–2](#)), and bestiality ([Lev. 18:23](#); [20:15–16](#)).

Homosexual conduct is also viewed as a sin (something contrary to God's will) in several passages of the Bible. [Leviticus 18:22](#) says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination [Hb. *to'ebah*, actions that are extremely displeasing to God].” Similarly, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” ([Lev. 20:13](#); cf. [Genesis 19](#); also [Jude 7](#)). These absolute Levitical prohibitions are grouped with other relevant sex proscriptions (incest, adultery, bestiality) and are considered first-tier sexual offenses that are grouped together in [Leviticus 20:10–16](#).

In the NT, Paul speaks of homosexual conduct:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error ([Rom. 1:26–27](#)).

The phrase “contrary to nature” means that homosexual conduct does not represent what God intended when he made men and women with physical bodies that have a “natural” way of interacting with each other and “natural” desires for each other. (See note on [Rom. 1:26–27](#); cf. also [Rom. 1:19–20](#), that the truth about God and his moral law is visible and apparent in the material creation.) Homosexual desires are “dishonorable” both because they are contrary to God's purpose and because they treat a person's biological sex as only half of what it is. While the logic of a heterosexual bond is that of bringing together the two (and only two) different and complementary sexual halves into a sexual whole, the logic of a homosexual bond is that another person of the same sex complements, and fills what is lacking in, that same sex, implying that each participant is only half of his or her own sex: two half males making a full male or two half females making a full female. In other words, the logic of sexual intercourse requires a sexual complement, and thus a same-sex bond is a self-devaluing of one's own gender inasmuch as one sees the need to complement structurally one's own sex with someone of the same sex.

In a long list of sins, Paul also includes “men who practice homosexuality” ([1 Cor. 6:9](#)). This phrase translates two different Greek terms: *malakos* means “soft” or “effeminate” and was commonly used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the “passive” partner in homosexual acts, while *arsenokoitēs* is a combination of Gk. *arsēn* (meaning “man”) and *koitē* (here meaning “sexual intercourse”). The term *arsenokoitēs* was apparently coined by Paul from the Septuagint (Greek translation) of [Leviticus 20:13](#), and means (in plural) “men who have intercourse with men.” In [1 Timothy 1:10](#) Paul uses the same word *arsenokoitēs* in the midst of vices derived from “the law” (here, the second half of the Ten Commandments), which means that this verse also should be interpreted as an absolute prohibition of male-with-male intercourse, in keeping with [Leviticus 18:22](#); [20:13](#). Early Jewish interpretation of [Leviticus 18:22](#) and [20:13](#), and early Christian interpretation of [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) and [1 Timothy 1:10](#), also show that these verses were understood as absolute prohibitions against all types of homosexual conduct.

Does the Bible address the question of homosexual attitudes and desires? It must be remembered that God ultimately requires moral perfection, not only in human actions but also in attitudes of the heart. Therefore the Bible prohibits not only adultery but also a desire for adultery ([Ex. 20:17](#); cf. [Matt. 5:28](#)), not only theft but also coveting ([Ex. 20:17](#)). This is because “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” ([1 Sam. 16:7](#)). Therefore Scripture teaches that any desire to break God's commandments is also viewed as wrong in God's sight. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” ([Matt. 5:8](#)). While an impulse to do what God expressly forbids is (by definition) an impulse contrary to God's will, the Bible recognizes that Christians will be “tempted” by their “own desire” ([James 1:14](#)) and encourages Christians in such circumstances to “remain steadfast” ([James 1:12](#)) and to “be doers of the word” ([James 1:22](#)). This implies not actively entertaining the wrongful impulse (cf. [Matt. 5:28](#)), and not dwelling on it so that it “gives birth to sin” ([James 1:15](#)).

It is not surprising, therefore, that not only homosexual conduct but also homosexual desires are viewed as contrary to God's will. Homosexual desires are viewed as “dishonorable passions” ([Rom. 1:26](#)), and Paul also says that homosexual partners are

“consumed with passion for one another” ([Rom. 1:27](#)), giving a strong image of a powerful but destructive inward craving.

This is not to say that homosexual *desire* is as harmful as homosexual *conduct*. Though all sin is wrong and brings legal guilt before God (cf. [James 2:10–11](#)), a distinction between wrongful desires and wrongful actions can be made with regard to many areas of life. Hatred of another person is wrong in God's sight, but murdering the person is far more harmful. Coveting a neighbor's farm animals is wrong, but actually stealing them is much more harmful. And lustful desires for adultery are wrong, but actually committing adultery is far more harmful. Similarly, homosexual desires are wrong in God's sight, but actually committing homosexual acts is far more harmful.

The Bible's Solution regarding Homosexuality

As with every other sin, the Bible's solution to homosexuality is trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness, and the power to change. After talking about the “sexually immoral” and “adulterers” and “men who practice homosexuality” and “thieves” and “drunkards” ([1 Cor. 6:9–10](#)), Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, “And such were some of you” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#)). Then he tells them, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#); cf. [Rom. 6:23](#); [Phil. 2:13](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). This implies that some former homosexuals in the church at Corinth had left their previous homosexual lifestyle and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, were seeking to live lives of sexual purity, whether in celibacy or in faithful, heterosexual marriages.

It is important that the Christian community always show love and compassion toward those engaged in homosexual conduct, and also extend friendship toward them where opportunities arise, though not in a way that signals approval of homosexual practice. It is also important to extend hope for change, since many homosexuals will say that they long to establish a different pattern of life. However, a number of studies have concluded that long-term change from a homosexual lifestyle seldom occurs without a program of help and encouragement from others.

Objections

Numerous objections have been presented against the view that homosexuality is morally wrong. One objection is that some people are “born gay,” that is, that many homosexuals do not choose their homosexual orientation but it is part of their genetic makeup from birth, and so homosexuals can never change, and for them homosexual behavior cannot be wrong. But, as noted above, Paul, in talking about “men who practice homosexuality” ([1 Cor. 6:9](#)), says to the Corinthian church, “And such were some of you” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#)), indicating that homosexuals can change and become former homosexuals. This does not mean that homosexual desires will automatically or necessarily be eradicated for those who come to Christ. Becoming a Christian does not mean that people will no longer experience intense sinful urges (sexual or otherwise). But genuine faith does produce the fruit of obedience and real, substantive change, and Paul indicates that this is precisely what happened with some who had practiced homosexuality in Corinth.

Some argue that science supports the argument that homosexuality is determined by one's biological makeup from before the time of birth. Studies have in fact shown some indirect, congenital influences on homosexual development that may increase the *likelihood* of homosexual development. But there are certain hereditary factors that give people a greater likelihood of developing all sorts of different sinful behavior patterns (such as frequent wrongful anger, violence, adultery, alcoholism, and so forth), and it would not be surprising to find that some people, from certain hereditary backgrounds, have a greater likelihood of developing homosexual desires and conduct. But this is far different from proving congenital *determinism* of homosexuality, that is, that some people are genetically incapable of making any other choice than to entertain homosexual desires and engage in homosexual conduct. Especially significant are studies of identical twins, where one has become a homosexual and the other has not, even though they have identical genetic makeup.

The moral teachings of God's Word, not people's inward desires, must be the final standard of right and wrong. It is important to recognize that (1) virtually all behavior is, at some level, biologically influenced, and that (2) no command of God is predicated for its validity on humans first losing all desire to violate the command in question.

As for environmental factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of homosexual behavior, two of the most significant, particularly for male homosexuals, are the physical or emotional absence of a caring father during childhood years, and sexual abuse sometime during childhood or adolescence.

Another objection is to say that the biblical passages concerning homosexuality only prohibit certain kinds of homosexual conduct, such as homosexual prostitution or pedophilia, or unfaithful homosexual relationships. (This is sometimes called the “exploitation argument”: the Bible only prohibits exploitative forms of homosexuality.) But there is no legitimate evidence in the words of any of these verses, or their contexts, or in evidence from the ancient world, to prove that the verses were referring to anything less than all kinds of homosexual conduct by all kinds of people. Two biblical counterarguments against the “exploitation argument” may be briefly mentioned: (1) In [Romans 1:23–27](#) Paul clearly echoes [Genesis 1:27](#), indicating that Paul viewed any sexual relationship that did not conform to the creation paradigm of “male and female” to be a violation of God's will, irrespective of whether the relationship is loving. (2) Paul's absolute indictment against all forms of homosexuality is underscored by his mention of lesbian intercourse in [Romans 1:26](#), since this form of intercourse in the ancient world was not typically characterized by sex with adolescents, slaves, or prostitutes.

