

## Abortion and Infanticide

The unwanted infant and the unwanted unborn have been killed from time immemorial, both when the killing was legal and when it was illegal. Until recently the church never seriously debated the morality of killing an infant for any reason. The *Didache*, an early Christian document (c. A.D. 100–110) affirms: “You shall not kill the fetus by abortion or destroy the infant already born.” Even in 1963, a Planned Parenthood pamphlet stated, “An abortion kills the life of a baby after it has begun. It is dangerous to your life and health. It may make you sterile so that when you want a child you cannot have it.”

But because of the recent introduction into the abortion controversy of new concepts about “personhood” and “quality of life,” the debate has begun to encompass the newborn as well. One notable spokesman for infanticide is Princeton’s Peter Singer. As we saw, he claims that because newborns (or those suffering from dementia) are not self-aware or aware of their existence over time, they (“human non-persons”) have less value to society than pigs, dogs or chimps (“non-human persons”).<sup>1</sup> This is

no mere academic theory—regardless of whether a child is handicapped or not. For example, the Philadelphia abortionist Kermit Gosnell was sentenced to life in prison in 2013 for killing newborn children—severing their spinal cord—after botched abortions. And the media silence, with only a few exceptions, was deafening. This case exposed the moral inconsistencies bound up with the abortion industry, as we note below. Even so, for those ethicists who acknowledge the full authority of Scripture, there is no room for any view that would justify the killing of infants, whether healthy or handicapped. To deliberately take the life of an infant is murder.

Since many of the arguments used to vindicate the widespread fatal neglect or actual killing of infants are the same as those used in the abortion issue, and since Bible-committed Christians do not debate the morality of killing an innocent person, we leave the question of infanticide and turn immediately to the abortion issue.

To set the context, consider the stages of human development:

<sup>1</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 122–23. Philosophers Michael Tooley and Jeffrey Reiman utilize the same type of argument.

1. Sperm. There are between 250 and 300 million spermatozoa in a single ejaculation.
2. Zygote. One sperm and the ovum unite (conception) within forty-eight hours of intercourse, and the fertilized ovum (also called the *conceptus*) makes its four-to-six-day journey down the fallopian tube, seeking implantation in the uterus (womb). Up to one-half of zygotes do not make it to implantation.
3. Embryo. The fertilized ovum or “egg” is implanted, and the embryo is established in its own individual life, though 4 percent of twins divide *after* implantation (“twinning”). On the other hand, there are cases where two eggs are released by the mother, both are fertilized, but because of their movement, they become one egg (called “recombination”).
4. Fetus. The embryo has developed all human physical characteristics by about eight weeks and is called a fetus from then till birth.
5. Infant. Birth into physical independence of the mother, though, unlike most animals, still wholly dependent on others for survival.

6. Child
7. Youth
8. Adult

Killing of a human being at stages 5 (infant) through 8 (adult) has been considered a violation of the sixth commandment throughout church history. Killing sperm (stage 1) or preventing conception has been opposed by the Roman Catholic Church as sinful, but has not been opposed by most Protestant churches. The broader social debate involves stages 2 (zygote) through 4 (fetus).

## **The Soul and the Beginning of Life**

The crux of the issue is the question: At which stage does personhood or ensoulment begin?

What *is* the soul? The soul is who *you* are. Or you could say, “I am my soul.” The soul is the center of personal awareness. The soul gives each of us our personal identity through all of our bodily changes. The body’s cells are virtually entirely overhauled or replenished every seven years or so. So something nonphysical (the soul) must allow for this continuity through change. Even though the soul can survive bodily death, our body and soul function as an integrated and

organic *whole*. When I (my soul) worry, this can set my stomach churning. And when I feel pain in my body, the soul (or “I”) focuses attention on it. And when my body dies, my soul can continue to exist by God’s sustaining power in the “intermediate state” (Lk 20:38; 23:43; 2 Cor 5:3–8; Phil 1:21, 23–24). At Christ’s return, we will receive an immortal resurrection body. By the way, animals have “souls” too. Just as Adam is a “living soul” (*nepeš hayāh*, Gen 2:7), so are animals (Gen 1:24). But animal souls—which have far fewer capacities than that of humans, who are made in God’s image—do not survive bodily death.<sup>2</sup>

Historically the church has debated the issue of ensoulment. When does the physical body possess a soul? Is it passed on through biological generation from one’s parents? Does God create a soul and “implant” it in a human body? If so, at what stage does he do this? At conception? At implantation in the uterus? At some point beyond, such as “quickenings”? Though Scripture does not expressly tell us, theologians have debated two main views throughout the church’s history—the

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion on the soul and the body-soul/mind question, see chap. 19 in Paul Copan, *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007).

