

# Abortion in the light of Scripture

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After receiving the assignment for this paper and in its subsequent preparation, a memory from childhood rose from the recesses of my mind. When I was a youngster, our family doctor was found guilty of performing an abortion, in which the patient died. Though I was quite young at the time, I can recall the reaction of the community-the act was rarely spoken of openly-when it was discussed it was in hushed tones-there was outright shock and sorrow among the townspeople-disbelief. That which was a childhood memory has now become a headline word in newspapers and the subject of feature articles in popular magazines and journals. It has provoked discussion in homes, argument in medical and legal societies, debate in state legislatures as well as in church circles. Opponents of abortion reform hold the centuries old view that it is a cruel word, an ugly, shameful act and a crime. Proponents speak of it as desirable, an act of mercy and compassion and want it legalized.

Just what is an abortion? Webster's Dictionary defines abortion as the expulsion of the human fetus prematurely. A medical dictionary defines it similarly but lists some 22 classifications or types of abortions; for example, accidental, criminal, induced, infectious, natural, therapeutic and so on. Obviously, the legislation in question does not deal with the usual accidental or natural cause of an abortion, commonly called "miscarriage," caused by an intra-uterine infection, trauma, or the natural rejection of the embryo or fetus from the mother's body. Rather, the question now before the people and their legislatures, as well as ourselves as responsible Christians, is whether or not there should be a lifting of the restrictions on what Webster calls "aborticide," that is, the act of destroying the fetus in the womb either by direct use of instruments or by the use of a chemical or "medication" that kills the fetus and causes it to be expelled.

This then is the question that is before us-does Scripture have anything to say about such abortions? However, before we go into our study of this question, I feel it would be useful to sketch briefly the development of the present day abortion laws so that we might be acquainted with the issues at hand. Though in antiquity there were many laws, which speak of abortion, the first statute, which influenced abortion laws in our country, was the Miscarriage of Women Act, passed in England in 1803 and which punished abortion by means of drugs. Twenty-five years later, in 1828, an amendment was made to this statute to punish abortion accomplished through the use of instruments. This British law became the model for similar laws in the United States. We find that the nation's first abortion law was enacted in Conn. in 1821 with the other states following suit in due course. Prior to 1967 the general pattern of the laws in all 50 states was complete prohibition of abortion except to preserve the life of the mother. Between 1967 and the present time 10 states have liberalized their abortion statutes in varying degrees or have declared their existing laws as unconstitutionally vague.

In our own state of Michigan two easy abortion bills were introduced in the Michigan State Senate in March 1969. Senate Bill 287, introduced by Senator Bursley, which in addition to permitting abortion when the mother's life is endangered would legalize abortion a) To preserve the physical or mental health of the mother; b) when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest; c) when there is significant risk that the child would be born with a serious physical or mental defect. Senate Bill 288, introduced by Senator McCauley, leaves the question of abortion a personal matter between physician and mother. The states that have changed their abortion laws or are discussing changes have these same elements in them in varying degrees.

So the question which was taboo and cloaked in darkness has now forged to the front and is before us with all of its implications. Undoubtedly, this black-out on open discussion was ended dramatically in 1962, when a drug called thalidomide, given to women in early stages of pregnancy, raised the possibility of children born with major malformations. The Sherry Finkbein case, you may recall, received wide publicity. Ostensibly to stop further calamities of this kind, proponents of abortion reform point to such humanitarian (in their view)

grounds. However, we feel that the underlying movement toward reform has many currents—to exercise legal control over a bad situation, the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement, the relaxing of moral responsibility, and various medical, sociological and psychological concerns.

However, it is incumbent upon us, as people whose hearts are bound, guided and directed by the Word of God—pastor, teacher, layman—to take a look at this subject in the light of Scripture. As in all our activities as Christians, our guidance should stem from God in His revelation, rather than from legal, medical, psychological, or economics textbooks.