Some have suggested that the Sodom and Gomorrah episode does not point to judgment on homosexual practice, but relates only to coercive homosexual practice. But [Genesis 19:4–5](#) indicates that homosexual conduct was characteristic of the entire city and was a primary reason for God's judgment (cf. the note on [Jude 7](#)).

Some object that the phrase “contrary to nature” in [Romans 1:26–27](#) shows that Paul is only talking about people who “naturally” feel desires toward a person of the opposite sex but who then practice homosexuality. Paul says, “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men

likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” ([Rom. 1:26–27](#)). According to this view, Paul is not saying anything about people who “naturally” feel desires for a person of the same sex, for such desires would not be “contrary to *that person's* nature.” However, this is reading into the text a restriction that has no basis in the actual words that Paul wrote. He does not say “contrary to *their* nature,” but “contrary to nature” (Gk. *para physin*), a phrase that is used several times in literature outside the Bible to speak of all kinds of homosexual conduct as something contrary to the natural order of the world. In other words, Paul is not saying in [Romans 1:24–27](#) that some people switched their innate heterosexual urges for contrived homosexual urges, but rather that people exchanged or left behind sexual relations with a true sexual complement (someone of the other sex) to gratify their inward urges for sex with members of the same sex. Paul sees such people as choosing to follow their desires over God-ordained creation structures.

Finally, there is an objection from experience: some homosexual “couples” have faithful, fulfilling relationships, so why should these be thought immoral? But experience should not be used as a higher standard for moral right and wrong than the teaching of the Bible. In addition, many studies indicate that, particularly among male homosexuals, long-term one-partner relationships are uncommon, and the widespread pattern is many sexual partners, often numbering many hundreds over the years. An additional harmful result of homosexual conduct is often immense damage to the family structures of a society and also to physical health (e.g., various studies have shown a significant reduction in life expectancy for homosexual males compared to the general population).

Same-sex Marriage?

Proposals for governments to recognize “same-sex marriage” should be evaluated in light of the Bible's teaching that one role of civil government is to “praise those who do good” ([1 Pet. 2:14](#)). Government recognition of a relationship as a “marriage” carries with it the *endorsement* and *encouragement* of that relationship by a society. Married couples enjoy many protections and benefits (legal, financial, and interpersonal) that society has granted in order to encourage marriage and signal that the institution of marriage brings benefits to society as a whole. So the question is really whether a society, through its laws, should give approval and encouragement to homosexual relationships that both the Bible and most cultures throughout history have considered to be morally wrong rather than “good,” and that also bring significant harmful consequences. Governmental recognition of “same-sex marriage” would imply a requirement to allow homosexual couples to adopt and raise children, and this would rob many children of the opportunity to be raised in a home with both a father and a mother, which is by far the best environment for them. In addition, government recognition would likely soon carry with it governmental prohibitions against criticizing homosexual conduct.

Conclusion

Homosexual conduct of all kinds is consistently viewed as sin in the Bible, and recent reinterpretations of the Bible that have been raised as objections to that view do not give a satisfactory explanation of the words or the context of the relevant verses.

Sexual intimacy is to be confined to marriage, and marriage is to be only between one man and one woman, following the pattern established by God in creation. The church should always act with love and compassion toward homosexuals, yet never affirm homosexual conduct as morally right. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers the “good news” of forgiveness of sins and real hope for a transformed life to homosexuals as well as to all sinners.

Civil Government

God Established Civil Government

God has established civil government for the good of all people: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ... [T]he one who is in authority ... is God's servant for your good” ([Rom. 13:1, 3, 4](#)). This indicates that God has established an order of authority regarding civil government: those who are in authority have responsibility to judge right from wrong and to distinguish good from evil by rewarding good behavior and punishing wrongdoing. This means that those in authority should not use power in ways that are arbitrary or that merely serve their own personal advantage. Those who are not in authority are to “be subject” to those who are in authority.

Paul also indicates that God is sovereign over both evil governments and good ones. God not only raises nations up, he also brings them down: “He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away” ([Job 12:23](#); cf. [Ps. 75:7](#)). In fact, he will sometimes use one nation to judge another (cf. [Jer. 25:7–14](#)). [Isaiah 10:5–11](#) says that God raised up Assyria, which he used to judge all of the surrounding nations. But then he judged Assyria as well, at the appropriate time, using another nation. When God allows evil governments to persist, sometimes believers suffer greatly, but in such situations they also glorify God through their courage and faithfulness (cf. [Dan. 3:16–23](#); [Matt. 14:10–11](#); [Acts 5:29, 40–42; 12:2](#); [Heb. 11:35–38](#); [Rev. 2:10; 12:11](#)).

All citizens should obey the laws of the state (for exceptions, see below): [Romans 13:2](#) says, “Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” In other words, those who reject the authority of a civil government reject God's authority as well. [Romans 13:3–4](#) says,

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

This passage also indicates the purpose of government: it is established by God in order to restrain evil, punish wrongdoers, and promote the order and well-being of society.

[First Peter 2:13–17](#) articulates similar truths: “Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution” (v. 13), which includes persons in authority like “the emperor,” or “governors,” or, by implication, other officials who are sent “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (v. 14). The reason Christians must obey in this way is because “this is the will of God” (v. 15), and, further, “that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (v. 15). This also means that Christians should honor those in authority, show them proper respect, and pray for them (cf. [1 Tim. 2:1–3](#)).

Christian Influence on Governments

Since the moral standards of the Bible come from the God of all creation, who holds all people in all societies accountable to him, Christians should act upon opportunities given them to influence government to make laws consistent with the Bible's moral standards (cf. [Dan. 4:27](#); [Luke 3:18–19](#); [Acts 24:24–25](#); also the prophetic warnings to pagan nations in [Isaiah 13–23](#); [Ezekiel 25–32](#); [Amos 1–2](#); Obadiah; Jonah; Nahum; [Habakkuk 2](#); [Zephaniah 2](#)). Influencing a government to make good laws is one way of obeying Jesus' command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” ([Matt. 22:39](#)), for good laws bring many benefits to people. However, civil governments should not make laws enforcing allegiance to, or prohibiting the practice of, any particular religion, for Jesus divided the realms of responsibilities between the things that “are Caesar's” and the things that “are God's,” thus establishing two distinct areas or spheres of authority ([Matt. 22:21](#); cf. also [Luke 9:52–55](#); [12:13–14](#); [John 18:36](#)).

When Obedience to Government Is Wrong

Christians should *not* obey the government, however, when obedience would mean disobeying a command of God. This is indicated by several passages showing approval of disobedience to governments. For example, when commanded not to preach the gospel, Peter says, “We must obey God rather than men” ([Acts 5:29](#)). Another example is found in [Daniel 3:13–27](#), where Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to worship the golden statue; they stood firm against the king: “we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” ([Dan. 3:18](#)). God rescued them from the fiery furnace, thus confirming his approval of their stand ([Dan. 3:19–30](#)). Other examples of obeying God through disobedience to civil governments include the Egyptian midwives ([Ex. 1:17, 21](#)), Esther ([Est. 4:16](#)); Daniel ([Dan. 6:10](#)); and the wise men ([Matt. 2:8, 12](#)).

Is Revolution or a War of Independence Ever Right?

Christians have differed over the question of whether God's people should ever support revolutions against evil governments or wars to gain independence from evil governments. Some Christians argue that [Romans 13:1–5](#) prohibits this, especially where Paul says, “whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.” Others have argued that Paul has in mind here only the conduct of private individuals, but that lower officials who are under a wicked higher official are in a different situation. They argue that lower officials may in fact be obeying God by leading a revolution or fighting a civil war against wicked rulers, in order to protect those whom God has given into their charge, and that thus, in protecting their people, they are fulfilling their responsibility before God to be “not a terror to good conduct, but

to bad” ([Rom. 13:3](#)). Biblical examples would be Moses against Pharaoh ([Exodus 1–14](#)), and some of the judges ([Judg. 2:14–16](#); cf. [Heb. 11:33](#)).

Methods of Selecting Leaders for Government

Because the Bible speaks so frequently about kings, for many centuries it was assumed that only a monarchy fit the biblical pattern for civil government. People believed in the “divine right of kings,” by which kings were thought to rule by God's ordination (an idea that some supported from [Rom. 13:1–2](#)), and the people were thought to be subject to their almost unlimited power. The common method of succession was hereditary monarchy, in which the king's oldest son would succeed him on the throne.