*creationist* and the *traducian* positions. According to the creationist view, the individual human soul (or person) comes into existence—is created by God—at the point of fertilization. The traducian view, by contrast, considers the soul as a continuation of the parents’ souls, going all the way back to the original human couple. Like a *shoot* (*tradux* in Latin) that extends itself outward, so one’s soul was not newly created by God at conception; rather, at fertilization, the soul of the parents is passed on to the offspring as an organic extension of the human “vine.”

Whatever view is taken, the focus of the question is really on *when* a new individual comes into being. The question of the beginning of the “soul” is the key issue for Christians, for they want to know when the human soul comes into existence. After all, *that* is when human life truly begins. What is the status of all failed spermatozoa? What will become of spontaneously aborted zygotes and embryos? Are only fetuses reaching live birth ensouled? Even the concept of what the term *soul* means is difficult to determine from scriptural data, let alone when the soul begins. Though Scripture does not speak directly to the issue of when “ensoulment” takes place, does it offer any insights about the unborn? What

insights can we gain from philosophical reflection on the biblical text?

Because of recent advances in our knowledge of prenatal life through three-dimensional sonograms, the scientific evidence reveals quite clearly the early traces of physical human characteristics. The contention of some pro-abortion advocates that the embryo is merely a tissue or organ of the mother, like her appendix, gave way in the seventies before the weight of scientific evidence. Virtually all agree that zygotes, embryos and fetuses are individuals of the human species with their own unique DNA code. Indeed, the unborn is totally dependent on the mother before birth as the infant is after birth, but the child pre- or post-natal has its own individuality. Surely a pregnant mother does not have two heads or a male sexual organ. We note that despite the appropriate concern shown by some protectors of sea turtle eggs, the same passion for protecting life is not extended to unborn humans.

There is no clear-cut logical demarcation in the development of human life from conception to adulthood. If it is argued that an embryo still lacks essential human characteristics, such as brain activity, it cannot be argued that the life of the fetus (from two or three months till birth)

is biologically different from the life she will experience following birth. From conception onward, there is personal continuity and, given enough time, the human embryo will be a fully functioning adult.

So from a biological point of view there is little difference between aborting a fetus and killing an infant. An embryo, and especially a zygote, is qualitatively different, and it may not be possible to prove categorically that fully human biological life exists at that stage. But it would be impossible to prove that the zygote or embryo does not possess a fully human existence.

What of *twinning* (division after implantation) and *recombination* (two fertilized eggs becoming one)? Does this throw into question life's beginning? What of the beginning of the soul? First, there is no question we are speaking of something *human* and something *living*. Second, in either situation, the fertilized egg or conceptus is genetically unique. Third, there is no scientific consensus on certain dimensions of twinning, which could involve asexual reproduction (parthenogenesis). Consider how inseparable Siamese twins have distinct centers of awareness (souls) despite being joined in body. Some scientists think that some

fertilized eggs are a basic duality before they divide. Fourth, the traducian view of the soul in particular—with its image of a vine-like shoot spreading out—could readily account for twinning and recombination. So we see that twinning and recombination do not present any good reason to reject that we are dealing with unique human life. One philosopher offers this analogy:

Imagine that we lived in a world in which a certain small percentage of teenagers replicated themselves by some mysterious natural means, splitting in two upon reaching their sixteenth birthday. We would not in the least be inclined to conclude that no human being could therefore be considered a person prior to becoming sixteen years of age; nor would we conclude that life could be taken with greater impunity prior to replication than afterward. The real oddity—to press the parallel—would be two teenagers becoming one.

However, in all of this we still would not judge the individual's claim to life to be under-

mined in any way. We might puzzle over questions of personal identity ... but we would not allow these strange replications and fusions to influence our thinking about an individual's right to life. Nor therefore does it seem that such considerations are relevant in determining the point at which an individual might assume a right to life in utero.<sup>3</sup>

Someone like David Boonin will claim that we *don't know* exactly when during conception the human comes into existence. For example, is it when the sperm penetrates the ovum? Is it when the maternal and paternal chromosomes “cross over” into a two-chromosome (diploid) set? Or is it when the conceptus implants in the uterus? In response, we should not confuse *knowing* (epistemology) with *being* (ontology). Even if we cannot precisely *know* when a human comes into being, we can say that we have an *actual* unique human being at or close to conception. And we could challenge Boonin and others about their own

<sup>3</sup> Robert Wennberg, *Life in the Balance: Exploring the Abortion Controversy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 71.

claims: *At what point* does a human have a right to life? Exactly *when* does one arrive at the point of being sufficiently rational and self-aware?<sup>4</sup> Those advocating Boonin's view are far less sure and are far more vague and shady than the pro-life position's starting point. And even if one is uncertain about the *status* of the unborn, one should err on the side of caution and seek to protect unborn life rather than advocate killing it.