Another reason that it is important to look at this subject in the light of Scripture is that, as one reads various articles and books by church related authors regarding induced abortion, one thing becomes very conspicuous; the absence of biblical references. The document, "Sex, Marriage and Family," adopted by the LCA in its 1970 Convention, contains only one Biblical citation, and that one is not in the section dealing with abortion, which is permitted "on the basis of the evangelical ethic." A recent piece on abortion, written by the executive director of the ALC's commission on Research and Social Action cites but one Scriptural passage. The author quotes Jesus' words spoken about Judas, "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Truly a bit of light-headed exegesis! In a letter urging abortion reform a noted Lutheran Cleric notes as substantiation Jesus words, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

Recently, the United Methodist Church issued a statement on abortion. This document also overlooks the Biblical perspective. In fact, it advocates "removing the regulations of abortion from the criminal code...(placing the decision) solely in the hands of the patient and her licensed doctor." The American Baptist Convention holds "that abortion should be a matter of responsible personal decision."

In the view of the above statements, surely the indictment of Paul Ramsey in his article, "Feticide/Infanticide upon Request," is well taken, "Churchmen seem to have a penchant for saying today what the surrounding culture said twenty-four hours earlier." His observation is brought into sharp focus by comparing two statements of the ALC on abortion. On Jan.29, 1963 the Executive Committee of the Church Council of the ALC issued a statement on abortion which includes the statement; "In no instance is personal convenience a proper consideration. Always, both patient and doctor, are faced with the question: Is not termination of pregnancy in this way (in a case of possible deformity) a transgression of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill?" Then we find a quote by the same group, taken from Religious News Service, July 1970: "All factors considered, an induced abortion may well be preferable to an uninterrupted pregnancy issuing in an unwanted child."

It is time for us to go into Scripture to see what God would say to us on this subject of abortion. Our thrust in searching for an answer shall be two-dimensional. 1. Is the unborn, at any stage, to be regarded as a person? 2. A look at some of the underlying motives for abortion reform.

As we look into Scripture, we find that there are few passages that speak directly to abortion (feticide). One, however, is quite direct, Ex. 21:22-23: "If men strive and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life." Keil and Delitzsch, in their commentary, assert that a correct translation demands that when death occurred through injury either to the mother or to the child in her womb, the *lex talionis* principle applied, i.e. an "eye for an eye," etc.

But some would object and say that this is precious little evidence. Their objections should not distress us. Though we can't find a passage that says, "Thou shalt not perform an abortion," this doesn't mean that our quest for truth in this question is ended. Rather, it forces us to look at the whole of Scripture. The Scriptures were not given as a system of canons from which we can conveniently and easily pick out solution A for problem A and solution B for problem B. The Word, however, is a sharp, two edged sword that pierces into man's inner being with its message of sin and grace and which, after faithful study, brings principles to apply to situations. Therefore, we must study to see how God views man, total man, and the sanctity of life of the born as well as the unborn. Such Scriptural inferences are not out of place with the purpose of Scripture or our theology.

For example, no where do we find in the Bible a command which says "Baptize infants." For some churches this settles the question. They say where there is no direct command, there is no action. As we study Scripture, however, the scope of Christ's redemptive work, Jesus' statements on the necessity of regeneration, as well as his parting command to His disciples, we can see easily that to neglect infant baptism is to go against Scriptural principles.

How does God view man? Man is regarded Biblically as the crown of God's creation, a special creation. Man is endowed not only with blood and tissue, muscles and molecules but with reason and above all with a soul. As such, he has a responsibility and a relationship with his creator. Man is not just another speck of matter in the totality of the universe. He is special. And this same process of God's creative power and promise is evident in our conception and birth, even as we hear in Scripture, "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me." This thought is indeed significant, for a Christian views the miracle of birth as involving God's creative hand. Though we can understand the biological and medical terms of fertilization, gestation and so on, yet we know that it is God that continues to give this new life in accord with his reproductive promise and command, "Be fruitful and multiply." Hence, we do not view man as just another creature, a product of an evolutionary development. We have a high regard for man in his role as envisioned by God to subdue the earth, for the individual worth of man and an equal reverence for the sanctity of God-given human life. Each human being is blessed by the loving Creator not only with abilities and faculties to enjoy the blessings as well as the rights of life, but, above all, to use this space of life, this time of grace wisely to restore man's divine image through the forgiving grace of God in Christ. A significant passage in this regard is Acts 17:26;

(God) hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitations; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being.

