

# The Need for a Dissident Christian Community in Modern Medicine – Part I

By Mark Blocher

## “Beautiful” Eggs for Sale

Ethical controversies in medicine are a regular occurrence these days. One recent example is the Internet website posted by a California photographer featuring an online auction for the ova (eggs) of models. Several media sources reported that people were bidding up to \$100,000 for the egg of a “beautiful” woman in order to enhance their chances of having a “beautiful” child. (I am reminded of the Proverb: “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout, so is a beautiful woman that lacks discretion” Proverbs 11:22). This bizarre story held our attention for a few days, but soon died as other matters took its place in the spotlight.

## Medicine and Morality

As we consider such ethical debates we should note that they are being conducted in a cultural context where a prevailing Judeo-Christian moral consensus is collapsing. The history of Western medicine is a blend of Judeo-Christian moral precepts and Hippocratic medical ethics, an ethical formula that contributed to the development of the best health care system in the world. That tradition is now largely ignored, if not outright reviled. There is not just a subtle drift away from the Judeo-Christian ethic in medicine, but a stampede! Physicians are no longer required nor expected to take an oath “first do no harm.” The blending of medical skills and ethical integrity that marked the medical profession for so many centuries is in the process of being replaced by what Nigel Cameron calls a “consumerist-corporatist exercise in the delivery of saleable skills to the market.” This change is evidenced by the number of physicians returning to graduate schools in order to get their M.B.A. degree.

## The Effects of Medical Consumerism

The human-egg auction house on the Internet is just one example of the consumerism that characterizes modern medicine. It illustrates that some couples struggling with infertility are no longer satisfied with just any child — they want a particular kind of child. The elderly person with a damaged knee or hip is no longer satisfied with a replacement that permits him to walk, he wants one that will allow him to downhill ski until he is ninety.

Abortion on demand represents another aspect of medical consumerism. Advocates of abortion rights market this right as if exercising it will guarantee happiness, and millions of women have bought into this belief to their own detriment. Abortion has become so institutionalized that opponents of the practice find themselves paying for them through their medical insurance premiums. Where I live, there is only one HMO that does not pay for abortions.

## A Dilemma for Christians

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How should Christians position themselves within the medical culture today? Should we withdraw completely and attempt to establish our own system of medical care, or should we remain within the mainstream of the medical community? Neither option is completely satisfactory. The first option is not only dauntingly difficult to achieve it is ill advised. God has not called Christians to withdraw from the culture, but to engage it (1 Corinthians 5:9, 10; Colossians 4:5, 6). The second option of remaining uncritically in the mainstream and conforming to the image of the changing moral face of medicine means being absorbed and being silenced. I believe we must be present in the medical community, but present as dissidents. This does not mean we are to be belligerent or unnecessarily oppositional, but it does mean that the so-called “standards of care” accepted by the medical establishment may (and often do) run contrary to the moral principles of Christianity. On such occasions, believers must be prepared to make sacrifices for their moral and theological beliefs. It also means we must be prepared to clearly and patiently explain why we oppose certain practices or policies.

## The Clash of Worldviews

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We must realize that the dominant worldview of modern medicine is naturalistic, holding that the ultimate reality is material-energy shaped by chance. Such a worldview will always bring forth results that are not only relativistic, and not only wrong, but which will be inhuman. Because of its false view of ultimate reality, the naturalistic view of the world not only does not have a basis for respecting the uniqueness and dignity of the individual person, it is actually ignorant of what or who human beings really are. This is particularly troubling when such a worldview is put to work on human beings.

For example, there is a growing segment of the medical community that is extremely optimistic about the future of genetic engineering as a means of improving the human race (eugenics). If a consensus among the majority in society emerges that utopian eugenics is a defensible social policy, then that society needs dissidents who will question the goals and motives of genetic practitioners, lest it, too, dissolves into the highly criticized practices of the Nazis. However irritating and shrill the voices of dissent may be, those who assume the responsibility of designing and implementing social, educational, economic and legal structures that are sharply protective of eugenic interests must be willing to accept that such scrutiny is the price to be paid for the power they wield.

## Voice in the Wilderness

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There may be times when such voices seem obscurantic, obstructionist, and even lacking common sense. There may be times when the majority believes those with religious conviction are ill-informed. Perhaps the voices of dissidents will be irritating to the culture, but dismissing them out of hand because their arguments seem illogical or indefensible is to miss the importance of free speech in a free society, a principle that liberals are quick to seize when it is to their advantage.

Allowing the voice of opponents to be heard and taking some of their concerns seriously is a small price to pay if practices such as eugenics are to be part of our social policy. When that social policy involves the deliberate destruction of human life, even for presumably merciful reasons, it is necessary to place impediments against destroying human lives for reasons that have nothing to do with the best interests of the life being destroyed. It is easy to claim we are killing for merciful reasons when in fact our motives stem more from economic or other social concerns. Killing human beings, even those many do not consider full human beings, must remain a difficult thing to do. We do not want killing to become easy, to occur without serious reflection on what such a social policy says about our society. An argument can be made that there is already far too much killing in American society, too many acts of violence, and there can be no denial that abortion methods are violent. I believe a pluralistic society like ours cannot afford to silence the voice of those who would advise extreme caution before pursuing such a “solution” to the “problem” of genetically-defective preborn human beings. If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the Third Reich in its practice of eugenics, we can hardly afford to “demonize” those who take positions against abortion in even the most severe cases.