From a biological point of view, there is no question of unique personal identity that is genetically distinct from the mother, beginning at conception. From the time a mother knows she is expecting, the unborn already has a beating heart (three and a half weeks). Brain function is detectable at six weeks. At eight weeks, the unborn has distinctive limbs and even fingerprints. Even if it is "above one's pay grade" to know the moral status of the unborn, one should not actively promote killing the unborn in the name of "a woman's right to choose"—any more than a hunter shoots at something moving in the woods without knowing exactly what is moving. Ignorance on such an important issue should prompt

<sup>4</sup> Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), pp. 43–44.

restraint and caution rather than proceeding as though the issue did not matter.

So the debate has shifted from the question of when human life begins to the question of the *value* of various forms of life.

## The Value of Life

Since the unborn are already a form of human life, many in the pro-life movement hold that abortion of zygote, embryo or fetus is a form of murder and must be outlawed by any moral society. At the other extreme are those who hold that there are differences of value among human lives and that not all human beings are "persons." In the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision of the Supreme Court, Justice Harry Blackmun introduced the concept of "useful life," suggesting that to end a life that is not useful may be not only permissible but actually mandatory for the ethically sensitive person. The key issue is said to be the "quality of life," not the "sanctity of life." The philosopher James Rachels distinguished between *biological* life (mere physical existence) and *biographical* life (a life infused with a sense of meaning and the capacity to live out that life). Between these two opposite viewpoints range the majority of specialists and ordinary peo-

ple in America.

**The right to choose.** Common in political discourse is the language of women having “reproductive” or “privacy” rights or having a planned and wanted child. We hear that laws should be “kept off” a woman’s body—although abortion is the ultimate invasion of it. And we are familiar with the claim that the woman—not the church or state—should determine her “fate.” The woman has a right to protect *her* body, we’re told. As some portray it, the unborn child is something of an unforeseen “invasion” into the woman’s womb.

Philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson came up with a much-discussed thought-experiment: You are kidnapped by music lovers and find yourself in a hospital hooked up to the body of an unconscious but ailing world-famous violinist; he is completely dependent on your circulatory system as you share the rarest of blood types. After nine months, the violinist will certainly recover, but he will die if you allow the tubes to be disconnected. What should be done? Thomson argues that if one finds a human being parasitically attached to him without his free consent and quite possibly at great risk to the host’s physical health, then the host has no moral obligation to continue

to sustain this life, even if—for the sake of argument—that person is fully human.<sup>5</sup> Is Thomson’s comparison of a dependent violinist with an unborn child a valid one? No, it is not.

For one thing, the unborn child has not willfully “invaded” the womb. In the vast majority of cases, two freely consenting adults engaged in sexual activity; their union produced another human individual, whose natural environment is—or should be—the safety of a mother’s womb. Second, the notion of kidnapping or something alien or parasitic being attached to you is emotionally loaded language; it is question begging (assuming what it wants to prove). Why not use the language of “mother” and “unborn child”? The mother-child connection just isn’t a stranger-stranger relationship. Whereas the violinist is a *stranger*, the mother is connected to *her own child* and surely has a greater responsibility to that child. Doesn’t a helpless, vulnerable, dependent child—born *or* unborn—have a claim to motherly care and protection from its own mother? Third, when it comes to abortion, we are not speaking here of merely *withholding* medical care

<sup>5</sup> Judith Jarvis Thompson, “A Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66.

from someone who is dying (see the next chapter on [euthanasia](#)). We are speaking of actively *destroying* an unborn life, which sometimes involves crushing its skull and dismembering it. Thomson's argument that this is merely "withholding" care is like smothering a person with a pillow, claiming this is simply withholding oxygen from that person.

What then of the "right to choose" language? It is laden with questionable assumptions. For one thing, right to choose *what*? "Choice" is a relative term—like saying "to the left of." A right to choose in relation to what? We gain moral clarity when we ask: What is the *object* of one's choice? Is one free to rape or murder? Obviously not. Second, the "right to choose" assumes an individualistic outlook that undermines community; it fails to welcome "the least of these" unborn children into the world, where they can be cared for and loved. Third, this mindset fails to see life as a gift from God and thus a charge to keep. We are not sovereign over our own lives or the lives of others God has entrusted to us. Fourth, we do not choose our earthly family (or spiritual family for that matter), yet we are called to committed love—to seek the well-being of others, even if doing so is inconvenient and even challenging. Abor-

tion undermines the spirit of these loving commitments that make life meaningful.