But over the course of centuries more careful examination of the Bible has brought a widespread recognition among Christians that the Bible does not endorse hereditary monarchy as the only proper form of government. When read in their overall context, the tragic narratives of the hereditary monarchies that followed after David, beginning with Solomon and then continuing in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah (see 1–2 Kings), show a progressive turning of these kingdoms away from God and a decline in their circumstances until both Israel and Judah were carried away into exile in disgrace. Though there were a few good kings, most of the kings of Israel and Judah fulfilled Samuel's dire warnings about the ways in which kings would abuse their powers and eventually enslave the people ([1 Sam. 8:10–18](#)). And many of the pagan kings who opposed God's people were quite uniformly evil. The overall portrait of monarchies in the Bible is not a positive one (except for the future rule of Jesus, who will one day reign over a renewed world as “King of kings and Lord of lords,” [Rev. 19:16](#)).

But what is the alternative to a hereditary monarchy? Several strands of biblical teaching combine to show the benefits of some sort of system by which (1) government gains legitimacy by the consent of the governed, (2) rulers are selected by the consent of those who are governed, and are accountable to them, and (3) the power of government is divided among several persons and groups in order to provide a check against the tendency of all sinful human beings to abuse power, especially great power. The arguments in favor of such a form of government are these:

1. All human beings share equally the status of being made “in the image of God” (see notes on [Gen. 1:26](#); [1:27](#)). This is a powerful concept that leads to the conclusion that no family should think it has by heredity a “right” to rule over other families and people, or to govern others without their consent.

2. If the government is to be “God's servant for your good” ([Rom. 13:4](#)), government should exist for the benefit of the people, not for the special benefit of the king and his family (cf. the negative example in [1 Sam. 8:10–18](#) in contrast with the good examples in [1 Sam. 12:3–5](#); [Num. 16:15](#)). But who can best judge what is best for the people of a nation? A good argument can be made that, over the long run, the people themselves are the best judge of what is good for them. To be sure, the people may

err, but they are not likely to err as grievously as a non-accountable paternalist ruler, making decisions on their behalf, might be expected to do.

3. Scripture contains several positive examples of rulers seeking the consent of those whom they govern (cf. [Ex. 4:29–31](#); [1 Sam. 7:5–6](#); [10:24](#); [2 Sam. 2:4](#); [1 Kings 1:39–40](#); [12:1](#); and, in the early church, cf. [Acts 6:3](#)).

4. The fact that “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” ([Rom. 13:1](#)) does not require a monarchy, for God can institute governments through a process by which the people are able to select their own leaders and keep a check on their powers.

Capital Punishment

The Bible places much importance on the sanctity of human life; therefore any theological argument for capital punishment—the legal execution of someone guilty of a heinous crime—must meet high standards of biblical support and practical justice. Since human beings are made in God's image and likeness, only God has the ultimate authority to specify if, and under what conditions, it is morally justified to take a human life.

The Covenant with Noah

After the flood, God commanded Noah and his children to be fruitful, to multiply, and to have dominion and stewardship over the earth and all of its creatures. Permission was given to kill animals for food ([Gen. 9:3](#)); but murdering a human being meant forfeiting one's own life, for God said, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” ([Gen. 9:5–6](#)). In this verse, “shedding blood” refers to the violent, unjustified taking of human life (cf. [Gen. 37:22](#); [Num. 35:33](#); [1 Kings 2:31](#); [Ezek. 22:4](#)).

This part of God's covenant with Noah ([Gen. 9:1–17](#)) is a crucial text related to capital punishment for two reasons: (1) the provisions of this covenant were not limited to one specific nation for one specific period of time, as the Mosaic laws were, but were given at the time of a new beginning for all of human society following the flood; and (2) the reason for the command regarding murder is one that remains perpetually valid: “for God made man in his own image” ([Gen. 9:6](#)). The previous verse indicates that this command shows how God will execute justice on a murderer, namely, by requiring that other human beings, as God's representatives, put the murderer to death: “From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man” ([Gen. 9:5](#)).

This passage in Genesis explains what is wrong with murdering a human being and why the punishment for intentional murder should be execution: because human beings are made in the image of God. The severity of the crime dictates the severity of the punishment. This is consistent with an overarching principle known as *lex talionis* (i.e., the law of retribution). [Exodus 21:22–25](#) (see [note](#)) is one example: “if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” In contrast to

the malicious practices of the nations surrounding God's people, the *lex talionis* was a civilizing influence in three ways (cf. [Gen. 4:23–24](#)). First, it prevented private vengeance, since the context of such laws showed that this was a principle reserved for judges. Second, it prevented excessive punishment by insuring that *only* an eye could be taken for damaging an eye. (For example, one could not *kill* another in return for blinding him.) Third, it prevented insufficient punishment by ensuring that social prejudice did not lead to treating some lives as less valuable than others. One could not require an eye for damaging an eye in one case but not another.

In biblical moral understanding, equally shared reflection of the divine image is what demands taking the life of the one who has wrongly taken the life of another. But the Bible never requires more than the life of the murderer; e.g., it never allows killing a whole village to avenge the murder of one person. According to the Bible, the value of human life does not come from anything that human beings control. It comes from reflecting something (or someone) other than themselves; it is something that all possess and that they can never lose.

Some interpreters disagree with this view. They argue that [Genesis 9:6](#) does not *prescribe* capital punishment but merely *describes* what often results from living a life of violence. They claim that the statement “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” is only a prediction equivalent to the saying “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” ([Matt. 26:52](#)). Against this interpretation is (1) the fact that [Genesis 9:5](#) says *God himself* will require this “reckoning” for the taking of human life; (2) the reason given for taking human life is not to satisfy a subjective feeling but is rather to hold perpetrators accountable for destroying God’s “own image”; and (3) subsequent laws show that God in fact commanded that human beings carry out the death penalty for various crimes (cf. [Num. 35:16–21](#)).

Many who oppose the death penalty subscribe to the so-called “seamless garment” argument. For them, the sanctity of human life means that killing another human being is never permissible, whether in abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, or war. Those who support the death penalty respond that specific teachings of the Bible, not an abstract theory (such as “never take a human life”), should determine the Christian position. And specific teachings of the Bible do give support to the principle of capital punishment. One of the strongest biblical refutations of the “seamless garment” theory is in [Ezekiel 13:19](#) where God not only condemns “putting to death souls who should not die” but also “keeping alive souls who should not live.” Someone who is “pro-life” on abortion and euthanasia can, therefore, at the same time consistently favor capital punishment. The principle remains the same in both cases: justice for and protection of the innocent, and punishment for the guilty in proportion to what they have done.

The Sixth Commandment

The sixth of the Ten Commandments forbids the unjustified taking of a person's life: “You shall not murder” ([Ex. 20:13](#)). The ESV footnote to this verse explains that the Hebrew term used (*ratsakh*) is somewhat broader than the contemporary English word “murder” when it says, “The Hebrew word also covers causing human death through carelessness or negligence.” The commandment does not, however, prohibit all killing. The verb *ratsakh* is never used, e.g., for killing in war. Another reason the

sixth commandment cannot prohibit capital punishment is that God himself said in the very next chapter of Exodus that “if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die” ([Ex. 21:14](#)). (However, cities of refuge were established for those guilty of accidental [unintentional] manslaughter [[Ex. 21:13](#); cf. [Joshua 20](#)].)

In the OT it was God who prescribed the death penalty. Therefore capital punishment cannot be contrary to God's character or inconsistent with God's command to “love your neighbor as yourself” ([Lev. 19:18](#)). God's laws are always consistent with his moral character, and his moral character never changes ([Ps. 102:27](#); [Mal. 3:6](#); [Heb. 13:8](#); [James 1:17](#)).

The laws God gave Moses at Sinai for governing Israel in the Promised Land included death penalties for several other crimes besides the intentional shedding of innocent human blood, which had already been prohibited under the Noahic covenant ([Gen. 9:5–6](#)). But these additional death penalties were *only* given to govern the theocracy of Israel and were never universally applied even in the OT. While the death penalty for murder is universally commanded based on an enduring theological principle (i.e., man being made in the image of God; [Gen. 9:5–6](#)), the other death penalties later included in the Mosaic law are not. Therefore these laws were specific to the particular history of Israel at that time, and they should not be treated as necessary patterns for civil governments today. (For many of these cases regarding worship of other gods, the NT parallel would be excommunication from the fellowship of the church.)