### Separation or Demonstration?

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We must not be content to merely criticize the shortcomings of such a worldview. There will undoubtedly be times when life in such a culture seems nearly intolerable and there will be strong temptations to simply abandon the culture and separate entirely from it. Despite the fact that separation is one of the strongest forms of protest, it is often sought, more often than not, for the temporary comfort it provides the separatist, not as a form of protest. We may be marginalized by the secular forces surrounding us, but we must not marginalize ourselves. David Koresh made it all too easy for authorities to manipulate the media into telling the Branch Davidian story their way.

Christian medical professionals must demonstrate what medical practice looks like within a truly biblical worldview. In fact, it is vital that Christians demonstrate by their practice how a biblical worldview affects every area of life. This is the kind of dissidence that confronted Israel during the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus not only criticized the religious and civil leadership of His day, He demonstrated clear alternatives with His actions. The authorities might doubt what He said, but they could not doubt what He did.

### An Example from the East

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Perhaps an analogy for our engagement with modern culture can be found in the Christian dissidents currently operating within communist China. These brave individuals have not attempted to immigrate to the West, to escape an oppressive, heavy-handed government, nor have they completely hidden away in underground communities to avoid scrutiny from the authorities they criticize. They remain vocal and visible, living consistent Christian lives while doing everything possible to bring pressure on the government to change its ways.

Such actions require dissidents to cultivate an alternative community and to prepare that community to accept hardship. Although they continue to work, teach, raise families, and function within the predominant culture, they also nurture an alternative community that is radically counterculture in its values and its message. Rather than looking like the culture, Christians must show in word and deed what a biblical view of the world looks like.

Christians must take this approach toward American culture and become a counter-culture community knit together by biblical values, genuine Christian faith and theological understanding.

### Doctors as Dissidents

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One way to be truly counter-culture is to demonstrate a more excellent way to care for the sick. Much of modern medicine has forgotten that medicine is about caring for sick people. Our main point of departure from modern culture is our conception of what it means to be human in the face of sickness, disability and death. The story of the Church throughout its history has been interwoven with the story of medicine — of caring for the sick and hurting. The Church's concern for the sick and dying elevated the professional and social status of the physician and the nurse. We must not forget that Scripture is full of stories that speak about the fragility of life, the imminence of death, sickness and examples of healing. The Bible contains imperatives to care for those who suffer and provides hope for something far better than merely the restoration of bodily health.

If we are to be dissidents within modern culture, particularly within the medical community, we must give clear witness to the teachings of Scripture. I find it not only tragic but sinful the number of Christian physicians who prescribe contraceptives for unmarried women and do not tell them that pregnancy is not the only threat they face in being sexually involved outside of marriage. Whatever happened to physicians telling women the truth? Will they be upset? Probably. Will they find another physician? Perhaps. Would they want some physician prescribing contraceptives for their own daughters? No. Unfortunately, the business of medicine has taught Christian physicians to compromise on the ethics of medicine.

If Christian physicians are to be dissidents in the medical community they must constantly be aware of the sin/sickness correlation. Sickness is the shadow of death, a reminder of the horrible consequences of humanity's rebellion against God. Each sickness reminds us of our ultimate mortality (Hebrews 9:27). In this sense, every sickness has a theological dimension. It is a spiritual issue, one where not only the physician but the pastor has a legitimate role. Spiritual issues do not take a back seat to physical ones.

## The Spiritual Component of Sickness

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For the most part, we in America have made sickness a physical issue to be attended to by physicians and other medical personnel, and it only becomes a spiritual one when the person's condition is thought to be terminal. Until then, we tend to think that the pastor's only role is to visit occasionally, pray and read Scripture. This reflects the general failure of the Church to think about medicine as a theological issue. We've divorced medical practice (and receiving medical care) from its connection to the sin-sickness-death motif so prevalent in Scripture. Yet few seminaries offer their students any training in medical ethics.

One of the criticisms leveled at modern medicine is that it tends to depersonalize people, to treat them as things rather than persons. By ignoring sin-sickness-death causality, modern medicine fails to comprehend an essential component of understanding human beings. In fact, I would argue that this is at the heart of depersonalized medicine. Modern medicine has a flawed view of human beings; a view of people where the machine is a common metaphor for the human body. How can physicians and nurses care for whole persons when they do not understand the supernatural dimensions of sickness and death? If the cause of death is not "natural," if it is both moral and supernatural (divine judgment for sin), how are physicians to adequately provide care if they ignore these dimensions?