**Personhood.** Unlike Thomson, most would agree that if the unborn are fully human persons, then their lives should not be taken. But how does one define "fully human" or "personhood"? Now, Father, Son and Spirit are *divine* persons in the Godhead, and there are *angelic* persons as well. Here we are discussing the category of *human* personhood.

Pro-abortionist philosophers such as Peter Singer and James Rachels attempt to define personhood along the psychological or social lines—for example, self-awareness, personal identity over time, rationality, social awareness, or possessing the desire for a certain kind of life ("quality of life"). Singer himself does not hide his animosity for the Jewish-Christian outlook and the idea of inviolable rights rooted in a God who made humans in his image. Others will claim that *recognizability* as a human, *viability* (the ability to survive outside the womb), or a certain level of *brain development* renders one human. These criteria can be used to judge whether the unborn can be killed or not. However, such suggestion wrongly anchors humanness or personhood in *function* rather than in *nature* or *essence*.

But what is more basic—the whole or the parts? Is essence or nature more fundamental than function? Essence (what makes us what we are) is more fundamental than function. Though we are designed by God to function as priest-kings in this world, we come with certain capacities to carry out these God-given tasks. That is, as humans, we come with certain essential capacities that make us human, even if we are not presently utilizing them. For example, humans have the capacity for self-awareness, but surely a person who is *sleeping* or *temporarily comatose* is still a full person even if her capacity for self-awareness is not being exercised. What about rationality? Our capability for rationality may be physically blocked by a blunt trauma to the head—or by Down syndrome or Alzheimer’s. But if it would be possible for those physical blockages to be removed, then those inherent abilities bound up in human nature could be realized.

What about the criterion of having “human-like” physical characteristics to qualify one as a “person”? As ethicist Francis Beckwith points out, mannequins look quite “human” but are far from being human. A hundred-year-old woman will look quite different from a

healthy newborn, but who would dispute that both are human? Whether the malformed Elephant Man or the midget, they belong to the species *homo sapiens*, and their divinely endowed worth is to be protected. What of the criterion of “viability” outside the womb? Of course, given the increased sophistication of medical technology, this depends on *where* one lives. Viability will be earlier in the United States than in tribal West Africa. And before modern medicine, viability was significantly later than it is today. Is the humanity of the unborn so arbitrary that it depends on the era or geographic location in which one lives?

The biblical concept of “the image of God” assumes that our role as priest-kings in this world involves the essentially human capacity to reason, know God, make choices, create culture, appreciate beauty and relate deeply. This recognition of human dignity inspired both the modern human rights movement<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>6</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005); Mary Ann Glendon, *The World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001); Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, ed. and trans. Ciaran Cronin and Max

the bioethics movement of the 1960s. It highlighted the sacredness of humans, regardless of their stage of development or physical condition. Daniel Callahan, a leader in the bioethics movement and cofounder of the Hastings Center, writes, “When I first became interested in bioethics in the mid-1960s, the only resources were theological or those drawn from within the traditions of medicine, themselves heavily shaped by religion.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, A. R. Jonsen’s account of the “birth of bioethics” credits the influence of the “Judeo-Christian religious tradition”<sup>8</sup> The “founding father” of the modern bioethics was Paul Ramsey (1913–1988), a Methodist professor. He took for granted that human value is “ultimately grounded in the value God is placing on it” and that no person “is ever much more than a fellow fetus.”<sup>9</sup>

What of the idea of a “useful life” or “biographical life” as the basis for estab-

Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 150–51.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Callahan, “[Religion and the Secularization of Bioethics](#),” *Hastings Center Report* 20 (1990): 2–4.

<sup>8</sup> A. R. Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ramsey, “[The Morality of Abortion](#)” in *Moral Problems*, ed. James Rachels (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 12–13.

lishing a legal right to life? Leo Alexander, director of the neurobiologic unit in the division of psychiatric research at Boston State Hospital and formerly serving with the Office of the Chief of Counsel for War Crimes, Nuremberg, documented how the “rational utility” principle (or “what is useful?”) guided medical thought in Germany between the two world wars; it came to displace fundamental moral and religious values. Under the Nazis, this Hegelian principle led to using “human experimental material” in medico-military research and to exterminate the “useless” in society—the chronically ill or the socially or racially unwanted.<sup>10</sup> Such elitist definitions of true personhood or what is “worthy life” not only led eventually to the attempted extermination of the Jewish race; in an earlier era it led to the enslavement of vast numbers of black “nonpersons.” The definition of some as subhuman or less worthy was the implication of the Dred Scott decision by our Supreme Court (1857), and it lay at the root of American justification of the slave system. Today it is used to justify abortion of unborn children.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Alexander, “[Medical Science Under Dictatorship](#),” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 241 (July 14, 1949): 39–47.

