

God, What Do You Think About the Taking Of Life?

Rich Nathan

May 30-31, 2015

God, I Have a Question Series

Genesis 1.26-27

Today we're going to talk about a few of the toughest issues facing our society today – abortion, suicide and doctor-assisted suicide. Just a few days ago the Columbus Dispatch reported that doctor-assisted suicide is one of the most important subjects facing religion today. Over 80% of millennials, those between the ages of 18 and 35, and two-thirds of Americans support having doctors helping their patients to commit suicide. Now, there have been many, many books written on these topics, along with thousands of articles, both academic and popular, written from Christian as well as secular perspectives.

I need to say at the front end that the subjects of abortion, suicide, and doctor-assisted suicide are not just academic for many of us. These issues are deeply personal and they raise some of the most painful memories in many of our lives. Among my dearest friends, several have lost parents to suicide. Others have lost siblings. Some of you, including my aunt, lost a child. One of the hardest things I have to deal with as a pastor is doing the funeral of a person who has committed suicide. Many more of you have been impacted by abortion; either an abortion that you had, or your girlfriend's or wife's abortion. And assisted suicide is not just academic.

One New York Times editorial recently said,

The right to die is our final freedom.

Fortunately, today we have two experts to guide us as we tackle these subjects. So, after I provide us with a framework concerning how we might think about these subjects, I am going to interview two members of our church. Diane Bauman, who has been involved in the pro-life movement for 19 years.

Photo – Diane Bauman

In 2001 she became the Director of our Value Life Ministry here at Vineyard Columbus. Our Value Life Ministry serves approximately 600 women every year who are facing unintended pregnancies. It is the largest church-based pro-life ministry in the state of Ohio and, in terms of a single church, it may be the largest pro-life ministry of any single church in America.

Diane was recently elected to the Board of the Ohio Right to Life. And this past year she has consulted with 11 churches across the nation concerning how they can start a pro-life ministry in their own congregations.

And we're going to hear from Dr. John Campo.

Photo of John Campo

Dr. Campo is the Chair of Psychiatry at The Ohio State University's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine. It is part of the College of Medicine. John has written dozens of articles in academic journals, and many book chapters and books. He has received numerous academic awards and is an expert in pediatric psychiatry. He has done considerable research on the specific topic of suicide.

Because of the scope of these topics, I won't attempt to venture into the subject of capital punishment which is also a really important topic as we consider the taking of life. I might do an article on this subject so that you can hear my thoughts regarding that. You've already heard my thoughts on war in a recent message titled, "God, May a Christian Go to War?"

Since Easter I've been doing a series that is titled, "God, May I Ask a Question?" I've been tackling some of the subjects that many churches tend to avoid such as "God, What Do You Think of Divorce?" "God, How Should Christians Relate to the Gay People?" Andy Saperstein did a message titled, "God, How Should Christians Relate to Muslims?" Next week I'm going to do a message titled, "God, Do You Still Work Miracles Today?"

Today, my message is simply titled, "God, What Do You Think About the Taking of Life?" Let's pray.

Genesis 1:26–27 (NIV)

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Much of the conflict regarding the taking of life is

A matter of worldview: Is personhood divinely given, or humanly constructed. There are lots of ways that society has defined personhood. When a human life obtains moral standing, so that it is safeguarded and valued. There is an enormous range of opinion about when a human life acquires moral significance and, therefore, protection. The genetic view of personhood believes that a human being is always a person; that personhood comes at conception. Another view of personhood concerns viability; when a human life can survive outside of the womb which is at about 23-24 weeks.

This particular view that human life doesn't acquire moral standing or personhood until 23-24 weeks has some inherent contradictions to it. One is that in many neo-natal clinics more and more babies are surviving outside of the womb. So you can have a hospital in which in one wing the neo-natal clinic is doing all that it can to preserve the life of a prematurely born baby and in another wing a mother is aborting a baby at the same stage of development.