Because of this sanctity of human life, to willfully, wantonly, intentionally, premeditatedly take a human life, thus shortening this precious time of grace, is a most horrendous and atrocious sin against the 5th Commandment. This commandment God in His wisdom gave to protect human life. On this point we can find general acceptance among men.

In this light we must now consider the key point in the entire discussion of abortion. Is the small embryo or fetus a human being or merely a piece of tissue without being or rights? On the other hand, if the unborn baby is a person with a separate identity, and is not just an appendage of the mother's body, then all the stirring arguments of the pro-abortionist apply not only to the mother but also to the developing child within the mother. Then he, too, has a God-given right to live. He is not just a "thing" that a mother may dispose of like a tonsil or a scab.

On this point we could here quote numerous noted medical experts on both sides of the question on their view of the unborn. Our interest is not primarily in the opinions of men this all important question of life, together with all its implications, but more importantly, we wish to seek truth in Scripture.

Thus, we find passages in which an identity, a personhood, is ascribed to the unborn. In Jer. 1:5 we note that God's dealings with Jeremiah as a person began before his birth. "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto all nations." God's creative dealing with Job is indicated in Job 10:11,12: "Thou didst clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews. Thou hast granted me life and steadfast love; and Thy care hast preserved my spirit." (RSV). John the Baptist, we are told in Luke 1:15, "shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."

This thought is excellently carried out by Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, who says:

Man is not man because of what he does or accomplishes. He is man because God made him. Though the little child engages in only a limited range of human activities, Jesus used him as the

model for the Kingdom—evidently because, as one of the “weak things of this world that confound the wise,” he illustrates God's grace rather than human work-righteousness. Even the term “brephos” “unborn child, embryo, infant,” is employed in one of the parallel passages relating children to God's Kingdom. The same expression appears in the statement that when Mary visited Elizabeth, the unborn John the Baptist “leaped for joy” in Elizabeth's womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter parallels the ideal Christian with a “brephos” and Paul takes satisfaction that from Timothy's infancy (apo brephos) he had had contact with God's revelation. Moreover, the Bible regards personal identity as beginning with conception, and one's involvement in the sinful human situation as commencing at that very point: “Behold I (not ‘it’) was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me (not ‘it’).” For the Biblical writers personhood in the most genuine sense begins no later than conception; subsequent human acts illustrate this personhood, they do not create it. Man does because he is (not the reverse) and he is because God brought about his psycho-physical existence in the miracle of conception.

Medical authorities substantiate this view, for they tell us that in the genes the characteristics and traits of the child are present after conception. A person doesn't become human by experience or acquired characteristics but he is such in conception. Throughout Christian history the fetus has been considered human. What else could it be? This life will result not in the bringing forth of a hyacinth or a hyena but in a human being. Though pro-abortionists would have the public believe that abortion laws are relatively recent, and this view of the fetus is of rather recent origin, we find that also in ancient codes there are prohibitions against striking a woman so as to cause the death of her unborn child. These codes include the Sumarian Code of 2000 B.C., the Hammurabic Code of 1300 B.C., the Assyrian Code of 1500 B.C., the Hittite Code of 1300 B.C., and the Persian Code of 600 B.C. In the Didache, written in Syria about 80 A.D. we read, “you shall not slay the child by abortion.” Another early reference to abortion is in the Epistle of Barnabas, written about 138 A.D., which says “You shall not kill what is generated.” Many other codes could be cited, in addition to many statements by the early Roman Church, to illustrate a reverence for unborn life.

This same view toward the fetus is made clear by quotations from court decisions in several states: “A child is not only regarded as a human being, but as such from the moment of conception—which it is in fact.” (District of Columbia 1946). “Medical authorities have long recognized that a child is in existence from the moment of conception.” (Illinois 1961). An unborn child is defined as “a human being from the time of its conception until it is born alive.” (Wisconsin Abortion Statute—Criminal Code 940.04). “‘Child’ should include a human being upon conception and during pregnancy as well as are actually born.” (Colorado Supreme Court 1936 and restated in opinion of August 1969).