Methods of execution in the OT included stoning ([Lev. 20:2, 27; 24:14; Deut. 21:21](#)), hanging ([Deut. 21:22–23; Josh. 8:29](#)), burning ([Lev. 20:14; 21:9](#)), and the sword ([Ex. 32:27–28](#)). OT law also ensured that capital punishment could only be carried out based on the testimony of at least two witnesses ([Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6, 19](#)). In some cases, the punishment was to be executed by the witnesses themselves ([Deut. 13:6–10; 17:7](#)), while in others it was to be inflicted by the congregation ([Num. 15:32–36](#)), the nearest of kin, or the avenger of blood ([Deut. 19:11–12](#)).

The NT on Capital Punishment

The most definitive NT text on capital punishment is [Romans 13](#), where the apostle Paul discusses the nature of punishment and the role of civil magistrates. He writes, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ... Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer” ([Rom. 13:1–4](#)). It is important to recall, however, that just three verses earlier Paul forbids personal revenge: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” ([Rom. 12:19](#)). Then in [Romans 13](#), with no sense of inconsistency, Paul moves right on to explain that leaving punishment “to the wrath of God” means allowing punishment to come through the civil government, which is “the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer” ([13:4](#)). So, while personal retaliation is forbidden, civil authorities are to punish evildoers justly and dispassionately.

Both proponents and opponents of capital punishment point to “the sword” (Gk. *machaira*) in [Romans 13:4](#) to support their view. Opponents note that “the sword” is sometimes used as a symbol or metaphor (i.e., the “sword of the Spirit,” [Eph. 6:17](#); the word of God is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” [Heb. 4:12](#)). They understand “the sword” in [Romans 13:4](#) to be only a symbol of governing authorities. Against this, proponents of capital punishment maintain that the image of “the sword” stands for governmental authority to use even lethal force if necessary. They note that even where “the sword” symbolizes authority, that symbol has no meaning without the reality backing it up. The NT also uses the same word for sword (Gk. *machaira*) on several occasions that clearly refer to the real use of lethal force, e.g., when Herod “killed James the brother of John with the sword” ([Acts 12:2](#)), and when it refers to martyrs who were “killed with the sword” ([Heb. 11:37](#); cf. also [Matt. 26:52](#); [Acts 16:27](#); [Rom. 8:35](#); [Rev. 13:10](#)).

The apostle Paul, who used the word “sword” in this text, showed that he knew that some crimes are worthy of death, saying, “If ... I ... have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death” ([Acts 25:11](#)). It is unlikely that Paul would have said this if he thought capital punishment was never justifiable. Even so, except for crimes of murder, neither God's command to Noah in [Genesis 9:6](#) nor any NT statement makes it necessary to treat any other specific crime as so horrible that all societies everywhere must always apply capital punishment when someone commits it. Apparently that question is left for each society or government to seek to decide wisely and justly.

The two sides on the issue of capital punishment also differ over Jesus' command to turn the other cheek ([Matt. 5:38–39](#)). Proponents of capital punishment think that Jesus only addressed personal conduct, not how governments carry out assigned duties, while opponents claim that Jesus addressed government duties as well. The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery ([John 7:53–8:11](#)) is not thought to be as relevant by either side, both because there is doubt about whether the text itself was originally part of John's Gospel (see [note](#)) and because Jesus' words in the story (“Let him who is without sin ... be the first to throw a stone at her”) do not pertain to the crime of murder.

Justice and the Role of Government

At the heart of the moral debate over capital punishment are often different views of justice and the role that is assigned to government in relation to it. Those favoring capital punishment usually stress the retributive view of justice (i.e., wrongdoing calls for proportional punishment). They argue that the Bible reveals that God has ordained human government to act as his agent in applying retributive justice to wrongdoers. Human government is “an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer” ([Rom. 13:4](#); cf. [1 Pet. 2:14](#)). Thus capital punishment is seen as (1) an outpouring of divine justice in this present life, (2) a deterrent from personal vengeance ([Rom. 12:19](#)), and (3) a deterrent from further crimes (see [Eccles. 8:11](#); [Rom. 13:3–4](#)). Those opposing capital punishment either define justice differently (e.g., as distributing benefits or restoring damages), or hold that government should be less concerned with retribution (treating people as they deserve) than with mercy (*not* treating people as badly as they deserve).

Finally, Christians who believe that capital punishment has biblical justification also hold that it must be carried out in a just manner. So, among other things, this means that holding people accountable for wrongdoing should be done in a way that requires: (1) clear evidence of guilt established by eyewitnesses or irrefutable forensic evidence (cf. [Num. 35:30](#); [Deut. 17:6, 19](#)); (2) granting the accused due process without discrimination based on social status, beliefs, race, or economic class; (3) rendering judgment based on adequate proof of moral culpability; and (4) making sure that any punishment assigned is proportional to the crime.

War

Definition of War

War is a large-scale armed conflict between countries or between groups within a country aiming at changing or dividing established government. Throughout history, wars have frequently been started by rulers seeking to expand their territory and power, but wars can be started for a variety of economic, political, religious, or ethnic reasons.

Biblical Justifications for Some Wars

No recognized Christian group or Christian leader today argues that any government should engage in war to compel people to support the Christian religion. This is because of the recognition that Christian faith, by its nature, must be voluntary if it is to be genuine (note the invitations in various parts of the Bible that appeal to people's freedom to choose whether or not they will follow God: [Ezek. 33:11](#); [Matt. 11:28–30](#); [Rev. 22:17](#)). Jesus distinguished between “the things that are Caesar's” and “the things that are God's” ([Matt. 22:21](#)), thus establishing that the civil government (“Caesar”) and the church (“the things that are God's”) have different responsibilities and different tasks, and that the government should not use its power to attempt to control people's religious faith. Jesus himself refused to use deadly force to advance his kingdom or compel allegiance to him (see [Matt. 26:52–55](#); [John 18:36](#)).

However, God does give civil government the responsibility and the authority to use superior force, even deadly force, to protect its citizens from evil. This is because, until Jesus returns ([Dan. 9:26](#); [Matt. 24:6](#)), there are some people so deeply committed to doing evil that they can be restrained, not by reason and persuasion, but only by superior force. Therefore, in the OT God says that rulers must “give justice to the weak” and must “deliver them from the hand of the wicked” ([Ps. 82:3–4](#)). The NT maintains that the civil government has been established by God with responsibility for maintaining justice. This is why the government has a rightful duty to “bear the sword” ([Rom. 13:4](#)), to be “a terror” to bad conduct, and thus to be “God's servant” to do “good” for its citizens ([Rom. 13:3–4](#)). Part of this responsibility is acting as a “servant of God ... who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer” ([Rom. 13:4](#)). Peter likewise affirms that civil government is sent “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” ([1 Pet. 2:14](#)). Therefore one of the primary duties of government is to protect its citizens, even through the use of force (“the

sword”) if that is necessary in order to restrain evil. This is the justification for police forces that protect citizens from any harm that would come from others within a nation. And this responsibility from God also provides justification for nations to engage in armed conflict (“to bear the sword”) in order to protect their citizens from evildoers who would attack them from outside the nation, including a defense against armies sent by other nations when those armies and nations are “those who do evil” ([1 Pet. 2:14](#)) in the pursuit of such a war.

Several wars in the OT fall under this category of a war of defense against evil aggression (such as Abraham's war to rescue Lot in [Gen. 14:1–16](#); Saul's war against the Ammonites in [1 Sam. 11:1–11](#); and Gideon's war to defend Israel against the Midianites in [Judges 6–7](#)). Therefore it should not be thought inconsistent in the OT for God to command people to go to war (see [Deuteronomy 20](#), for example) and *also* to command his people, “You shall not murder” ([Ex. 20:13](#); [Deut. 5:17](#)). The Hebrew word translated “murder” (*ratsakh*) in the sixth commandment is used 49 times in the OT but is never used to refer to killing in war (for which other Hebrew words are used; see note on [Deut. 5:17](#)).

Over the ages, Christians have adopted three different views on the ethics of war: crusade, just war, and pacifism.

Crusade

The crusade ethic treats war as the most effective means for destroying all resistance to establishing some idealistic vision of social order: it does so by religious authority; it is led by a religious figure such as a prophet, pope, or imam; it accepts no compromise; it spares no prisoners; it sets no limits on force; it sends soldiers into battle with zeal; it ignores all odds; it demonizes opponents; it distinguishes only between friend or foe (not between combatants and noncombatants); it never surrenders; and it never ceases so long as opposition exists. But while God does order wars of crusade in the OT (such as Moses' war of vengeance against the Midianites in [Numbers 31](#), and Joshua's conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua; see [The Destruction of the Canaanites](#)), and while Jesus is pictured as leading a war of crusade when he returns to rule the earth on all levels ([Rev. 19:11–21](#)), the Bible never gives *human* rulers a choice of electing to fight wars of crusade on their own initiative.