To increase the absurdity of the viability argument, that is when are we going to convey personhood; when are we going to give you moral standing and offer you protection and support, if you can survive independent of another. We know that no infant that comes to full-term can survive independently. Indeed, almost none of us could survive independent of the larger society. Put me in the woods, or I dare say many of you who are listening to me today; stick us in the woods in Canada somewhere without a compass and without water, and let's see how long any of us survives. After two hours of wandering around, I would be reduced to tears. Put almost any of us on a raft in the middle of the Pacific and see how long many of us would survive.

The truth is that it is not just the unborn fetus that is dependent on another. We're all dependent on each other to survive.

Joseph Fletcher, who was a professor for years at the Harvard Divinity School, and helped pioneer the subject of bio-ethics, taught that all Downs Syndrome children would be better off dead. And that we should probably deny the status of personhood to anyone who had an IQ of less than 40; and that we should definitely deny the status of personhood to anyone who had an IQ under 20.

The Jesuit priest, Richard McCormick, said that life is to be preserved when it has relational potential. But when the potential for relationship is no longer present, such as with some severely disabled people, or folks who have severe dementia, then the need to preserve life ceases.

Peter Singer, the Princeton philosopher, said that we should not give personhood to anyone until, perhaps, 30 days after they are born to see if this newborn infant shows signs of intellectual development.

Some say personhood really has to do with our IQ capacity for self-consciousness, our capacity for relationship.

During the Nuremburg War Crimes Trial following WWII, the world found out that the German medical community and German society, in general, had accepted a principle that certain kinds of human beings were not persons and could be killed because they didn't have a good "quality of life." The killings started with abortions in very difficult cases. It gradually extended to abortion on demand. And then when abortion became widespread, persons whose lives were considered in the words of the Nazis

Devoid of value

First to go were handicapped infants and children, then the mentally ill, then the terminally ill. Voluntary euthanasia was followed by involuntary euthanasia. People deemed not worthy of life were murdered before the Holocaust. Personhood was constructed by the Nazis so that 275,000 Arian German men, women and children were killed. One view of personhood is that we human beings determine which members of our species, homo-sapiens, are worthy of moral and legal standing. Personhood is humanly constructed.

A very different view of personhood is that personhood is divinely given; not humanly constructed. The essence of human sacredness is not based upon some attribute that we have – whether we are beautiful or ugly, productive or idle, intelligent or unintelligent, moral or immoral, loveable or unlovable. Every human life is entitled to moral standing and legal protection as a person because every human life is made in God's image.

The value of every human life is not given to us by society. The value of human life is intrinsic and God-given. As James 3:9 says:

James 3:9 (NIV)

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.

To raise a hand, or even a word against a human being is an assault on God himself. That's why the taking of a life is so serious. Here is what we read in Genesis 9:6:

Genesis 9:6 (NIV)

6 "Whoever sheds human blood,
by humans shall their blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made mankind.

There is something intrinsic to human beings, the species that scientists call "homo-sapiens" which is unique among all the creatures on earth. We have been given the sacred task of representing God to the rest of creation. And even more than that, when God decided to enter this world, he took on human flesh. He became homo-sapien, one of us. He entered the world through the womb of a human woman named Mary. And he lived in our midst as a man, a true man, with a truly human body and a truly human soul. Not only are we made in God's image, but God gives value and dignity to human life by coming into this world as the Incarnate One.

And then after Christ's death and resurrection, he ascended into heaven not as God alone, but as God and man joined together in one person so that eternally humanity is joined to

divinity in the second person of the Godhead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Human beings have value and dignity not because we're able to think great thoughts, not because we're able to relate to each other, not because we produce anything, not because we look a certain way. The foundation of human rights is the God-given value that God places upon humanity. We have intrinsic worth.

Another way to think about our value as human beings is to answer the question:

Are we owners of our lives, or are we stewards?

According to the Bible, God alone has the right to take life away because he is the one who gave us life in the first place. To deliberately take away someone's life, or to deliberately take away one's own life is to usurp the place of God and to assert "I own my own life" or "I own the life of this other person in my womb or outside of the womb." The Bible says that we are owned by God because we are doubly bought by God.

