



## Bioethics: A Primer for Christians

*Gilbert Meilaender*

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## **Bioethics: A Primer for Christians** Gilbert Meilaender

In the face of rapid advances in medical research and treatment, bioethics has become a serious social concern. Originally published in 1996 and later chosen by World magazine as one of the top 100 books of the twentieth century, Gilbert Meilaender's Bioethics covers a wide range of pressing bioethical issues and offers discerning guidance on how Christians ought to think about them. In admirably clear language Meilaender discusses abortion, assisted reproduction, genetic advance and prenatal screening, care for the dying and euthanasia, human experimentation, and more. This new edition of his Bioethics features updated information throughout, a fuller discussion of human embryos -- including stem cell research -- and a thorough rewrite of the chapter on organ donation."

## **Bioethics: A Primer for Christians Details**

Date : Published December 15th 2004 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (first published November 30th 1995)

ISBN : 9780802829092

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Format : Paperback 138 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Nonfiction, Philosophy, Christian

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## From Reader Review Bioethics: A Primer for Christians for online ebook

### Steph says

Fantastic. Very readable, but not at the expense of thoroughness. It canvasses a vast array of issues, but I didn't feel overwhelmed/assaulted with information - partly due to his skilful written expression, partly due to his sustenance of some core themes which he kept returning to. I'm not a sciencey type, but I found this very helpful.

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### Nyjb Reviews says

Dr. Gilbert Meilander has been at the forefront of the development of Christian bioethics for decades and has made many contributions in both the private and public arenas.

The fact that this book is in its third edition (the first edition was published in 1996) is a powerful tribute to the great usefulness of Dr. Meilander's thinking.

Some of the topics have been . . .

">Read the full book review of Bioethics: A Primer for Christians by author Gilbert Meilaender at New York Journal of Books

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### Will P. says

Meilaender's approach to bioethics is substantially different from my own, and from that of many other Christians. However, I believe that his concerns are still valuable, and should be respected as important parts of the ongoing bioethics debate within the Christian community.

Reading this book was an interesting experience. In perhaps 2/3 of the chapters, I found myself in strong agreement with Meilaender and was impressed by the detail and depth of his insights. Such sections included his stances on refusing treatment, assisted suicide, and human experimentation. However, in the remaining 1/3 of the book, it seemed to me that Meilaender was ignoring very significant details. His positions on adoption, prenatal screening, and organ donation do not seem to be grounded in medical fact or Biblical truth.

I believe that some of my differences with Meilaender may arise from different theological backgrounds. My background is Reformed, while Meilaender is a Lutheran. Lutherans generally have a very different approach to culture than Reformed individuals, which may account for some of the oddities that I encountered. This divide is especially significant with respect to adoption. Meilander believes that adoption is a sign of brokenness in the world because it is not a creational norm. I believe that adoption is a sign of redemption and a symbol of the Church's "adoption" into God.

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## **Kyle says**

Every thoughtful Christian should read this. It's short, and even when you don't agree, it will help you think through your positions.

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## **Sadie says**

I don't know how to rate this book. The writing was clear and concise but I so strongly disagree with all of his points (he's way too conservative for me). In fact I think they're wrong really really wrong. I was also put off by his authoritative attitude. The suggestion that this book is "...what we Christians ought to say in order to be faithful to the truth that has claimed us in Jesus" (xii)

I'm a Christian and I don't think this book is what we need to be faithful to. I'm still hoping to find a progressive book on Bioethics from a Christian perspective.

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## **HomemakerMD says**

This volume was smaller than some of the other Christian bioethics texts I read recently, but its content is rich and deep. The writing was clear and fluid, the arguments scriptural and didn't simply skim the surface but grappled with the tough questions.

The first chapter, titled "Christian Vision", was an excellent overview of the general approach Christians take to life, death, suffering and medicine. I appreciated the segment on suffering, which began with the phrase, "At the heart of Christian belief lies a suffering, crucified God." (pg 7) His approach to suffering was as an evil thing and yet a thing that does not lack purpose, and he pointed out that to make the alleviation of suffering the highest goal of life would be to ignore that it does serve a purpose.

The second chapter, "Procreation versus Reproduction," contained a discussion of the new technologies involved in assisted reproductions, with a description of the change in thinking that has occurred even among Christians in the shift from viewing children as a gift versus a product to be tinkered with and produced. He discussed the significance of the biological bond, and I loved his description of the child as "God's 'yes' to... mutual self-giving." His contrast of this with the assisted reproduction using third parties in which "the lines of kinship are confused" was clear, and his reasons for Christians to reject the participation of a third party in assisted reproduction were reasonable. However it seemed his arguments against the use of assisted reproduction without third parties seemed to lack weight, resting mainly on the vague idea that "instrumentation" of the body is questionable morally. The last section in the chapter dealt with how Christians ought to approach having children in general, which can be well summarized with "Without in any way undervaluing the presence of children, we should also be free of the idolatrous desire to have them at any cost—as our project rather than God's gift." (p 23)

The discussion in the "Abortion" chapter surrounding the beginning of life and personhood was one I found to be well-rounded and informative. The only point at which I was hesitant to agree was on page 34, where the author discussed pregnancy resulting from cases of incest or force. He extended grace to these situations where pregnancy could be considered to be a continuation of the initial attack upon the woman involved, but I would have appreciated a more balanced approach to this complex and difficult scenario. It seems that there are times when the birth of a child can for the victim of violence be a way of redemption of the crime committed against her. Even in cases where she does not have the resources, emotionally or otherwise, to raise the child, there are so many waiting would-be parents it would be a loss to end this life in the womb. The discussion of prenatal screening seemed to be an exception to the rest of the book, in that it was

medically dated and simplistic. First, the use of amniocentesis is certainly not the routine way pregnancies are screened—they are the exception rather than the rule. Usually blood tests are performed initially and only followed by an amniocentesis if needed for positive blood test results. The number of false positives for such tests is high, leading many couples to panic needlessly and probably other couples to choose abortion. But if the Christian uses prenatal diagnosis in a prayerful and thoughtful manner, in the setting of risk factors such as advanced maternal age, the Christian family can both prepare themselves for the arrival of a child with special needs and also consider whether prenatal treatments/surgery or special delivery plans necessary. The author didn't discuss these possibilities at all.