Biblically approved use of the crusade ethic occurs only at God's initiative (see [Num. 31:1–2](#)), is led only by God himself (see [Josh. 5:13–15](#)), and occurs only in such a way that those called to participate can readily verify that this is done at the direct command of God (see [Rev. 19:11–16](#)). When Pope Urban II launched wars of crusade during the Middle Ages, he violated biblical moral boundaries in a way that has shamed the cause of Christ and the reputation of the church ever since.

Just War

The just war ethic argues that warfare is sometimes necessary in order to resist or reverse specific unjust actions taken by one government or nation against another, but it also insists that war is always regrettable, is always something to avoid if possible, and is never to be used to establish some new vision of a social order.

The just war ethical tradition arises from both biblical and classical sources. In the Bible, just war principles can be found in rules revealed for engaging enemies outside the territory of the Promised Land ([Deut. 20:1–20](#)), in God's judgment of war actions taken by the Gentile nations around Israel ([Amos 1](#)), and in the regard Jesus had for moral wisdom relating to the way kings go to war ([Luke 14:31](#)).

The NT church included many soldiers serving on active duty and saw nothing morally inconsistent with Christians serving as military professionals. The conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was confirmed by the Holy Spirit with no question of his profession compromising his faith ([Acts 10](#)). John the Baptist responded to soldiers in a way that implied they were serving in a morally legitimate profession ([Luke 3:14](#)). And when Paul was imprisoned in Rome, many in the Praetorian guard became Christians (cf. [Phil. 1:13](#)). As a result, Christians soon came to fill the Roman “fortresses,” military “camps,” and army “companies” (see evidence provided by Tertullian in *Apology* 37; c. A.D. 200), and the first persecutions of the church arose because of the high number of Christians serving in the Roman army. While some early Christians opposed military service (cf. Tertullian and Origen), the majority tradition of the church has never considered military service to be inconsistent with biblical standards.

Over time, the just war ethic has developed a common set of criteria that can be used to decide if going to war in a specific situation is right. These include the following: (1) *just cause* (is the reason for going to war a morally right cause, such as defense of a nation? cf. [Rev. 19:11](#)); (2) *competent authority* (has the war been declared not simply by a renegade band within a nation but by a recognized, competent authority within the nation? cf. [Rom. 13:1](#)); (3) *comparative justice* (it should be clear that the actions of the enemy are morally wrong, and the motives and actions of one's own nation in going to war are, in comparison, morally right; cf. [Rom. 13:3](#)); (4) *right intention* (is the purpose of going to war to protect justice and righteousness rather than simply to rob and pillage and destroy another nation? cf. [Prov. 21:2](#)); (5) *last resort* (have all other reasonable means of resolving the conflict been exhausted? cf. [Matt. 5:9](#); [Rom. 12:18](#)); (6) *probability of success* (is there a reasonable expectation that the war can be won? cf. [Luke 14:31](#)); (7) *proportionality of projected results* (will the good results that come from a victory in a war be significantly greater than the harm and loss that will inevitably come with pursuing the war? cf. [Rom. 12:21](#) with [13:4](#)); and (8) *right spirit* (is the war undertaken with great reluctance and sorrow at the harm that will come rather than simply with a “delight in war,” as in [Ps. 68:30](#)?).

In addition to these criteria for deciding whether a specific war is “just,” advocates of just war theory have also developed some moral restrictions on how a just war should be fought. These include the following: (1) *proportionality in the use of force* (no greater destruction should be caused than is needed to win the war; cf. [Deut. 20:10–12](#)); (2) *discrimination between combatants and noncombatants* (insofar as it is feasible in the successful pursuit of a war, is adequate care being taken to prevent harm to noncombatants? cf. [Deut. 20:13–14, 19–20](#)); (3) *avoidance of evil means* (will captured or defeated enemies be treated with justice and compassion, and are one's own soldiers being treated justly in captivity? cf. [Ps. 34:14](#)); and (4) *good faith* (is there a genuine desire for restoration of peace and eventually living in harmony with the attacking nation? cf. [Matt. 5:43–44](#); [Rom. 12:18](#)).

If a war is just, it should not be viewed as morally wrong but still necessary, nor as morally neutral, but as something that is morally right, carried out (with sorrow and regret) in obedience to responsibilities given by God ([Rom. 13:4](#)). Those who serve in a just war should understand that such service is not sinful in God's sight but that they do this as "God's servant for your good" ([Rom. 13:4](#); cf. [Luke 3:14](#); [John 15:13](#); also [Num. 32:6, 20–23](#); [Ps. 144:1](#)).

Most nations throughout history, and most Christians in every age, have held that fighting in combat is a responsibility that should fall only to men, and that it is contrary to the very idea of womanhood, and shameful for a nation, to have women risk their lives as combatants in a war. The assumption that only men and not women will fight in battle is also a frequent pattern in the historical narratives and is affirmed by leaders and prophets in the OT (see [Num. 1:2–3](#); [Deut. 3:18–19](#); [20:7–8](#); [24:5](#); [Josh. 1:14](#); [23:10](#); [Judg. 4:8–10](#); [9:54](#); [1 Sam. 4:9](#); [Neh. 4:13–14](#); [Jer. 50:37](#); [Nah. 3:13](#)).

Pacifism

Since the time of Tertullian and Origen (2nd–3rd centuries A.D.), some Christians have advocated pacifism, the idea that participating in war is always wrong, or is always wrong at least for Christians. Arguments used to support pacifism are: (1) Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek ([Matt. 5:39](#)); (2) Jesus taught us that "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ([Matt. 22:39](#)); (3) Jesus refused to use the power of the sword to advance his kingdom ([Matt. 26:52–53](#)); (4) the use of military force shows lack of trust in God; and (5) violence always begets more violence and does not really solve the underlying problems.

Those who differ with pacifism respond to each of those arguments as follows: (1) Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek was intended as a guide for individual conduct, not for the conduct of governments or soldiers or police in the service of governments (see note on [Matt. 5:39](#)). (2) The command to love one's neighbor is consistent with going to war to protect one's neighbor from an aggressor, as is evident from the fact that the OT commanded love for one's neighbor ([Lev. 19:18](#)) as well as directions for the conduct of war ([Deuteronomy 20](#)). It is also evident from the example of David, who loved his son Absalom but sent the army against him when Absalom sought to usurp the throne ([2 Sam. 18:1–33](#)). (3) It is never right to use military force to advance the gospel message, or compel adherence to Christianity, but that is different from the responsibility of government to protect its citizens. (4) The believer's trust in God must be defined by what Scripture says, including its teachings on God's appointment of civil government to use force to protect its citizens. Therefore one should trust God to work through the power of the sword exercised by government. (5) It is simply not true that wars never solve problems: war was necessary to defeat slavery in the nineteenth century in the United States and to defeat Hitler in World War II, as well as to defeat other tyrants throughout history. In addition, non-pacifist Christians also note (6) that although Jesus stopped Peter from using a sword to resist arrest on his way to the cross ([Matt. 26:52](#)), he did not consider it inconsistent with directions given hours earlier that same evening when he instructed his disciples to carry weapons for self-defense ([Luke 22:35–36](#); see [note](#)); and if using deadly force is justified as required under individual circumstances, there can be no objection to using deadly force as required under civil community circumstances.

Lying and Telling the Truth

The God of the Bible is the God of truth, beauty, and goodness. As seen in the Ten Commandments (“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” [Ex. 20:16](#)), God expects his people to adhere to his standard of truth. But is it ever permissible to tell a lie?

Telling the truth and the permissibility of lying have been perennial issues of concern for both Christian ethicists and for the individual Christian facing an ethical dilemma. For instance, if a killer inquires about the whereabouts of his next potential victim, is a Christian permitted to lie in order to protect the innocent? Is it acceptable to lie in order to achieve great good? May a Christian falsify documents in order to smuggle Bibles into a “closed” country?

The Sanctity of Truth and the Condemnation of Lying

The Bible clearly emphasizes the sanctity of truth. God “never lies” ([Titus 1:2](#)) and his people are to imitate him by being people “of the truth” ([John 18:37](#)). Jesus described himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” ([John 14:6](#)). Moreover, Jesus promises that “the truth will set you free” from the bondage of sin ([John 8:32](#)). Finally, one of the evidences of human depravity is that people “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” ([Rom. 1:25](#)).