Years ago I read a story about a boy who built a boat and went to a park and sailed his little boat on a pond. The boat floated away across the pond. Another little boy picked up the boat and ran off with it. The boy who built the boat was really sad. One day he was walking with his dad downtown and he looked in the window of a second-hand store and there was the boat he had built. He went in and talked with the store owner. The store owner said, "I'm sorry, son, I bought this boat legitimately. I hear you tell me that you made, but you are still going to need to buy it from me." And so the little boy paid the man for his boat. He took the boat out from the store, hugged it to his chest, and said, "You are doubly mine!"

That's what God says as he hugs us to his chest: "You are doubly mine! I own you by way of creation and I bought you at the price of my own Son's blood." You are doubly bought. None of us owns ourselves. Instead, we are under divine obligation as people doubly bought by God to manage all that God has given us for his glory. To manage our bodies and our appetites, our careers and our finances, and our talents, our gifts, our relationships and our families – to manage that for our owner, God.

Now, based on these foundational understandings that our personhood, our moral standing and right to protection is not humanly constructed, but it is divinely given, and in light of the fact that we human beings don't own ourselves, we're owned by God, doubly bought, we're mere managers of our lives. Let me offer you a few quick reasons why I am pro-life.

Why Am I Pro-Life?

Here is the first reason.

Because we ought to have the widest, most inclusive definition of human life.

A few years ago when President Obama was running for President, I was invited to a gathering of Christian leaders to meet with then-Senator Obama in Chicago. We spent about 3 hours together. It was a small gathering of about 16 Christian leaders and Senator Obama. There were folks like Franklin Graham and TD Jakes there; and I had the privilege of participating.

We went around the room asking Senator Obama some questions. Some of the people didn't have any questions to ask. But I had a number of questions about poverty, immigration, about Israel and I was praying about which one to ask. The person who preceded me was, in my opinion, quite disrespectful to then-Senator Obama. His question concerned the topic of abortion. So I decided to ask the question about abortion in a very different and more respectful way. I believe as the Bible teaches us in many places, in respecting those who have been given authority in our government whether I agree with them or disagree with them.

And so I said, "Senator Obama, I serve a large socially active evangelical church in Columbus, Ohio. Many of us appreciate how inclusive you are in terms of your social ethics. But the problem that many evangelicals have with you is that there seems to be a contradiction, a disjunction, a lack of inclusiveness in your social ethics when it comes to the unborn. The Christian ethic regarding the unborn is rooted in the parable of the Good Samaritan." And then I told him the story.

I said, "A lawyer came up to Jesus and wanted to argue with him about who he owed a duty to. The lawyer had all of these technical restrictions on who was his neighbor. If you had these religious characteristics, you were a neighbor; if you didn't you weren't."

I said, "To update Jesus' story a little bit, the lawyer is the 21st century Supreme Court. And the Court says, 'here are the rights and duties we owe to the unborn in the first trimester of life; here is how we approach the second trimester; here is how we approach the third trimester.' But, Senator, Jesus swept all of that away and he said, 'I want you to have the widest possible definition of neighbor. I want you to include the entire human family especially the weakest among us. Stop making these distinctions about who you owe responsibility to and who you don't. If you are a follower of Jesus, you have a responsibility to the entire human family – including the unborn.'"

And then I asked him, "Would it be alright if I drilled into your position on abortion a little more?" He sat back and he laughed and said, "You're not drilling me hard enough already?" I said, "Would it be alright?" He said, "Go ahead." And so I started drilling.

I am pro-life because people matter to God. Wealthy people matter to God. Poor people matter to God. Moral people matter to God. Immoral people matter to God. Religious people matter to God; irreligious people matter to God. Born people outside the womb

matter to God and unborn people inside the womb matter to God. We ought to have the widest, most inclusive definition of human life. I am pro-life

Because we ought to resolve all doubts in favor of human life

There is an old illustration that I've always liked. Imagine you are in the woods and you hear some rustling in the brush. You know there are a number of hunters in the woods. But you also know that there are deer in the woods. You hear some rustling, but you can't tell from the distance you are at whether the rustling in the brush is a deer or another hunter. Any moral hunter would resolve the doubt by deciding not to shoot.

