

“Ethics in Biology – a Christian Perspective?” – Professor Peter Silley

On 18 October, the issue of medical ethics, and how to maintain the Christian view in the light of biological advances, provided one of the most complex topics ever discussed by the Reading Churches Men’s Group. At the breakfast meeting at the Reading Blue Coat School in Sonning, guests were able to quiz the distinguished microbiologist and public health adviser, Professor Peter Silley. Yet there were no easy answers.

“Ethical standards are changing every day,” he said, “and Christian ethical standards in particular are under increasing attack. Society is drifting away from an acceptance of the standards God established, which means there is no secure and grounded framework for society to use in order to judge right from wrong.”

Some traditional perceptions of the gap between science and faith were overturned. Indeed science, Silley maintained, is fearful of the drift from faith of those seduced by secularism, popular science and either political or commercial expediency. Scientists, who have traditionally accepted that God had entrusted the world to our stewardship, are now appealing to religion to provide an absolute ethical framework – particularly with respect to climate change, environmental pollution and the eradication of wildlife species.

“A belief in God as the Creator is essential in the application of Christian ethics in biology,” Professor Silley emphasised. “When faced with complex start or end of life dilemmas, the key thing to do is to ask ourselves ‘what would Jesus have done’ in this situation. We should also pray for our politicians, that they don’t play God but do make the right choices over controversial developments which bring social and medical benefits – such as genetic modification or synthetic biology. Pray also for the victims of the Ebola virus, whom we have failed by not developing a vaccine in time to help them properly.”

There was a lively series of questions from the group – on specific issues, but mainly on general guidance. In response, Professor Silley quoted Solomon from Proverbs, Chapter Four; “wisdom is supreme; get wisdom.”

“Really make an effort to understand the science behind new developments, weigh up the risks and benefits, read both sides of the argument, and engage in the debate logically and objectively. Action is essential; good intentions get us nowhere.”

For anyone interested in reading further into this subject, Professor Silley has provided a short reading list:

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| William Barclay: | “Ethics in a Permissive Society” |
| Francis Collins: | “The Language of God” |
| John F Kilner (ed): | “Why the Church needs Bioethics” |
| Brendan McCarthy: | “Fertility and Faith” |
| Nick Spencer and Robert White: | “Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living” |