By contrast, lying is condemned in Scripture: “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD” ([Prov. 12:22](#)). The devil “is a liar and the father of lies” ([John 8:44](#)). Paul tells Christians, “Do not lie to one another” ([Col. 3:9](#)). He also commands, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor” ([Eph. 4:25](#)) and says that believers should be “speaking the truth in love” ([Eph. 4:15](#)). At the final judgment, those who are thrown in the lake of fire include “all liars” ([Rev. 21:8](#)). Telling the truth, therefore, is to characterize followers of Christ.

Does Scripture Sometimes Approve of Lying?

At the same time, however, Scripture records incidents that seem to approve certain examples of telling a lie. For instance, in [Exodus 1](#), the midwives disobeyed the pharaoh's command to kill the male Hebrew children (“the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live,” [v. 17](#)). When asked why they did not kill the male babies, they said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” ([v. 20](#)). In other words, the midwives claimed that the births happened so quickly that they could not get to the mothers in time to make it appear that there had been a stillbirth. This was at best a half-truth (applying in only some cases), and the explanation that they “let the male children live” ([v. 17](#)) suggests that they were lying to the king. But at the beginning and end of the narrative, it says that “the midwives feared God” ([vv. 17, 21](#)).

Another example is the case of Rahab the prostitute, who hid two Hebrew spies ([Joshua 2](#)). When Joshua sent two men to evaluate the situation in Jericho, Rahab took them to her rooftop, where she hid them under stalks of flax ([v. 6](#)). When a messenger from the king insisted that Rahab turn the men over to the authorities, she replied, “True, the men came to me, but I do not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went” ([vv. 4–5](#)). Despite her lies, Rahab is commended in the so-called “hall of faith” in [Hebrews 11:31](#) “because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.”

On the other hand, some interpreters argue that in neither case were the lies to be considered morally praiseworthy. Their lifesaving acts had a good motivation (to save lives) and good results, but those should be distinguished from the wrongful means that they chose to employ (i.e., telling a lie). In addition, some would argue that since Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute ([Josh. 2:1](#)), there is no indication that she had any knowledge of God's moral instructions to Israel. This makes it doubtful that every aspect of her conduct is intended to be read as an example for believers to imitate.

Is Lying Ever Permissible?

Several notable Christian theologians, including Augustine (A.D. 354–430), John Wesley (1703–1791), and John Murray (1898–1975), have taught that deliberate lying is never permissible. For instance, Augustine argued in his essay *On Lying* that telling a lie had the effect of eroding confidence in the truth and therefore weakened the Christian faith. Like every good theologian, he first defined his terms. A joke, even if involving factual falsehoods, is not a lie because everyone knows from the tone of the voice or the mood of the person telling it that it is meant to be taken not literally but humorously. Lying, strictly speaking, is seriously affirming as true something that one knows to be false. Augustine stated explicitly that one should never lie, even to prevent rape or to save a life. Lying, he argued, would ultimately undermine the gospel by destroying all certainty that one is telling the truth. If one cannot be trusted to speak truthfully about some things, how could one be believed when it comes to matters as important as the resurrection of Christ? Besides, Augustine observed, lying is a web that entangles a person. One lie requires another lie to cover it up, which requires yet another lie, and so on.

Others, such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), have argued that, while Christians should be known for their commitment to the sanctity of truth, there are exceptions to the rule against lying. Present-day ethicists who identify themselves as hierarchialists maintain that Scripture teaches that some moral principles take precedence over others. Lying may be appropriate in cases where telling the truth conflicts with obeying a higher commandment of God. For instance, one may lie in order to save a life. This hierarchialist view does not represent a cavalier attitude toward lying but holds that one is sometimes faced with conflicting moral absolutes, and it takes this situation seriously and tries to find the solution that more fully expresses God's ideals and priorities. Thus, someone who tries to smuggle Bibles into another country probably believes that the Great Commission takes precedence over atheistic law (as in [Acts 5:29](#), where the apostles said, “We must obey God rather than men”).

While some hierarchialists hold that breaking a lower moral command to obey a higher one is what God requires, and is therefore not sinful, others hold that breaking any of God's commands is always sinful even though sometimes it is morally necessary. Against this position, it is argued that such a view cannot be reconciled with the life of Christ. If one is ever tempted with a situation in which all of his choices require him to disobey something in God's Word, and so commit sin, then Jesus must have been faced with a situation like that too, because he is the "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are" ([Heb. 4:15](#)). However, that would mean that Jesus actually disobeyed a moral command of God, and if disobeying any of God's moral laws is sin, then that contradicts the final phrase of [verse 15](#) that says Jesus "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet *without sin*." Therefore the life of Christ encourages believers to think that they will never face a situation in which they are forced to disobey one of God's commands in order to obey another one.

German theologian Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986) maintained that an individual or group may forfeit its right to be told the truth. In those cases, some would argue, truth telling is not obligatory. An example would be the deception and concealment involved in military contexts. In war, the "tacit agreement" of truthfulness has been made null and void. No one expects the enemy to speak truthfully about military strategy, prowess, or power. As a result, says Thielicke, the situation involves "mutual mistrust." These are the rules of the game, as it were. Lying is not wrong in these cases because the parties involved are not committed to mutual trust. Another example might be when someone intends to use truth as a weapon against an innocent individual. If, e.g., someone is holding innocent people hostage at gunpoint, some would argue that the police are not obligated to tell the truth when negotiating with the hostage-taker. By harming others, the criminal has forfeited his claim to the truth.

In response, those who hold that it is always wrong to lie would say that there will always be another solution, often involving various ways of hiding facts but not lying (cf. [1 Cor. 10:13](#)). They would argue that the obligation to speak truthfully is not annulled by the debased moral condition of those to whom one speaks, but is based on an obligation to always reflect the character of God (cf. [Matt. 5:48](#); [Eph. 5:1](#); [Col. 3:9–10](#)). And God himself "never lies" ([Titus 1:2](#); cf. [Heb. 6:18](#)), not even to sinful unbelievers. Therefore God's people should not do so either.

Is It Permissible to Conceal Truth in Order to Mislead?

What about *actions* intended to conceal truth or to mislead others? While such actions are related to the issue of lying, they are still a distinct issue, and individual examples are more complex because the meaning of an action is often ambiguous. In addition, an examination of particular cases in the Bible reveals some instances where misleading actions are wrong (cf. [1 Sam. 14:2–6](#); [28:8](#); [1 Kings 22:30](#); [Prov. 13:7b](#); [2 Cor. 11:15](#)) and other situations where they seem to be right (cf. [Josh. 8:1–21](#); [1 Sam. 16:1–3](#); [19:11–13](#); [21:13–15](#); [Ps. 34:1](#); [Prov. 13:7a](#); [Matt. 6:17–18](#)). In any case, careful thought about lying requires treating such actions as a distinct category.

Finally, whether or not one believes that God ever approves of false statements, there are surely conditions under which it is appropriate to tell someone less than one knows or believes. For example, candor—being totally frank, or saying exactly what is

on one's mind—must be used judiciously. Charity should temper how one responds to another person. To say to the pastor bluntly, “Your sermon was terrible,” would not be edifying, but destructive. Speaking the truth in love requires discernment and restraint. Tact is a Christian virtue. In any case, the obligation never to speak a falsehood does not imply that one has an obligation to tell everything that one knows. There are many times when silence is appropriate (cf. [Matt. 26:63](#)).

Charitable Truthfulness

In sum, followers of Christ are to live lives characterized by charitable truthfulness. Failure to speak the truth in love to, or about, one's neighbor should be resisted. Lying is a sin of which one should repent. Even those ethicists who argue that there may be rare occasions when it is appropriate to lie agree that the temptation to lie to protect one's ego or status is so great, that few in practice are able to limit their lying to appropriate cases. In an age in which “everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak” ([Ps. 12:2](#)), Christians should, by contrast, be known as those who speak the truth and whose words can always be trusted.

Racial Discrimination

The Unity of the Human Race: Evidence from Scripture

Racial discrimination has a long and sad history, but the Bible consistently views it as contrary to God's moral will. The entire human race has descended from Adam and Eve ([Gen. 1:26–28](#)), and Eve is “the mother of all living” ([Gen. 3:20](#)), that is, of all living human beings. This means that all human beings share equally in the exalted status of being made “in the image of God” ([Gen. 1:27](#)). Furthermore, Paul says in [Acts 17:26](#) that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” The biblical record clearly indicates there is only one fundamental race of human beings, all descended from a single set of parents.