McQuilkin, Robertson, and Paul Copan. 2014. *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom*. Third edition. IVP.

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Journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, commenting on the same phenomenon, points out that the process began with the concept of the “value of life” and at first was applied only to severely, chronically ill, but it was gradually expanded until, under Hitler, it became the Holocaust. And he argued that the “abortion issue is far and away the most important one now facing what we continue to call Western Civilization.”<sup>11</sup>

Mother Teresa once said that nations refusing to welcome children by aborting them are the poorest of nations. Death comes to the unborn simply because they are an inconvenience, and the widespread practice of abortion is a clear sign that we live in a “culture of death.”

## Biblical Evidence

Scripture does not directly address the issue of abortion. This does not mean that God is indifferent to the issue any more than the Bible’s lack of direct teaching on suicide and euthanasia indicates moral neutrality. “You shall not murder” is the overarching principle and covers all varieties of intentionally taking innocent

human life. As we note later, Scripture indicates that the justifiable taking of human life includes just warfare, capital punishment, and self-defense. So do unborn human beings bear the image of God?

Most serious discussions of the biblical evidence for or against abortion wrestle with [Exodus 21:22–25](#)—the passage about two men fighting who accidentally injure a pregnant woman (and her unborn child). Two alternative translations are in view: she is struck and (a) “gives birth prematurely” or (b) she “has a miscarriage.” If the translation should be “gives birth prematurely,” the context and language suggest that further injury or “harm” could apply to *both* the woman and the unborn. If “has a miscarriage” is correct, then the penalty when an unborn child dies is merely a fine; if there is “further injury” to the woman, the penalty is proportional—“life for life, eye for eye.” Thus, some claim that the unborn has lesser value since only a fine is required. On the other hand, some argue that the Hebrew word *yālad* should be translated “give birth [prematurely]” rather than “have a miscarriage.” It means “go forth” or “give birth,” describing a normal birth ([Gen 25:26](#); [38:28–30](#); [Job 3:11](#); [10:18](#); [Jer 1:5](#); [20:18](#)); it is always used of giving

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, cited in Ronald Reagan, *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), p. 21.

birth, never of miscarriage.

Even so, since any death—whether of the mother or the unborn—would be *accidental*, a “life for life” scenario would *not* apply. Rather, a *fine* was typically demanded, as in the case of the goring ox (Ex 21:28–30). Also, in manslaughter cases (accidental death), the cities of refuge were made available (Num 25). So this passage is not decisive. Even if the penalties for killing a mother and the unborn were different, it does not follow that the unborn is less than human. And, again, accidental death is different from willfully killing, as with an abortion.

In Psalm 139, we do find strong support for the value of the unborn—the psalmist being the same self or “I” as the one developing being in the womb.

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my  
mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully  
and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret  
place,  
when I was woven together in the  
depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed body;*

*all the days ordained for me were  
written in your book  
before one of them came to be. (Ps  
139:13–16 NIV)*

The Bible consistently refers to conception when speaking of the beginning of one’s personal history. Genesis 4:1 says, “Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain.” Job lamented, “Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and that night which said, ‘A boy is conceived’” (Job 3:3). David traced his own identity back to conception, acknowledging, “In sin my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5).

An interesting account of fetal life is recorded in Luke 1. John the Baptist, a fetus of six months, leaps for joy (Lk 1:44) at the arrival of his cousin Jesus, who was in the earliest stages of prenatal development. Elizabeth addresses Mary as “the mother of my Lord” (Lk 1:43), not as “the future mother of my *potential* Lord.”

The common references in Scripture to God’s interest and call to people while still in their mothers’ wombs would be conclusive evidence that God considers these “fully human.” What about when God uses similar terminology of people before *conception*: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5; cf.

[Eph 1:4](#)). This does not refer to personal *existence* before birth. Mormons make that very claim. But to actually sustain that argument, Jeremiah would also be able to say *to God*, “And before *You* formed me in the womb, I knew *You!*” Rather, this text speaks of God’s *foreknowledge* and purposing to use individuals as prophets or to form a people for himself.

The biblical evidence suggests that the biblical writers saw a continuity between the prenatal and postnatal states. This is supported by the scientific and philosophical evidence, which points us to strongly affirming the continuity of a person or self who bears the divine image beginning at conception. The soul or self or “I” that you are today began at conception and has continued to the present; the human self is a uniquely created being who has a right or claim to protection and care at each stage of life. As Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who* reminds us, “A person is a person, no matter how small.”