These laws and statements are reflections of how God views the fetus and as a result man also. Therefore, we dare not become side-tracked on the issue of when is the exact moment when a new human soul comes into existence. Whether the fetus inherits his soul from his parents (Traducianism) or whether the soul is created individually at some point between conception and birth (Creationism) cannot be decided from Scriptural data. Pieper calls it an open question. Luther declared that publicly he would assert nothing in answer to this question but that he for himself favored traducionism. Undoubtedly, he was brought to this view because of the Pelagian controversy, in which there was an attempt to subvert the doctrine of original sin.

Of interest are the confessional statements on original sin, as in the Augsburg Confession, Art.II: “It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin.” Or, “Rather, along with the nature which God still creates and makes at the present time, original sin is transmitted through our carnal conception and birth out of sinful seed from our father and mother.” (S.D.;1,7). So we conclude that human existence under God's judgment as well as His grace begins before birth.

The important point then for us is that this life, granted by God, should not willfully, or with forethought be snuffed out, as though one were merely pulling a carrot out of the ground or eliminating an unwelcome tumor from the body. God tells us “Thou shalt not kill.” The value in upholding traditional laws against abortion

is two-fold; they limit the number and the spread of abortion and they declare the community evaluation of fetal life.

The principle by which we should be guided through Scripture is that there should be an equal concern for the rights and the sanctity of the life of the unborn as well as the mother and others in society. As this principle is carried out in given situations, undoubtedly, there will be cases in which difficult and grave decisions must be made. The guiding thought though must be the sanctity of life, governed by a prayerful application of God's Word. This is done in other situations in regard to the 5th Commandment as in self-defense, serving in a just war for the protection of citizens of a country, or in someone sacrificing his life on behalf of others. These decisions are arrived at, not in defiance of the sanctity of life, but rather because of it.

Often the flag of humanitarian concerns is waved by the pro-abortionist, so that many people become duped into endorsing the cause. However, in line with the theme of this paper, we should look at some of the underlying motives for reform to see if these reasons can be Scripturally based in accord with the principle of the sanctity of life.

Though it is not stated in so-many words, it becomes evident that the strong push toward the reform of laws in regard to abortion is because the world is losing or has lost a Godly view toward sex. It is less and less thought of as a blessing, a precious gift of God to be used wisely and responsibly in accordance with His Word. Sex becomes sex for its own sake, more or less a creature function, a biological function without the thought that God has given a tremendous power to man, to propagate. As a result, free love, loosening of morals and an unwillingness to accept the responsibility for the results of using the gift called sex is ever gaining the ascendancy. Hence, it is not surprising in such a moral climate that pressures are being brought to make it legally possible to rid oneself of the inconvenience germinating in the womb. If you don't want it, get rid of it. One hardly needs to be a theologian to see all the misery and heartache that is caused by a careless and irresponsible attitude toward God's directives in a proper use of this gift called sex.

Another influence, which plays into the picture, is the Women's Lib movement. In striving to throw off the shackles of male domination, the home and children no longer, for this group, has appeal in its present form. Though we don't wish to go into a detailed evaluation of this, we can see where God's natural order of creation is abrogated, many additional problems do arise. Contrary to God's establishment of child-bearing as a God-pleasing function of the woman, the cry goes up that women should have a right to say what happens to their bodies. We agree that women should not be used, but when one couples this cry with the extreme position on abortion of the American Civil Liberties Union (June 1967), this plea takes on a more sinister form. "It is a civil right of a woman to seek to terminate a pregnancy, and of a physician to perform or refuse to perform an abortion without the threat of criminal sanctions." In short, this is abortion on demand, though no state has come close to enacting a law of this nature. We would be naive to think that the compromise passage of a moderate abortion bill will more than temporarily delay the fight for free abortion. Against this view, we think God's Word applies, "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." (I Cor. 6:19, 20). Surely, this should say much to the Christian woman!