The Unity of the Human Race: Evidence from Genetic Science

Recent genetic studies from the Human Genome Project give interesting confirmation to the very large degree of genetic similarity shared by all human beings and the extremely small degree of genetic dissimilarity distinguishing one people group from another. The best of contemporary science shows that the human genome sequence is almost exactly the same (99.9%) in all people. In fact,

DNA studies do not indicate that separate classifiable subspecies (races) exist within modern humans. While different genes for physical traits such as skin and hair color can be identified between individuals, no consistent patterns of genes across the human genome exist to distinguish one race from another. There also is no genetic basis for divisions of human ethnicity. People who have lived in the same geographic region for many generations may have some alleles [possible forms in which a gene for a specific trait can occur] in common, but no allele will be found in all members of one population and in no members of any other.

Why then do people with different racial characteristics originate from different regions of the world? The human race, starting with Adam and Eve, has always included not only genetic variations of eye color, height, and facial appearance, but also of skin and hair color now associated with different racial groups. At some early point when people began migrating to various parts of the earth, some variations within the one human gene pool became geographically isolated from other variations, so that people living in what is now northern Europe came to look more like each other and different from people living in what is now Africa, or Asia, or North America.

Another interesting implication of this has to do with genetic inheritance of skin color. Modern genetic studies show that when a lighter-skin person has a child with a darker-skin person, none of their children will have skin darker than that of the darkest parent. This means that if the hereditary transfer of skin color has operated in the same way from the beginning of human history, then the genetic variety in skin color (which is a very tiny difference from the standpoint of human genetics) must have existed from the very beginning. This suggests that Adam and Eve's children (see [Gen. 5:4](#)) would have likely had different skin colors, and that Adam and Eve would have likely had different skin colors as well.

Interracial Marriage in the Bible

Given the biblical evidence regarding the unity of the human race, it is not surprising to find that the Bible includes examples of marriages between different ethnicities or “races” that are treated as perfectly normal and good. For instance, Joseph (who was of Semitic origin, a descendant of Abraham) married Asenath ([Gen. 41:50](#)), the daughter of an Egyptian priest (who was African). From this marriage came Ephraim and Manasseh, two of the largest of the 12 tribes of Israel ([Gen. 41:51–52](#)). In addition, Moses married a “Cushite” woman, also an African woman from the region of modern Ethiopia and Sudan ([Num. 12:1](#)). Indeed, God punished Miriam and Aaron for criticizing this marriage ([Num. 12:4–9](#)). In addition, there are non-Jewish ancestors in the line of Jesus the Messiah. Matthew's genealogy mentions that Jesus' ancestry included Rahab, who was a Canaanite ([Matt. 1:5](#)), and Ruth, who was a Moabite ([Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10; Matt. 1:5](#)).

There was some prohibition of marrying foreigners in the OT (see [Deut. 7:3; Ezra 10:11](#)), but as the verses in the previous paragraph show, this did not necessarily prohibit marrying people of a different ethnic group but only prohibited marrying outside of faith in the one true God (see [Deut. 7:1–2; Ezra 9:1–2, 11, 14](#)). The NT counterpart to this OT law has nothing to do with race or ethnic identity, but only teaches that believers should not marry unbelievers (cf. [1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14–18](#)).

The Curse of Canaan

Sometimes in the history of the church an invalid and indeed shameful argument has been used to justify racial discrimination. The argument is based on a false interpretation of the curse uttered against Noah's grandson, Canaan: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers” ([Gen. 9:25](#)). It is simply not possible to connect this curse of Canaan's descendants with people of dark skin, or with the members of any contemporary portion of the human race. [Genesis 10:15–19](#)

shows that the descendants of Canaan actually moved to the region of modern Palestine, where they lived in Sodom and Gomorrah as well as other nearby cities. Therefore, Noah's curse on the descendants of Canaan was fulfilled initially when God, in the day of Abraham, destroyed the cities of the Jordan plain ([Gen. 19:24](#)), and then later when Israel, led by Joshua, conquered the land of Canaan and in the process destroyed what remained of the sinful Canaanite tribes (see [Deut. 7:1–2](#)). These groups were not connected to the people of Africa.

NT Teaching

Several NT teachings are relevant to the issue of racial prejudice and discrimination. The parable of the good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25–27](#)) was in part designed to expose the wrong of the ethnic prejudice that existed between Jews and Samaritans (the Samaritans were a mixed race of people—half Jewish, half Gentile). In [Matthew 28:19](#) (cf. [Acts 1:8](#)), Jesus told his followers that they should “make disciples of all nations” (i.e., all ethnic groups), and Paul condemned racial discrimination in the church when he said, “There is neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus” ([Gal. 3:28](#)). Paul also taught that the wonderful “mystery” revealed in God's plan for the church is that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs [with the Jews], members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” ([Eph. 3:6](#)). He taught that unity among multiple ethnic and racial groups in the church demonstrates in an amazing way “the manifold [Gk. *polypoikilos*, “having many facets, diversified, very many-sided”] wisdom of God” so that it is “made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” ([Eph. 3:10](#)). In other words, when the gospel brings Jews and Gentiles, and by implication people of every ethnic background, together in one church, it gives testimony, even to the angels and demons in the spiritual realm, of how wonderful God's plan is to unite all different kinds of human beings in one body, the church of Jesus Christ.

It is therefore a terrible tragedy when Christians of any particular racial background exclude people of other racial or ethnic backgrounds from participating in certain local churches. Such thinking is completely contrary to what God intends. In the book of Revelation John's heavenly vision of the glorified church is described as:

a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ([Rev. 7:9–10](#)).

If this is God's great plan from the beginning of time until the end, then surely the Christian church of today should be a living example of racial harmony, characterized by full inclusion of people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds united in serving Christ and his universal kingdom on earth.

Stewardship

The Concept of Stewardship

The entire earth belongs to God, for he created it: “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” ([Ps. 24:1](#); cf. [Gen. 1:1](#); [Lev. 25:23](#); [Ps. 50:10–12](#); [Hag. 2:8](#)). But while God made animals simply to dwell on the earth and eat the food they found on it ([Gen. 1:30](#)), he made man (as male and female) to rule over all the earth and develop its resources in wise and useful ways: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it* and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” ([Gen. 1:28](#)). To “subdue” the earth meant to exercise wise control over it in such a way that it will produce useful goods for the people who “subdued” it. This command therefore implied an expectation that Adam and Eve, and their descendants, as God’s image-bearers, would investigate, understand, develop, and enjoy the resources of the earth, with thanksgiving to God who had entrusted such a responsibility to them. This implied not merely harvesting food from the vines and fruit trees in the garden of Eden but also domesticating animals (cf. note on [Gen. 2:20](#)), developing the mineral resources of the earth (cf. [Gen. 2:11–12](#)), and eventually developing dwelling places and means of transportation, learning artistry and craftsmanship, and so forth. The ability to develop and enjoy the resources of the earth in this way is an ability unique to human beings, one that is shared neither by animals nor by angels. Therefore the innate human desire to develop the resources of the earth and produce useful goods for human beings should not be immediately dismissed as sinful or greedy, but is an essential aspect of how God created human beings to function on the earth.

Stewardship and the Environment

The responsibility to be stewards of God’s creation does not mean that humans have a right to *abuse or destroy* his material creation, for wisdom dictates that they should take appropriate steps to protect this gift of God from unwarranted defilement and inappropriate use. Nor does stewardship mean that people are to *ignore* God’s material creation, either through passive neglect or through a philosophical decision to leave nature in its “natural state.” After the fall, “the creation was subjected to futility” ([Rom. 8:20](#); cf. [Gen. 3:17–18](#)) in such a way that nature now includes floods, forest fires, hurricanes, weeds, insects that can destroy crops, etc. Wise stewardship involves active steps to “subdue” and “have dominion” over such factors, with thoughtful development of the world’s resources, in gratitude to God and in accord with his moral laws.

Stewardship in All of Life

Whatever a person “owns,” he or she is to manage as a steward who is responsible to God. Stewardship responsibilities extend not only to the creation, material possessions, and natural resources, but also to other things such as talents or skills that have been given by God ([1 Cor. 4:7](#)), time and opportunities ([Eph. 5:15–16](#)), the wonderful responsibility of bearing and raising children ([Eph. 6:4](#)), and spiritual gifts and ministries ([1 Cor. 4:1–2](#); [Eph. 3:2](#); [1 Pet. 4:10](#)).