## Abortion As Murder

Should a person who performs an abortion or who requests one be subject to the same penalties as one who kills a child or an adult? Why do we not name a miscarried embryo and hold a funeral service for it? Why do parents not grieve in the

same way, especially when the spontaneous abortion is early? Should the teenager, who, seduced and distraught, takes a “morning-after pill” be treated as if she murdered an adult? In our estimation, the abortion of a zygote or embryo is morally wrong because it bears God’s image from conception onward in a continuous personal existence extending beyond earthly life. That said, one who commits such an abortion should not be treated as one who commits premeditated murder.

What, then, is the sin? Both ancient Jewish law and contemporary law hold a person responsible for criminal neglect or reckless behavior that is not aimed deliberately at any person but results in harm or death. It is morally wrong—a violation of God’s law—and even the Hippocratic Oath took for granted the wrongness of abortion. While we believe that preventing conception before, during or after intercourse is not of itself wrong, the abortion of a zygote or embryo is a sin of reckless violence. Should this act then be criminalized? Should women having abortions be thrown into prison? We do not believe so.

Even before 1973, many state laws against abortion attempted to strike a balance of considerations. They sought to

uphold the sanctity of the unborn by criminalizing the *abortionist* who engaged in directly killing the unborn—particularly gruesome later in the third-trimester, when skulls would be crushed and bodies dismembered. These laws also took for granted that women seeking abortions tended to be *vulnerable* and *desperate*. In our culture, ignorance about abortion is far more widespread, and many are not convinced that the unborn are part of the human community. Women seeking abortions are not given the facts about the full humanity of the unborn, but are told that what is in their womb is “the product of conception” or “a blob of tissue.” As it turns out, women are the *second* victims of abortion, commonly pressured by boyfriends or husbands into having an abortion, and then potentially dealing with regret and guilt as they may realize later that they have taken a human life.<sup>12</sup>

## Attempts to Justify Abortion

How should such a position be applied to the many difficult problems and issues

<sup>12</sup> See Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 108–11.

that arise in this great contemporary moral issue?

***Economic and social well-being.*** This is probably the most trivial reason for violating the right to life of another human, but it is also probably the most common motivation for abortion. It appears that, second only to the drive for personal autonomy, the desire for freedom from the limitations of parenting and for an affluent lifestyle are primary motivations behind the pro-choice movement. Of course, for those—especially in many non-Western countries—where the desire is not for affluence but for escape from grinding poverty, the motivation may be somewhat higher. But the irony is that poor people are not the chief abortion advocates. In fact, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a chief advocate of the poor, considered abortion to be the greatest crime. Says Teresa, “It is a very, very great poverty to decide that a child must die that you may live as you wish.”

What about deaths through back-alley abortions if abortion were illegal? The number of deaths of mothers under the old system has been greatly inflated. In 1971, two years before the *Roe v. Wade* decision, there were only sixty-eight deaths from illegal abortions and abor-

tion attempts in the entire United States. Compare that with fifty-five million deaths of the unborn since 1973.

**Mental health of the mother.** Of higher value than her material welfare is the mental welfare of the mother. But is the potential of psychological damage to be compared with the certain loss of life and the possible agony of a violent, painful and protracted dying? Regardless of who is on what side of the abortion debate, the mother and the unborn child must not be pitted against each other. And if the pro-abortion side is solely concerned about the mother's well-being, then it should acknowledge the dangers to the mother who chooses abortion. In 2011, a study published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* showed how abortion has been linked to significant increased risk of not only depression and anxiety, but social phobia (61 percent), suicide ideation (59 percent) and various types of substance abuse (ranging from 142 to 313 percent).<sup>13</sup>

**Life of the mother.** Historically, Protestants have justified taking the life of the unborn when a continued pregnancy would put the life of the mother in jeopardy.

<sup>13</sup> Priscilla K. Coleman, "Abortion and Mental Health: Quantitative Synthesis and Analysis of Research Published 1995–2009," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 199 (2011): 180–86.

ardly. For example, an ectopic pregnancy—when the fertilized egg is trapped in the fallopian tubes—will lead to certain death for *both* the mother and the unborn. There may be other scenarios in which the mother or the unborn may live, but not both. Most Protestants would argue that preserving the mother's life has a self-defense justification, in addition to having to choose in a "tragic necessity" scenario—preserving the life of the wife and, possibly, mother of others so as to prevent a greater loss to the family and even to society. We should add that Roman Catholic teaching insists that unless *both* lives are in jeopardy, to deliberately take the life of one merely to avert the danger of loss to the other is not deemed ethically justifiable.