If we don't know at what stage a developing fetus becomes human or you're not sure regarding the end of life, if someone with severe dementia is human, if you say, "I'm not sure; there are all these arguments back and forth," then we ought to resolve our doubt in favor of according that developing life protection. Before you shoot, you better be 100% certain that you're not taking a human life.

Here is the third thing.

Because "freedom of choice" arguments only work for the powerful

Many of you have heard of Brittany Maynard, a 29-year old woman who had brain cancer and fought to establish residency in Oregon which has legalized doctor-assisted suicide. She was fully supported by her family, by the media, by her attorneys.

But there were so many other people who were not young and beautiful like Brittany Maynard. They're old and alone. They're sitting in a wheelchair in some state institution. They're not lawyered up. They might not even have family who visit them. The only people they interact with all day long are minimum wage attendants, who may or may not care about them at all.

The moment we normalize as a society someone's right to die, society begins to assert pressure on everyone else who is dealing with the infirmity of age and the debilitation of various illnesses. Everyone else is pressured to begin to view the taking of their own lives not just as an option, but as an obligation. "You know, we're paying a lot of money to keep you alive. You are a burden on society. No one really cares about you. If you want to stop being a burden on your family, the most loving thing you could do is step aside." Or "You know, if you have this baby, you really can't afford it. This baby will be a financial burden on the rest of us. You really should abort."

When any of us claim the right to be able to take human life, whether the life of someone else or our own lives, when we usurp that God-given role we move from

The right to die → a duty to die

I want to call Diane Bauman up now. Diane, as I mentioned earlier, is the Director of our Value Life Ministry. She has been the Director for 14 years. In the past year this Vineyard Columbus ministry has assisted 600 women who were facing unintended, and often unwanted, pregnancies. Let's welcome Diane.

Interview – Diane Bauman

1. Diane, why did you get involved in pro-life work?
2. How many women does your ministry help each year?
3. One of the criticisms of the pro-life movement it is anti-woman; that you are choosing to value the rights of an unborn fetus over a woman's choice over her own body. How would you and your ministry respond to this anti-woman charge?
 - a. Abortion does harm to many women. Perhaps cite the number of women who after abortion choose to work in pro-life ministries v. the number of women who after having an abortion join a pro-choice group like NARAL (I believe its 10-to-1). Note how many women who have had abortions work in your ministry.
 - b. Our Value Life Ministry is deliberating both-and. I believe this so-called fight between mother and her child is an absolutely false choice. We support both women and their babies. You don't have to choose.
 - c. The term "pro-choice" is a misnomer. The vast majority of women we see want to keep their babies (mothers naturally care for their babies), but face a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in doing so. For example, finances, or a lack of emotional support, or abuse. We find that when we remove these obstacles, moms choose life. It is the feeling of limited or no-choice that causes many women to opt for abortion. The true pro-choice option for women, when all the obstacles are removed, is almost always choosing life.
4. Diane, how many women choose abortion, in your experience, after they encounter our Value Life Ministry and they are provided with real choices?
5. Another thing critics charge pro-life people with is that really you are just pro-fetus. You are in love with the child in the womb, but pro-life people do nothing to help a mother and child after the baby is born. How would you respond to this based on our Value Life Ministry?

6. Many women who are listening to us today have had abortions. The statistics say that 1 out of 5 women will have had an abortion at some during their lives. What are some of the issues that some women might face post-abortion? How can a woman find help, if they face one of these issues?
7. What if a person listening to us says, “I am facing an unwanted or unintended pregnancy?” “My girlfriend or a loved one is facing an unintended pregnancy.” Where can they find help?
8. How can an individual or a small group support our Value Life Ministry, if someone wanted to help, or get involved? What could they do?

