

EVANGELICALS AND ABORTION

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I. TWO WORLDVIEWS

“It is not merely two ethics facing each other, but the world views of two epochs, two cultures—one on the way out, one on the way in.”¹ Thus John G. Milhaven has well stated the main problem in the abortion debate.

These two views have been moving toward each other for a long time but have now apexed, resulting in a clash of old and new moralities. It was bound to happen. Classical ethics went out when man began to “lose the view that human life was best understood in terms of an other-worldly destiny.”² The shift took place when man turned in on himself and saw the larger picture of his human condition—his completeness and his life. “The shift is from Classical man to Modern man.”³

The search for the meaning of man began when he became obsessed with worldly experience and broodingly asked: “Who am I? What am I?” Everything had to relate to experience in order to be valid. All else was suspect.

According to Milhaven, five hidden principles have emerged that have energized and directed modern thinking. Modern man sees himself and his life (whether good or evil) (1) as revealed in his experience of this world, (2) as the experience would be even if there were no God, (3) as it is shaped (or can be shaped) by technology, (4) as it occurs in the lives of ordinary people, and (5) as it is created by the unique self of man, by his ongoing self-creation or freedom.⁴

These hidden principles reflect a new morality, and we deal with them in human experience. Therefore the fetus does not have the same worth as a living person. Herein lies the tension: Is performing an abortion the same as committing murder? “The battle lines are drawn: tradition versus the new morality.”⁵

Because many Christians hold both worldviews—classical and modern—they continually compromise in other areas of life as well as the

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¹ J. G. Milhaven, *Toward a New Catholic Morality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 72.

² *Ibid.* 74.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* 78.

⁵ E.-H. W. Kluge, *The Practice of Death* (New Haven: Yale University, 1975) 2.

abortion issue. Milhaven suggests "that many Christians of the present historical juncture are ethically schizophrenic."⁶

It seems to me that there is a way for the Christian to be able to handle and control this "schizophrenic" ethic. The answer to every Christian ethical problem is to be sought through prayer, the study of Scripture, and honest intellectual searching: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Ps 119:18). We are sojourners on the earth, and we continually seek God's principles for making ethical decisions. Thus it would be helpful for us to look to the Scriptures to understand God's mind for us, since the Holy Spirit is to be our guide in making ethical decisions. We need this help because "abortion is at once a moral, medical, legal, sociological, philosophical, demographic and psychological problem not readily amenable to one-dimensional thinking."⁷ People differ violently on the morality, legality and social implications of abortion, and it appears to be a no-win situation.

While Genesis is primarily written to "define man's relationship to God, Genesis touches all sciences, philosophies, and industries."⁸ In Gen 1:28 we see that man has been instructed to have dominion over his world. God relinquished a great deal of power for him to use. After all, man was created in God's image, and with this comes the power to reason, to think logically and to manifest compassion and mercy. Man has been given dominion over everything that has the "breath of life"—which certainly must include human life.

In dealing with the scope of Christian ethics in community, Sittler makes the following remark that I believe is appropriate: "Man is created in community and for community. The proverb 'Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch' (a solitary man is no man) bluntly puts a truth which is central to biblical teaching. God's covenant is with a people."⁹

We have the right to dominion over everything—including the right to make decisions regarding everything that has the breath of life, as long as it is done in community and for the good of the community (or common good), under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In terms of the Genesis account mankind has been given dominion (authority) over the rest of God's creation and has been instructed to rule over it and subdue it (1:26-28). Everything is put under our feet (Ps 8:6), not for our own benefit but for God's glory. We are coworkers with God in this earthly task. We are like God in the sense of the responsibility and freedom he has given to us, and this involves our role in caring for and developing and improving a world that will glorify him.

⁶ Milhaven, *Morality* 81.

⁷ D. Callahan, *Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 1.

⁸ W. M. Clow, *The Bible Reader's Encyclopaedia and Concordance* (Cleveland: Collins, 1962) 157.

⁹ J. Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1958) 66.

II. BIBLICAL TEACHING ON MISCARRIAGE

Let us now consider Exod 21:22-25. We begin with the presupposition that it is a case of miscarriage in this text. It is assumed that the pregnant woman brings harm to herself when she enters into an argument between two men. If there is no harm to her but to her child, then the person who hurt her is fined as much as the woman's husband lays upon him.¹⁰ The text continues: "He shall pay as the judges determine." But the translation and meaning of that clause is very obscure. S. M. Paul renders it as "the payment to be based on reckoning"—that is, according to the estimated age of the embryo. He points to a possible parallel in the Hittite Laws (section 17): "If anyone causes a freewoman to miscarry—if (it is) the tenth month, he shall give ten shekels of silver, if (it is) the fifth month, he shall give five shekels of silver, and pledge his estate as security."¹¹ Again, the Code of Hammurapi has several sections (209-214) dealing with a similar subject. If a man strikes a pregnant woman and causes miscarriage, and if she does not die, he pays a sum of money—ten shekels of silver if she is of the nobility, five shekels if a commoner, and two shekels if a slave.¹² In the case of the fetus, money is demanded in payment of a fine and the fine is appropriate according to the age of the embryo. The older the embryo the more the fine, which indicates that the older the embryo the more valuable it becomes.