The discussion regarding the Christian and autonomy and suffering in later chapters was excellent. The culture of medicine has so profoundly tempered public thinking as to assume the priority of autonomy and self-determination over the life of surrender (i.e. that of a Christian to his God).

In the chapter on "Refusing Treatment" I was initially somewhat disappointed. This issue of when to stop treatment is so complex and difficult to answer that some level of medical knowledge is needed to be able to give the discussion value. It was clear to me on page 67 that the author did not know the evidence surrounding the use of opiates during the end of life. I have done literature reviews in the past on this subject and read a good portion of the medical literature on this topic, and studies that actually suggest that appropriate management with opiates at the end of life actually extends the life longer than if pain goes undertreated. Also it is known that the body requires rapidly increasing doses of opiates to control pain during those final days and hours. But I appreciated the author's note that "Life is not our god, but a gift from God; death is a great evil, but not the ultimate evil." (p68). I also appreciated the way that the author distinguished rejecting a burdensome treatment versus rejecting a burdensome life (as in the case of a patient in a vegetative state). And in the end the section of the chapter on "Truth-telling" was worth its weight in gold for the way in which, particularly in the way in which he cautioned against suggesting to a patient that his condition is hopeless.

The remainder of the book contained thought-provoking discussions about organ donation, human experimentation, embryo research, and concluded with a discussion of the providence of God at work in health and in sickness.

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### **Thomas Achord says**

3.5 stars if I could. The discussions are helpful to spur on reflection of the given topics. He waxes a bit too far on individualism for my tastes, and he doesn't define dignity or value - a problem among many religious writers today. Some of his conclusions are premature, given the brief accounts he paints. I find myself being more open to scientific advances that give us control over the body. The negative reasons Gilbert provides for abstaining from, say, screening do not sufficiently outweigh their benefits.

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### **Leslie says**

This book is an helpful way of re-envisioning many things we take somewhat for granted in medical practice today. Meilaender focuses more on issues pertaining to the beginning of life - to fertility, and embryos - than to issues at the end of life. However, the discussion of issues related to transplantation is interesting. The basic focus is on reintegrating mind and body, and viewing all humans as innately worthy of love. Regarding end of life issues, he sounds nearly Aristotelean in proposing a spectrum in which overutilization of technology in the face of death is idolatry and hastening death in the face of overriding needs and desires is similarly idolatrous, so that we should aim for a mean. Much of what he says provides guiding principles rather than answers, but he is also quite directive at times.

### **Greg says**

I did not like this book. To begin with, my opinion is that a good study of bioethics should not be shaped by the current state of medical proficiency. Current capabilities may lend new facts which can be incorporated, but this book shows its age, especially in genetic questions. Meilaender writes for a Christian audience. In so doing, he raises the obvious points of respect for Christian teach of ethics and morality rather than blind obedience to the furthest permissible stretches of the law, and discusses controversies that one would expect to be covered. Unfortunately, the book reads like a catechism of teaching regarding current controversies, instead of probing deeply the question of "Why?" in most cases.

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### **Sean says**

A very good introduction to the subject. All arguments for and against are given a consideration and the author does well to put a Christian perspective across. He is in no doubt, Christian perspectives will be challenged, for this reason a clear and positive argument is very helpful.

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### **E says**

Parts were excellent, such as introductory remarks concerning our creation as finite yet free creatures, the reality of suffering, and the goodness of medicine. Chapters on abortion, suicide, prenatal screening, and embryonic research were right on.

I found him a bit more conservative than myself on the topics of IVF, surrogacy, etc., but I've never spent the time to really think through those issues properly. So his chapters there were helpful. He questions such techniques, although not birth control.

Most helpful for me as a pastor was the chapter concerning end-of-life decisions. One must really consider his goals when facing these questions. For instance, do you end treatment because the life is no longer worth living? Probably not a good reason. Do you end treatment to salvage the quality of life remaining? Probably a much better reason. Are the measures you're pursuing ordinary or extraordinary? Lots of good things to think through here.

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### **Landon says**

Not the easiest writing to follow, and I didn't agree with all conclusions but it was a very interesting look at the complexities of the ethical dilemmas rampant in science. Some hit home personally with the chapters on human embryos and human experimentation.

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### **Mario Tafferner says**

A very sophisticated introduction to Christian bioethics. Meilaender explores bioethical issues within the context of human freedom and finitude and provides deep theological thinking.

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### **Reyna says**

I had to read this for class. To me it was judgmental and the author's views are too extreme

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### **Gino says**

#### **An Excellent Primer for the Christian**

Meilaender does a superb job of boiling down the modern ethical questions in the field of medicine for laymen and clergymen alike. While some of his opinions are a bit odd for a conservative (see his chapter on abortion, for example), he generally provides excellent rationales for and, more importantly, ways of thinking about ethical thinking in medicine. He could benefit from looking at how the doctrine of the resurrection influences Christian ethical thought though.

Overall, a very good book.

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