Since sickness and death are reminders of our sinfulness, healing should be viewed as a foretaste of our future resurrection and complete restoration. We must not forget that the Lord Jesus Christ was a healer. Although He did not completely abolish sickness and death from Israel during His earthly ministry, Jesus' encounter with sickness and death was decidedly one-sided; the blind could see, the lame could walk, the deaf could hear.

Jesus demonstrated through these acts of healing that sickness and death are spiritual issues, and that He alone possesses the power to eradicate them from human experience. He is the Source of our hope, not HMOs, pharmaceutical companies, genetic engineers, medical societies or the National Institutes of Health. What this means is that those who minister to the sick — physicians, nurses and other allied professions — are involved in a uniquely spiritual vocation whose task is to alleviate some of the adverse effects of sin and the universal fact of death. If Christian physicians and nurses really understand this and if they allow it to affect their practice of medicine, they will become the true dissidents in our culture.

## A Call to Minister

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What does this mean for the Church? It is imperative that the practice of genuine Christian community become re-established within local churches throughout North America, a restoration of what it means to be a people of healing and reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17, 18). This is crucial if we are to wean ourselves from over-dependence upon the medical establishment and other "caregiving" segments of secular society.

This will be only be realized through effective discipleship, biblical instruction, specialized "compassion ministry" training and the implementation of specific

compassion ministries by individual congregations. Through the establishment of these ministries, local congregations will come to be viewed by the local body and non-believers as essential problem-solvers within their communities. The types of ministries I envision include church-based “welfare” programs, preventative medical education, congregational nursing that includes home health care, biblical hospice and respite care, assisted living, biblical counseling, and life-skill development.

The philosophy of ministry which drives this approach is grounded in biblical teachings concerning the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the marks of an effective church and the role of the local church in the life of the believer and the community it serves. Since all that we call “ministry” is directed toward God’s special creation, human beings, this model rests upon a biblical anthropology that entails the following assumptions:

- Human beings, in the totality of their being, are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26,27)
- The Fall of humanity, beginning with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), relates to the totality of each human being, and God’s provision of redemption also encompasses the total human person — body, soul and spirit (Romans 3-6; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 5). Sin not only manifests itself in alienation between God and humans, but alienation between humans and other humans. Human sinfulness even creates an alienation within an individual human being as well, between body and spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18; 11:29, 30), which is often manifested through some disease, illness, disability or other physical impediment. This alienation can also manifest itself in the disruption of vital human relationships: husband-wife, parent-child, employer-employee, citizen-state, resulting in poverty, abuse, sickness, unemployment, criminal prosecution, etc.
- The needs expressed by imagebearers are needs of the whole being, not just one “part” of the person; therefore anything that affects human beings is a spiritual issue. Jesus addressed physical, emotional and spiritual needs in a holistic manner, thereby indicating that human beings are to be ministered to in the totality of their being.
- The social, moral and spiritual turbulence created by human sinfulness cannot be resolved by any culture or government that views itself as autonomous and emancipated from the control of a sovereign God. In such a culture, government grows larger and more intrusive in order to direct the distribution of goods and services in an ever more equal fashion, all the while claiming that such efforts generate authentic community. When a culture refuses to acknowledge the real human predicament of alienation from God due to humanity’s collective and total sinfulness, mere secular attempts to balance calls for equality and liberty are condemned to frustration. They will be frustrated because the stage upon which the battle for advantages will be waged is politics, which does not and cannot knit autonomous individuals into cooperative, caring community. Rather, politics rooted in secularism and committed to melding radical egalitarianism (equality)

and radical individualism (with all of the conflicting rights claims) reduces society into fragments of isolated individuals and angry groups competing with one another. Social peace and cohesion decline in such a culture, with any sense of community disappearing, producing despair in the human heart. Life in such a culture can come close to seeming intolerable, yet at the same time Christians become so dependent upon the material benefits provided by the government that controls their lives that they will succumb to the erroneous notion that the solution to the disease of a politicized culture is more politics. More politics means more clashes between interest groups, more anger and division, and more assaults upon those who oppose them. Eventually, a collectivist solution will be adopted to control this social turbulence, with the result being an authoritarian government.

## Conclusion

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It will become increasingly difficult for Christian medical professionals to function openly as Christians within the secular health care environment. Leaving medical practice, however, is not the solution, but providing opportunities for these professionals to integrate medicine and faith is an essential aspect of creating a distinctive Christian community.

Christian physicians already volunteer their time to travel overseas for medical missions, giving them opportunities to provide much-needed medical services and share the Gospel. It is equally important to demonstrate within our own culture that being a follower of Jesus Christ makes a difference in the practice of medicine. By observing the physician who is a follower of Jesus Christ, even though both Christian and non-Christian physicians use the same instruments, procedures, medications, etc., the Christian physician provides a dimension to patient care that other physicians do not.

Likewise, Christian nurses can play an important role within the local church by providing a form of congregational nursing. A Parish Nursing program already exists where practicing nurses can receive specialized training in providing care within the local church. Such nursing is a ministry of compassionate care for the whole person as a response to God's grace toward a sinful world.