Whatever the outcome of the debate over unborn-life versus mother-life, the practical truth is that, due to the rapid advances of medical science, this dilemma is extraordinarily rare. Abortion is not justifiable based on the rarest of cases. In virtually all cases, taking innocent human life can be avoided.

**Unwanted children.** "No one should be forced to bring an unwanted child into the world." This argument is possibly the least worthy. In the first place, many unwanted children at birth become very

much wanted. Babies have a way with people. Furthermore, it can hardly be said that any child is unwanted in the present-day United States where the desire to adopt seems almost limitless. This is a clear, practical answer for unmarried mothers, who account for the vast majority of abortions. If the unborn were not human beings, the question of their wantedness may have some validity, but since they are human, the claim of unwantedness has no more merit than it would have in the case of the unwanted child who has already been born. Do we say, “No parent should be forced to *raise* an unwanted child”?

This question raises another: What happens to unwanted children? Do not unwanted children become abused children? Is it fair to bring a child into the world who must face such a future? This argument is not used for children and adults who may face possibly unpleasant futures—otherwise, the entire race would be in jeopardy. True, many now advocate suicide as preferable to continued intolerable suffering, but suicide is self-chosen; abortion is not. Before the 1973 Supreme Court decision it was said that abortion on demand would reduce child abuse, but during the first decade following that decision, even though fifteen million

unwanted children were aborted, child abuse climbed nearly 400 percent. One study showed that 90 percent of battered children were from *planned* pregnancies. But the truth is: *abortion is the ultimate child abuse*, and violence against the unborn seems to create an atmosphere—both personal and social—in which violence to the already born proves to be less abhorrent. Abortion is an insult to a culture of life.

To say that a woman does not “want” a being she has helped bring into existence is a gross betrayal of the life-compact already entered into; this is quite hypocritical. Why not rather face the consequences of one’s past choices and make sure that the child *is* wanted, either by the natural parent(s) or by others who stand in line awaiting the opportunity to adopt? This is a more honorable, civilized and moral way than killing.

One further word concerning wantedness. In every place where the prenatal determination of sex has become commonplace (such as India and China), unborn females have been aborted far out of proportion to males. How ironic that women, seeking to assert their rights at the expense of their own children’s right to life, actually open the way to a perverse “gendercide”—a frontal assault in what

turns out to be a genuine “war on women.”

All of this discussion should remind us who oppose the constitutional right to abortion to take responsibility to assist mothers with unwanted pregnancies. Not only should we oppose abortion, but we have a moral obligation to work toward providing alternatives. We can affirm a culture of life by caring for and even opening our homes or providing shelter for unwed mothers, not to mention involvement through foster care and adoption. We can assist parents who cannot cope with special medical or financial needs. We must demonstrate our love for mothers as we seek to protect their unborn children. Compassion with tears is more appropriate in creating a culture of life than anger and bitter words.

***Rape, incest and the handicapped.*** In the case of rape and incest, the new life did not originate through any choice of the mother; so the responsibility of the mother is of a different kind. What to do now is her *first* choice, not her second.

Ultimately, however, the answer to the terrible dilemma faced by a girl or woman who finds herself pregnant under such circumstances depends on whether the unborn is a human being. If it is, no matter what the source, to destroy it is

wrong. A *second* act of violence cannot correct the *first*. The mother’s lack of responsibility for the conception does not remove the child’s God-given right to life. The unborn child is not the attacker but is, in fact, a second victim, who should not receive capital punishment for its father’s crime.

There is a further problem concerning legislation that permits abortion in cases of rape or incest. Such laws invite trivialization of the crime of rape since women with unwanted pregnancies often have used this exception as a loophole, claiming to be victims of rape when in fact no rape occurred. If the rape is reported immediately, no legal exception would be needed, as the procedure would normally be contraceptive rather than abortive.

With increased sophistication in prenatal diagnosis, potential birth defects are more easily detected. As a result, up to 90 percent of the handicapped are aborted.<sup>14</sup> That said, it is better to suffer harm than to inflict it, and the response to the unborn child with a physical handicap is

<sup>14</sup> Michelle Bauman, “[Extreme Abortion Rate for Disabled Leads to DC Conference](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/extreme-abortion-rate-for-disabled-leads-to-dc-conference),” *Catholic News Agency*, January 19, 2012, [www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/extreme-abortion-rate-for-disabled-leads-to-dc-conference](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/extreme-abortion-rate-for-disabled-leads-to-dc-conference).

