



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Making Difficult Decisions
(Cloning, pp. 75-80)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Making Difficult Decisions

Not every medical “advance” deserves our unquestioning acceptance. In deciding whether and how to employ new technologies, we must draw upon our religious values. Clearness committees can help us do this in a positive and helpful way.

Prayer

In peace we pray to you, O God.

For one another as we seek divine guidance on difficult medical decisions—awareness of our place in your creation, compassion toward your world, justice in medical and financial ethics, humility in our convictions, and unity in our confession, (*silent prayers*), Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Responsive Reading†

We shall walk through the valley and the shadow of death,
we shall walk through the valley in peace.

**If Jesus Himself shall be our leader
we shall walk through the valley in peace.**

We shall meet God’s children there,
and there’ll be no weeping there.

**If Jesus Himself shall be our leader
we shall walk through the valley in peace.**

Reflection

When medical procedures raise thorny moral issues, doctors can describe technical options, family members offer support, and friends give advice, but to whom do we turn for wisdom? Stuart Sprague laments, “Most people do not seek advice from members of their religious communities, especially in a formal way.”

Discovering what to do and how to live in morally puzzling situations requires what Scripture calls the “wisdom from above [that] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, [and] willing to yield” (James 3:17). A truly wise person is willing to listen to and learn from other members of the community of faith.

A long-standing way of communal moral discernment is the Quaker practice of calling together a clearness committee. Other congregations could adapt this practice to help members make difficult medical decisions, Sprague says. This is how it works:

- ▶ *Determine the committee’s role.* One type of committee judges whether “clearness”—a thoughtful and spiritually mature decision—is reached by the person requesting the committee. A second type of committee doesn’t make that judgment, but serves as a resource during the person’s decision making.
- ▶ *Prepare the committee members.* “Several church members, clergy or laity, must commit themselves to the education and discipline necessary to function in this role,” urges Sprague. “Before they are called together for clearness, members should establish the boundaries of appropriate practice, learn how to ask questions in a helpful way, and commit themselves to confidentiality and respect for one another and the decision-maker.”



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► *Keep reflection 'close to the ground.'* We are guided by general norms, virtues, and exemplars, but not in any simple or mechanical way. These guides need "testing and applying...in a variety of contexts and scenarios. Sometimes a norm must be balanced against another norm or further specified according to the details of the case." Committee members can help decision makers "identify and overcome any personal biases or prejudices that would distort their understanding of the moral norms and their reflection on the particular case."

"This process assumes that the person has already developed morally within a faithful community that has been shaped by the reading of Scripture," notes Sprague. "Now the person is seeking, with the assistance of some respected advisors in that community, to *clarify* how these norms, virtues, exemplars, cases, and so on, can guide her or him in the current situation."

Study Questions

1. What morally puzzling decisions about medical procedures or technologies might be brought to a clearness committee?
2. How have Quakers used clearness committees in the past? Of the two types of committees, which would be the best sort for persons who are facing difficult medical decisions?
3. List the key qualifications for clearness committee members.
4. Gaining clearness is not automatic, even with a good committee. What traits might help a person to reach clearness?
5. Quakers believe that a clearness committee helps the requesting person "discern the inner light." How do you understand this doctrine? Do you agree with it?

Departing Hymn: "If You Will Only Let God Guide You"

If you will only let God guide you,
and hope in Him through all your ways,
whatever comes, He'll stand beside you,
to bear you through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
builds on the Rock that cannot move.

Only be still, and wait His leisure
in cheerful hope, with heart content
to take whate'er the Father's pleasure
and all discerning love have sent;
nor doubt our inmost wants are known
to Him who chose us for His own.

Sing, pray, and swerve not from His ways,
but do your part in conscience true;
trust His rich promises of grace,
so shall they be fulfilled in you;
God hears the call of those in need,
the souls that trust in Him indeed.

Georg Neumark (1621-1681);
tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878), alt.
Tune: NEUMARK

†Based on "We Shall Walk Through the Valley," African American spiritual.