HEART, Healing Effects of Abortion Related Trauma, a 7 week closed confidential healing group for women who have experienced the pain of abortion

MotherHeart Mentoring – Become a one-on-one mentor for a woman in an unintended pregnancy

Adopt A Mom – Small groups can adopt one of our moms to offer care and resources

9. Abortion is the only possible issue that young adults are more conservative than are their parents or grandparents. The surveys are clear that Americans are almost exactly split on whether they support current abortion law, or whether they would significantly restrict our current abortion law. On the other hand, young adults are much more likely than are their parents and grandparents to support more restrictive abortion laws. Why do you think that is?
 - a. Because contraception is widely available.
 - b. Because of the power of ultrasounds. Advocates for abortion can no longer convincingly make the argument that a fetus is just a clump of cells, or is part of a woman’s body, or just tissue – not when a young adult sees 3D color pictures of a developing baby within the womb.

In the time remaining I want to turn our attention to the subject of suicide. John Bunyan, in the most famous Christian book ever written after the Bible, a book called Pilgrim’s Progress

Cover Photo of Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan

...has a fictional character in his book who is the wicked Giant Despair. This horrible Giant seizes people who wander near his Doubting Castle. He locks them in a dark, stinking

dungeon. His poor victims languish in the dungeon without mercy. The Giant beats his victims causing them to cry and to scream out in despair. When the victims cry, Giant Despair whispers in their ears,

Do away with yourselves. Drink this poison, for why should you choose life seeing it is attended with so much bitterness? Do away with yourself.

There are many people who have heard that whisper in their ear: Do away with yourself. Life is too painful.

I'm going to ask Dr. John Campo, who is as I mentioned in my introduction, the Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at The Ohio State College of Medicine, to join me on stage. John and his wife, Ronnie, are members of Vineyard Columbus. Let's welcome Dr. Campo.

Interview with Dr. John Campo

1. Why did you enter psychiatry?
2. How serious is the public health issue of suicide?

Dr. Campo's Public Health Slides #2

3. What's happening to teenagers? We hear a lot about youth suicide; what do you think is going on?
4. What are some of the warning signs that we ought to pay attention to?

Dr. Campo's Warning Signs Slide #4

5. What should someone do if we see some of these warning signs? What should we say? How can the average person help?

Dr. Campo's Prevention in an Acute Crisis SLIDE

6. Will asking someone about whether they are considering suicide plant the idea in their mind?
7. How would you help someone who has had a family member or a dear friend commit suicide?

Survivors of Suicide Support Group

You know, there are many lies that are whispered in our ears after a loved one's suicide. One of the major lies that many people believe is "My loved one's suicide is my fault." This lie usually begins with "I should have..." or "If I would have..." or "If only I had..." We blame ourselves. We regret things we didn't do; things we should have said; things that we did say. But this is all a lie.

The truth is every person bears their own responsibility for their own choices. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God pronounced a judgment on each person for their own sin. He didn't let Eve shift the blame to the serpent. Rather, he declared that Eve and Eve alone bore her responsibility.

Likewise, God didn't accept Adam's defense that "the woman you gave me is responsible." He showed Adam that he alone bore responsibility for his choice. Our choices, good or bad, belong to us alone. No one is responsible for the choices of another. And survivors of suicide are not responsible for the suicide of their loved one.

But you know, in all of human history there has only ever been one person that God allowed to take responsibility for another's sinful choices. That's when God allowed Jesus to take responsibility for the sins of the entire world. And God allowed Jesus to pay for all of those sins by dying a substitutionary death on the cross. Christ paid for the sin of suicide. Christ paid for the sin of what we could have done, or should have done, or might have said. Christ paid for the sin of abortion or assisting someone to procure an abortion. Christ died for every sin.

Gospel Call

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I. A matter of worldview:

- A. Is personhood divinely given or humanly constructed?
- B. Are we owners of our lives or are we stewards?

II. Why am I pro-life?

- A. Because we ought to have the widest, most inclusive definition of human life.
- B. Because we ought to resolve all doubts in favor of human life.
- C. Because “freedom of choice” arguments only work for the powerful