Stewardship and Ownership of Property

The idea of private stewardship or ownership of property is implicit in the Ten Commandments, for when God says, “You shall not *steal*” ([Ex. 20:15](#)), it implies that

one should not steal his neighbor's ox or donkey because it belongs to the neighbor. It is, in a sense, "private property." This becomes more explicit when the tenth commandment focuses on the desires of one's heart: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house ... or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" ([Ex. 20:17](#)). The neighbor's ownership of his house and his donkey gives him control over those things and also provides the basis on which God will hold him responsible for faithfully discharging his stewardship responsibilities. Therefore the Bible does not view the ownership of property as something that is wrong or evil in itself, but rather as a solemn responsibility that God entrusts to human beings created in his image. (Regarding the statement in [Acts 2:44](#) that believers in the early church "had all things in common," see notes on [Acts 2:44](#); [4:34](#); and [5:4](#).)

Stewardship and Various Uses of Possessions

The concept of responsible stewardship before God requires that believers use all their property and possessions in ways that are pleasing to God and faithful to his teachings in Scripture.

1. Some resources should be used to support oneself and one's family. Paul instructed the Thessalonians "to work with your hands ... so that you may walk properly ... and be dependent on no one" ([1 Thess. 4:11–12](#)), and to tell those "walking in idleness" "to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" ([2 Thess. 3:6, 12](#); cf. [1 Tim. 5:8](#)). The NT does not command Christians to follow rigid asceticism (see [1 Tim. 4:1–5](#)) but encourages believers to enjoy the resources of the earth "with thanksgiving" ([1 Tim. 4:4](#)) to God, "who richly provides us with everything to enjoy" ([1 Tim. 6:17](#); cf. [Eccles. 6:1–2](#)). Yet there are also strong warnings against the love of money, the temptations of wealth, and spending that is wasteful, selfish, or self-indulgent: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have" ([Heb. 13:5](#)). "If riches increase, set not your heart on them" ([Ps. 62:10](#); cf. [Eccles. 5:10](#); [Matt. 6:19–21](#); [Luke 12:15–21](#); [15:11–13](#); [James 5:5](#); [1 John 2:16](#); [3:17](#)). Jesus gave a number of warnings about wealth: "You cannot serve God and money" ([Matt. 6:24](#)). "The deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" ([Mark 4:19](#)). "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" ([Luke 6:24](#)).

2. Another morally good use of some resources is to save for future needs. Because "you do not know what tomorrow will bring" ([James 4:14](#)), it is wise, for those who are able to do so, to save some of what they have for a time when they will not be able to work (due to age, weakness, sickness, or loss of employment). A person who assumes that he will need no savings to depend on in the future is very likely deciding to impose a later financial burden on his children or relatives. However, accumulating savings also provides significant temptations to sin: Jesus says, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" ([Matt. 6:19–21](#); cf. [Ps. 62:10](#); [Matt. 6:24](#); [Luke 12:15–21](#); [Heb. 13:5](#)). And Christians should continually realize that whatever amount they save, that amount is not being given to the needs of others or to the building up of the church or to the spread of the gospel throughout the world.

3. A third use of resources, one repeatedly emphasized in Scripture, is giving money to those in need, or to the Lord's work in the church and in missions. In the OT, God required his people to give a “tithe” (that is, 10 percent) of their grain (see [Lev. 27:30](#)) and of their “herds and flocks, every tenth animal” ([Lev. 27:32](#); see also [Gen. 14:20](#); [28:22](#); [Num. 18:21, 26](#); [Deut. 12:17](#); [14:22](#); [26:12–13](#)). But while Jesus spoke about the tithing of the scribes and Pharisees ([Matt. 23:23](#)) during his earthly ministry, after his resurrection and the establishment of the NT church at Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)) the requirement to give a “tithe” or a tenth of one's income is never explicitly imposed on Christians. Rather than stipulating a fixed amount, the NT places emphasis on generous, abundant, cheerful giving: “God loves a cheerful giver” who “sows bountifully” ([2 Cor. 9:6–7](#)), and promises that “you will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way” ([2 Cor. 9:11](#)). So, while Christians are not obligated to give a fixed amount, it is hard to imagine that God expects people of the new covenant to give any less than the 10-percent tithe in the old covenant.

The NT specifically encourages giving to assist others in need: “If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?” ([1 John 3:17](#); cf. [James 2:14–17](#)). Jesus even encourages active imitation of God in doing good for “the ungrateful and the evil” ([Luke 6:32–36](#)). Paul devoted a significant portion of his third missionary journey to collecting funds for the needs of poor Christians in Jerusalem (see [Acts 21:17](#); [24:17](#); [Rom. 15:25–28, 31](#); [1 Cor. 16:1–4](#); [2 Cor. 8:1–4](#); [9:1–5](#); cf. *chart*). Though it is right to give to the material needs of all people, both believers and unbelievers, the NT prioritizes giving to the needs of Christian brothers and sisters: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” ([Gal. 6:10](#); cf. “brother” in [1 John 3:17](#)).

The NT also encourages Christians to support the needs of the church and of those who do the work of evangelism. Paul received financial support from the church at Philippi (cf. [Phil. 4:15–19](#)), and he told churches to support their elders, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching,” for “the laborer deserves his wages” ([1 Tim. 5:17–18](#); cf. [1 Cor. 9:6–14](#); [Gal. 6:6](#)). This would require that those who are part of a church should regularly give to support the ministry of the church.

NT Guidelines for Giving

Giving Should Be

References

willing and cheerful

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” ([2 Cor. 9:7](#); cf. [8:2–3](#)).

a regular pattern of life

“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up” ([1 Cor. 16:2](#)).

proportionate to one's ability “Each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” ([1 Cor. 16:2](#)).

generous “In a severe test of affliction, [the Macedonians'] abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave ... beyond their means” ([2 Cor. 8:2–3](#); cf. [Prov. 14:21, 31](#); [19:17](#); [2 Cor. 9:6](#); [1 Tim. 6:18](#)).

sacrificial The poor widow with “two small copper coins” is commended by Jesus for putting into the offering “everything she had, all she had to live on” ([Mark 12:42–44](#); cf. [Acts 4:32–33](#); [2 Cor. 8:3](#)).

Stewardship and the Poor

The Bible clearly and repeatedly emphasizes the need for Christians to care for the poor as one of the fundamental requirements of the gospel message. Jesus himself was born to poor parents (cf. [Luke 2:24](#) and [note](#)) and had few possessions during his public ministry ([Matt. 8:20](#)). Jesus says that as his followers do, or do not do, “the least of these” (i.e., those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked), so they either do it, or do not do it, to him ([Matt. 25:35–45](#); cf. the teaching in Proverbs that connects one's attitude to the poor with his or her relationship to God: [Prov. 14:31](#); [19:17](#); [21:13](#)). Paul and the early church took Jesus' teaching seriously and were “eager” “to remember the poor” ([Gal. 2:10](#)). In fact, Paul anchored his appeal to care for the poor in Jerusalem in the cross, that is, in Jesus' own atoning self-sacrifice: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)). The generosity of the church both within and outside the family of faith eventually led the anti-Christian Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate (4th century A.D.), to complain, “Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers. ... The impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well” (Julian, *Epistles* 84). Such care for the poor often takes the form of meeting immediate needs for food, clothing, and other essentials (cf. [Luke 10:25–36](#); [James 2:15–17](#); [1 John 3:17–18](#)).

Meeting the needs of the poor will also mean seeking to bring about long-term solutions. These solutions, which can often require greater time and energy to implement, enable those who are poor to obtain jobs by which they can support themselves and be able to “earn their own living” ([2 Thess. 3:12](#)), as Paul commands. Useful in this regard are programs that provide job training, related educational programs, microloans to begin small businesses, and changes in any governmental policies or cultural traditions that hinder long-term economic growth.

While nearly all Christian ethicists believe that civil government should take *some* role in assuring that everyone has access to the most basic human needs, they differ over the degree to which civil government (as distinguished from nongovernment entities such as relatives, neighbours, churches, and charitable organizations) should assume responsibility or authority for meeting those needs. Points of difference often arise

with regard to government programs to rehabilitate and train individuals, create new jobs, change social and economic structures, and/or redistribute wealth. Questions raised by these differences do not fall into categories of clearly defined biblical right or wrong, but tend rather to entail philosophical differences in economic or social theory.