Making Difficult Decisions

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how Quakers use clearness committees for communal moral discernment.
2. To suggest how other congregations might adapt clearness committees to help members make difficult medical decisions.
3. To discuss the theology behind the practice of calling together clearness committees.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Cloning (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “If You Will Only Let God Guide You,” locate the tune NEUMARK in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“Penelope Yungblut has described to me how a [Quaker] clearness committee helped her husband, John, make a difficult medical decision,” writes Stuart Sprague. “In 1994, his surgeons gave John only five days to decide whether to have a radical operation—the amputation of his hip and what remained of his leg—to remove the cancer which had recurred. He knew the surgery would be a disabling procedure, but the alternative was death from the cancer in a short time. To assist him in making the decision, he called together a clearness committee composed of friends. As a result of this meeting, he decided to have the surgery. John lived about a year after the procedure and, though he was disabled, he felt he had made the right decision.

“When believers today face decisions about whether to use medical technologies like in vitro fertilization, reproductive cloning, or stem cell therapy, and when they consider using extraordinary life-extending measures for loved ones with chronic illnesses, they find themselves in morally puzzling situations just as John Yungblut did. Too often, unfortunately, their congregations do not offer resources for communal discernment analogous to the clearness committees for Quakers” (*Cloning*, pp. 76-77).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Using the prayer in the study guide, pray silently for friends and neighbors who are facing difficult medical decisions. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Today we tend to think of decision-making as a private affair, and of practical wisdom—the ability to make spiritually mature decisions about what to do and how to live—as a virtue possessed and practiced by an individual. Yet James 3:13-18—in a clear echo of the Old Testament wisdom tradition (e.g., Proverbs 9:8-9; 12:15; 13:1; and 15:31)—describes the wise person as being open to correction and willing to learn from others in the community of faith.

Various practices of mutual correction and communal discernment have developed in the church to help members deal with puzzling moral issues. Bioethicist Stuart Sprague recommends that congregations make available to members something analogous to the Quaker practice of clearness committees.

Sprague's essay is in the *Cloning* issue because congregations need practices to help members make difficult medical decisions related to in vitro fertilization, reproductive cloning, and stem cell therapy. Nevertheless, since your study group may want to discuss this practice of communal discernment independently of the morality of cloning, the study guide does not emphasize the cloning-related medical decisions that were the immediate context of his remarks.

Study Questions

1. In the context of their study of human cloning, members might mention medical technologies like in vitro fertilization, reproductive cloning, and embryonic stem cell therapy for diseases like Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, heart disease, or cystic fibrosis.

Members may have faced other difficult medical decisions about using extraordinary life-extending measures for loved ones with chronic illnesses, committing a parent to long-term care, undergoing radical surgery, accepting another round of painful chemotherapy, committing financial resources to pay for expensive procedures, aborting a fetus, adopting a mentally disabled child, caring for a loved one with severe mental illness, and so on.

2. Quaker meetings, or communities, called clearness committees to determine whether an engaged couple was making a wise decision about marriage or an individual was making a good choice about joining the community. Individual Quakers might call a clearness committee to help them clarify a calling to ministry or make a difficult moral decision.

The committee asks helpful questions and allows the person to explore the puzzling situation. Some committees will determine if the person has reached clearness; others leave that judgment to the person. Sprague recommends we use the second type of committee for making personal medical decisions. Do members agree, or can they think of certain cases in which the committee should be the judge of whether moral clearness has been reached?

3. Sprague says the committee members should be (1) "practiced at asking helpful questions," (2) not prone to "impose their own answers to these questions or give advice to the person, either directly or indirectly," (3) not prone to "dominate group discussions," and (4) trustworthy to keep the discussions confidential. You might discuss other qualifications like being (5) a careful listener, (6) well grounded in knowledge of the Bible, (7) a careful thinker, and (8) well respected both by the one who requests the committee and by the congregation.
4. The person who calls the committee together would benefit from traits like being (1) honest and forthcoming about the situation, (2) humble and open to instruction, (3) a careful thinker, (4) well grounded in biblical knowledge, and (5) one who trusts in God's guidance.
5. "In Quaker theology each person is believed to have the inner light, a source of divine guidance in making important decisions," Sprague reports, though he admits "an entire theological treatise would be needed to address our concerns about the existence of such a light; its grounding in God; how it gives specific direction to a person; and how it interacts with our emotions, rational thoughts, and desires.... Christians within the free-church tradition (like me) may resonate with how this notion can be adapted to a theology of the Holy Spirit, soul competency, and the priesthood of believers."

If this approach sounds too individualistic and arbitrary, keep in mind that it assumes the Holy Spirit is active in the process and "that the person has already developed morally within a faithful community that has been shaped by the reading of Scripture."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.