not to eliminate the little one but to care for her. If the fetus is human, then this unborn handicapped human, like the handicapped child or adult, has the right to life. Furthermore, in all but the few extreme cases, physical handicap does not need to mean a life not worth living. On the contrary, “The suicide rate among handicapped people is virtually zero.”<sup>15</sup> One survey indicates that 99 percent of adults with Down syndrome report that they are happy with their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Blessing and benefit come not only to the handicapped, but also to the caregivers, many of whom deepen in their compassion and even their courage while tending to the needs of others. This is movingly depicted in the book *Bright Valley of Love*—the true story of daring, courageous love in an effort to protect handicapped children in danger of Nazi extermination.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, caregivers often find themselves “humanized” in attending to the needs of others. University of North Florida English professor Chris Gabbard tells of his young son August

(when he was ten) who has cerebral palsy; he is completely nonverbal and cognitively nonfunctional and must wear a diaper. Before August was born, Gabbard followed Peter Singer’s thinking, confessing to prizing intellectual ability and despising “poor mental function.” When his son was born, he entered the intensive-care nursery with deep ambivalence: “What most stirred me was the way he resembled me. Nothing had prepared me for this, the shock of recognition, for he was the boy in my own baby pictures, the image of me when I was an infant.” Gabbard acknowledges that he cannot take vacations and that medical costs are significant. Nevertheless, he announces, “August, along with my daughter and my wife, is the most amazing and wonderful thing that has ever happened to me, for he has allowed me an additional opportunity to profoundly love another human being.”<sup>18</sup>

## Abortion Law

Despite the slogans, morality is legislated at least to some degree—against,

<sup>15</sup> Noted on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, April 22, 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, “Extreme abortion rate for disabled leads to DC conference.”

<sup>17</sup> Edna Hong, *Bright Valley of Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Chris Gabbard, “A Life Beyond Reason,” *The Chronicle Review*, November 7, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Life-Beyond-Reason/125242>.

say, rape, theft or murder. The *legal*, however, is not the *moral*, we have noted. Adultery or homosexual activity is immoral, but this does not mean these should be criminalized. But if abortion is the taking of innocent human life, however, it should be made illegal. But some say that laws enforcing the private religious convictions of some citizens should not be imposed on all. There is an element of truth in this. If laws are made that the broader community has no intention of enforcing, it is bad law as it promotes a lawless society. But to call abortion a private matter is far off the mark. Abortion immediately involves the unborn child, quickly involves others, such as the father, and soon has an impact on all society. In mainland China today, where 13 million abortions take place per year (in contrast to 1.6 million in the United States), the one-child policy has led to millions of sex-selection abortions favoring males, resulting in huge social problems that come with a huge shortage of women, including kidnapping women from neighboring countries to serve as brides for Chinese men.

Appealing to the “right to privacy” cannot be absolutized. If one’s private religious convictions demanded that he hold slaves, have many wives, discrimi-

nate against blacks, or mutilate Asians, these same liberal defenders of personal rights and freedoms would seek for legislation to stop him. The key questions are: *Whose* rights—those of the mother or the unborn? and, *which* rights—the right to life of the infant or some lesser rights of the mother?

As we’ve noted, half a loaf is better than none, and political debate may involve compromises on *policy*—though not on *principle*—in order to save as many lives as possible. For example, it is better to work toward laws prohibiting late-term abortions and taxpayer funding for abortions, requiring that parents be notified before their pregnant teenage daughter has an abortion, or requiring that an expecting mother see her child on a sonogram before choosing abortion, even if this means permitting abortion in cases of, say, rape or incest. After all, hard cases make bad laws. So while we should do all we can to protect innocent human life, on a political level we may need to work incrementally. All the while, we should seek, with God’s help, to change hearts and minds through education, persuasion and even conversion rather than forcing legislation on an unpersuaded population; this would likely both create a cultural backlash and harm the cause for

defending unborn life.

Furthermore, the church needs to challenge the presumed individualism embedded in the pro-abortion position. For example, if a teenage girl in our public school systems takes an aspirin at school, the school nurse notifies her parents; if she becomes pregnant, she can have an abortion without parental notification. It is this autonomous individualism that strikes at the heart of human community, which should welcome other humans, no matter how small. The presumed sovereignty of the individual opposes the fact that life is a sovereignly bestowed divine gift—one which humans can neither give nor take away. To seek meaning and fulfillment within one's own inner being fails to understand the kinds of commitments and virtuous character that make life meaningful. In word and deed, Christians should oppose such shallow individualism. They can model what true human community in Christ—the truest human—should look like. They can dedicate themselves to being a caring, loving community (Jn 13:35)—one that displays the beauty of a divinely grounded “culture of life” by welcoming children into our midst and caring for the helpless of all ages. This community in Christ has the privilege of

persuading hearts and minds about the necessary protection of the most helpless of humans and of advocating for laws respecting human life from conception to natural death. As we have noted, a caring community demonstrates and nurtures what true humanity looks like.

## Further Reading

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