As we noted, the Exodus law deals with miscarriage. But it is interesting to note that the destruction of a fetus is penalized far less severely than is the killing of the mother. If the mother dies, then a life is given for her life.

Monetary compensation is demanded in the case of the aborted fetus (v. 22c), whereas the *lex talionis* applies when the mother is killed or harmed in any way. If therefore a miscarriage is involved in this law, our logic helps us conclude that divine law views a fetus as something of a different order than a mother.

We also conclude that when the "fetus" becomes a "child" (= is born), and then becomes a girl, and eventually becomes a pregnant woman, then she is more valuable than as a fetus in the womb. A life for her life is to be given if she is fatally wounded. So, we conclude, if the fetus were viewed in the Biblical material as an actual human being its destruction would have been punished by death and not a fine. Thus the fetus is considered the property of the parents, while the fine to be levied (in the extra-Biblical parallels) is apparently in correlation to the age of the fetus.¹³

¹⁰ J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 233.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ E. A. Speiser, "The Stem *pll* in Hebrew," *JBL* 82 (1963) 301 ff.

Some say, then, that this OT passage seems to indicate that the fetus is not considered an actual human being. But it will be at birth, and thus it will then be more valuable.

I find no Biblical passage that speaks of humans possessing personhood before birth, nor do I find any passage that says abortion is murder. But we must keep in mind that Exod 21:22 does not deal with a matter of deliberate abortion. So we cannot move from this passage to any definite stance on abortion.

III. EARLY-CHURCH VIEWS

To give some perspective it might be helpful to include some of the statements on abortion from the early centuries of the Christian era, found in both Jewish and Christian writers. As we delve into this area we see the issue hotly debated. I would hasten to add that we should regard these views as historical and not necessarily Biblical. History is valuable especially when we look at an age-old problem, since it can give us perspectives that may agree or differ from our own. It also helps us to know that the Christian community of the past wrestled with the same issues.

From the earliest days of ancient Greece and Rome to the time of Augustine, abortion was widely practiced by pagans and occasionally by Jews and Christians,¹⁴ even though the practice may not have been safe for a woman.

The reasons for abortion were similar to those found today. Sex appeal was an important reason, since rich women in particular felt that pregnancy was not flattering to their figures. And, as today, the most frequent reason for aborting was to hide illicit sexual activity, especially among the young.

Among the Jewish people two main views were found. The Alexandrian Jewish position viewed abortion as immoral, punishable by death, and "required punishment for damage to a fetus, according to its stage of development."¹⁵ The Palestinian view believed the fetus not to be a person and held a more lenient view. Both schools confined their discussion to accidental or therapeutic abortions. Neither considered the possibility of induced abortion for less than life-threatening reasons.¹⁶ It is significant to note that both these views were grounded in the Hebrew text of Exodus 21.

The matter of deliberate abortion is not spoken to in these cases. The Bible is silent in this area. The basic Jewish cultural principle that we can pick up, however, is that there was a strong "Jewish abhorrence of deliberate bloodshed, and its respect for life, including that of the unborn.

¹⁴ M. J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982) 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 44-45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 45.

This principle formed a natural foundation for the Christian writings we have on abortion.”¹⁷

The earliest specific Christian references to abortion are *Did.* 2:2 and *Barn.* 19:5, both of which read: “Do not murder a child by abortion.” Of the apologists in the ancient world Athenagoras, a Greek Christian, addressed the issue in A.D. 177 to Marcus Aurelius as follows: “What reason would we have to commit murder (in defense of the Eucharist) when we say that women who induce abortions are murderers, and will have to give account of it to God?”¹⁸

Regarding child sacrifice Tertullian stated: “We may not destroy even the foetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance.”¹⁹ He made an explicit connection between the words of Luke 1:41 ff. and the issue of abortion, the first Christian writer to do so.

Basil of Caesarea condemned all abortion as murder and a sin to be judged by God through the Church but also to be forgiven by his grace. Ambrose exalted the unborn child as God’s handiwork and referred to Jer 1:5 as showing God’s care for the fetus in the womb and the utter disrespect for God expressed by abortion.

Both Augustine and Chrysostom condemned abortion, but their views differed. For Augustine the destruction of an unformed fetus was not murder. For Chrysostom the fetus was an object of God’s care, and he claimed that abortion was murder. Jerome distinguished between the formed and the unformed fetus and said that a certain stage of development is necessary before there is a person and, hence, before there can be a murder.²⁰

We do not find any NT passage that deals directly with the abortion issue, and curiously enough there is no Biblical text that forbids procuring an abortion. We are therefore thrust upon our own ability to use reason and logic because we can glean very little from the Scriptures. They present us with an argument from silence.