Another reason that is used for abortion reform is that the present laws cannot be enforced properly. Some comparisons will help us keep abortion laws in perspective. For example, perjury is rarely prosecuted, though it daily vitiates civil, criminal, and family court proceedings. Obscene abusive phone calls total in the millions with relatively few prosecutions, despite such laws against such calls in all fifty states. Grand larceny, has increased 107 percent in the years 1960-66. Significantly, only about 10% of the reported crimes are cleared by a conviction. Is a law against larceny a dead-letter issue that should be abolished because it is unenforceable? Similarly, should abortion laws be changed, because they are difficult to enforce? To do so would fly in the face of reason as well as the dictates of God.

Generally, the abortion reform bills passed or proposed are more moderate than the above proposal. They follow the guidelines set down in the American Law Institute's Model Penal Code. Because these are more moderate in comparison to the liberal proposals, many people feel that they aren't so bad. But if we look at them, we find that modern-day indications for "therapeutic abortion" divide into four general categories: 1.

Medical, 2. Fetal, 3. Psychiatric, and 4. Socio-economic. Of this a public affairs pamphlet says, "Theoretically, however, because of present laws in most states, each such abortion is approved because it is 'necessary' to 'preserve the life' of the pregnant woman." You get the point don't you? The definition is getting pretty broad. A few comments are in order on point 4. Here the question isn't the life of the mother, but whether she would want the child. In England where abortion laws have been greatly liberalized, a doctor writes that the question is no longer, "How can I cope with this pregnancy?" but "Why should I cope with this pregnancy?" So, he says, the woman says, "Why should I go through with this-back to the diapers, back to the drudgery, back to the scratching and scraping of twenty years?" So she picks up her handbag and heads to her doctor's consulting room.

In this same line of thought, John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Chairman of the Population Council, said in an address at a recent International Conference on Abortion; "I believe we must concern ourselves rather with the most fundamental rights of children-to be wanted, loved and given a reasonable start in the world. It is ironic that our society requires the most careful screening of persons who want to adopt children but, at the same time, indiscriminantly insists that parents go ahead with births they do not want."

I submit that many a child, loved and loved greatly, was not greeted with wild enthusiasm, when the discovery of the budding life was made. Our sinful flesh can so easily be motivated selfishly, and it makes no sense to create conditions to make our flesh react in a sinful way against God's beginning of life. So selfishness is quite often at the bottom of the press for abortion. Awhile ago I saw a television documentary about abortion in England. Many women were interviewed as to their reasons for having an abortion performed. The greatest number of answers were "I'm not ready to have a child." "I don't want it." "It doesn't fit into our plans." Such selfishness is surely against God's will!

Under the economic clause, consideration is taken of the financial condition of the family. Though no state says an abortion can be given because a family is poor, nevertheless, the idea is lurking around. Among the recommendations of a Special Commission in New York, a clear majority of the Commission recommended in 1968-that an abortifacient act should be legally justifiable "where the female already has four living children." The main reason for this recommendation was the fact "that when a family has four children, the cost of rearing each additional child can become a heavy burden. The very definition of poverty as established by the Social Security Administration recognizes that the birth of an additional child may force a family below the poverty line." Holy Social Security!! Somewhere do I hear God saying, "take no thought for the morrow" "Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content." "I have been young and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." This is lousy economics, judged by the standards of a materialistic world, yet this truth has been shown by God's children time and again. If the extent of a family's affluence, or lack of it, is to be a criterion for the success of a family, I doubt if many of us would be here or if we would have the children that we do.

Much more could be cited, but we have given several of these underlying currents in order to show that we are not dealing with the abortion question per se but also with many attitudes and values about which the Word of God has much to say in the way of guidance.

In closing, we leave you with some quotes which summarize the issue, which we have attempted to bring into focus for you. Richard Neuhaus says: "How flexible we can be with regard to abortion is tantamount, I believe, to asking how flexible we can be with regard to taking human life." In another context he notes: "abortion raises the question about the nature of human life, and those who refuse to discuss the issue on this level are in danger of jeopardizing man's highest values for the sake of a short-range resolution of an immediate problem."