

Trevor Stammers finds wisdom from the Book of Proverbs on some modern day dilemmas



BOUNDARY STONES IN BIOETHICS

key points

- Boundary stones help society maintain respect and continuity with previous generations. They remind us we are not autonomous islands.
- Ethical issues of IVF, gene editing, gender dysphoria, cybernetics and transhumanism all have in common that they seek to move boundary stones set by God.
- Moving boundary stones in human relations has often produced unforeseen consequences that bring pain and misery.
- Scripture makes clear that God will hold us accountable for boundary moving and its consequences.

Counter-intuitively, ancient literature in the Bible offers insight into some of the thorny ethical issues of our times. One that came to mind recently is found twice in the book of Proverbs: ‘Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your ancestors’.¹

In the New Century Translation, the second phrase is rendered ‘because those stones were set up by your ancestors’, making this more of an explicit explanation than just an adjectival clause. Then Proverbs offers another explanation, which shows why disobeying the initial command is such a serious matter. ‘Do not move the ancient boundary. Or go into the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong; He will plead their case against you...’

The boundary stone signifies two things. Firstly, respect for and continuity with previous generations. We acknowledge that we are not autonomous islands. We are connected to the mainstream of community which conceived, birthed and nurtured

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us. Roots are important in our lives and if we become torn from them, especially in infancy, this can cause great harm.

Secondly, the boundary stone signifies ownership. The boundary stone indicated who owned the land and for others to enter it and take it by moving the boundary was theft. God is declared as the defender or redeemer of those wronged by such a move, declaring he will act against those who take what is not theirs.

I suggest that what the ethical issues of IVF, gene

editing, gender dysphoria, cybernetics and transhumanism all have in common is that they seek to move boundary stones set by our Heavenly Father signifying both our kinship² and our ownership³ by him. All of these boundary stones I have in mind are found in the early chapters of Genesis and I shall take them in the order they appear.

First, we are sexually differentiated in a specific way. Recently a school in Brighton encouraged its pupils to identify with one of 23 different genders,⁴ including 'gender fluid' 'demi-boy' or 'non-binary'. Though gender is not synonymous with chromosomal sex and chromosomal intersexes can and do occur, the Scriptures clearly and unequivocally state that we are differentiated in a sexual binary.

Genesis states: 'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'.⁵ This is not a text to make you feel guilty if you are a male who prefers ballet dancing to football, or a woman who would rather be an astronaut than a homemaker. It is just stating the reality we observe around us and is imprinted in nature – what is 'understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse'.⁶

In a recent interview, Eddie Redmayne revealed that filming *The Danish Girl* had been an education for him in which he had learnt for the first time that gender is fluid.⁷ What he is actually saying there is that a boundary stone has been moved in his life and he is totally unaware of the danger of it both to him and his many fans.

A second boundary stone can be inferred from Genesis: 'And God blessed them. And God said to them "Be fruitful and multiply"'.⁸ Subsequently the mode of achieving this comes in the following chapter: 'A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh'.⁹ Sexual union and reproduction are intimately linked in Scripture, every discovery of technology that separates these two is a double-edged sword at best and an unmitigated evil at worst.

Initially, 20th century technology made it easy and safe to separate sexual union from procreation. Who can deny that the advent of contraception, whatever its many benefits that most Protestants and many Catholics take advantage of, has contributed to increased sexual immorality, the sexually transmitted disease crisis and ever-increasing demand for abortion?

IVF, though it has brought the joy of children into the lives of many, has also separated procreation from sexual union. It has thus provided the foundation for not only the commercial exploitation of women worldwide for their eggs but also for many of the techniques of the new genetic revolution. With both human cloning and with artificial gametes derived from induced pluripotent skin cells for the first time, man may be able create man in his own image.

This ability is still in its infancy but it will

inevitably increase, at least among the rich nations, if the technology makes it possible. What is the origin of this strong drive that makes us so want to have children who are our genetic offspring if at all possible? This seems to be part of the image of God in us, but if we use unethical means to achieve legitimate God-given yearnings, the costs could be very high.

The third and final boundary stone is found in Genesis 2 and its context: 'The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman"'.¹⁰ To be human is to be embodied. We are ensouled bodies as much as embodied souls and in the resurrection to come God will 'transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body'.¹¹ Our bodies are not an optional extra and contra Plato, our eternal destiny is not that our disembodied spirits ascend to the world of the forms, but rather that we eat and drink with our Lord at his wedding feast and enjoy heavenly union with him for evermore.¹²

In *The Givenness of Things*,¹³ Marilynne Robinson writes:

Disliking subjectivity will never make it go away. Here is an idea that would make Descartes blanch. Apparently there are scientists who believe that at some point fairly soon, we will be able to upload our minds to computers, freeing ourselves from our bodies being therefore immortal.

This is reminiscent of the serpent's provocation of Eve to move another boundary stone: 'God says we must not eat it or touch it or we will die. "You will not die for God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it"'.¹⁴ Robinson continues:

I suppose they will programme in the virtual experience of taking the uploaded dog for a walk in the virtual park, through the rain on random assorted virtual days adjusted to reflect the weather patterns in some selected place and season...

We are not just fighting against flesh and blood in our calling as Christian healthcare professionals but against the powers of darkness and of that ancient serpent whose head is not yet completely crushed.¹⁵ Let us understand the times, discern what the Spirit is saying¹⁶ and do all we can to open our eyes and the eyes of others to the reality of the living God who will hold us accountable for our actions and who warns that there are boundaries we should not cross or move.

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