Now we must consider some of the implications involved in the two worldviews we considered earlier. Kluge identifies those who hold to these worldviews as extreme traditionalists on the one hand and as moderate traditionalists on the other, the latter reflecting the new morality. The extreme view argues that “potential persons have the same moral status as actual persons—that in a very clear and definite moral sense an entity which in the course of time would become a person has the same rights and privileges as someone who already is a person.”²¹ So the conclusion in this view is that the potential human being has the same moral status as an actual person.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 54.

¹⁹ Ibid. 55.

²⁰ Ibid. 66–69.

²¹ Kluge, *Practice* 7.

The moderate traditionalist's view states that not all abortions are murderous, only those that are performed after the fetus has passed a certain point of development. "The point has been variously identified as the time at which the fetus quickens in the womb, acquires a soul, assumes a more or less human form, becomes independently viable, and so on."²²

We must remember that we deal with this question only because of the problem of sin. Therefore we must deal with the situation as it exists and not use a sinless world as the ideal by which we judge. If that were the case the question would be moot, for without sin there would be no reason for abortion.²³

IV. THE CELLULAR LIFE ISSUE

This brings us to the hard question as to when potential life becomes actual life, when the fetus becomes an actual human being. When we ask about the beginning of life we must be consistent with that principle and apply it to the end of life as well.

Joseph Still states that there are varying basic levels of life and corresponding death.²⁴ Cellular life is the life of all individual cells of a human being, and this begins at conception. The unfertilized egg and the spermatozoon each has half the chromosomes for a human cell. Upon the union of these two half-cells, cellular life begins. Cell growth continues by the multiplication of the dividing cells until there are eventually several trillion cells. The process of cellular life continues for about two years after the person is buried. If we are to hold that the soul²⁵ is present at conception (cell life) we must deal with some serious questions. In the case of twins, triplets, and so forth, the cell mass does not separate until six days later.²⁶ So if conception is the point at which the soul is present, then a twin would have half a soul, a triplet a third, and so on. I contend, however, that each human being has (more precisely, is) a soul. We must also consider that half of all conceptions are spontaneously miscarried, passing out the next monthly blood loss as a clot.²⁷ What are we to assume happens to these fetuses in terms of redemption and eschatological habitation? Will the next life include beings that have existed for just a few days or hours?

Another aspect we can investigate is when the fetus is capable of existing on its own outside the mother. It seems that when the fetus is

²² Ibid. 26.

²³ H. Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (New York: Harper, 1964) 241.

²⁴ J. W. Still, "We Need to Know Not Only When Human Life Ends But Even More Important, When It Begins," *Archives of the Foundation of Thanatology* 2 (Summer 1970) 66 ff.

²⁵ *Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. J. Hastings; New York: Scribner's, 1945) 872.

²⁶ P. Ramsey, "The Sanctity of Life," *Dublin Review* 511 (Spring 1967) 4.

²⁷ G. W. Corner, "An Embryologist's View," in *Abortion in a Changing World* (ed. R. E. Hall; New York: Columbia University, 1968), 1. 14.

able to live outside the mother it is to be considered a valued, actual human being and not just a potential human being. Actual life takes place, it seems to me, when the fetus is able to survive on its own outside the womb. Therefore until the fetus is able to exist in this fashion it is not considered an actual human being as we would consider the mother to be. This does not mean the fetus is of no value. As a potential human being it has great value, with all the necessary ingredients to becoming an actual human being. It is just not as great as that of the mother. Thus the life of a pregnant woman should be valued over that of the child she is carrying.

V. TWO THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Before the fetus can live outside the womb, abortion is a viable option because the mother is of greater value than the fetus. But no abortion is justifiable as such after the fetus has become viable—that is, after birth is possible.²⁸ Barth holds that the fetus is not a mere part of the mother, not just a thing. So he also concludes that abortion is not an option.²⁹ The sanctity of life principle, however, tells us this: “Whatever our evolving moral rules will be, they must be designed to promote the survival of the human species.”³⁰

We do know that the OT places great value on the fetus. In Ps 139:13–18 conception is recognized as a gift of God and is an act of creation involving both humans and God. It indicates the psalmist’s awareness of God’s care of him prior to his birth. Luke 1:41–44 is a NT illustration of the same principle regarding John the Baptist. According to Jer 1:4–5 God’s sovereign purpose cannot be overlooked. It is worked out for us in this way: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” Paul argues that the followers of Christ were chosen by God, not at conception or at birth but before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4). The struggles of Esau and Jacob in Rebekah’s womb prefigured their struggles in later life (Gen 25:23). Samson’s mother was told to abstain from alcoholic drinks during pregnancy. Her son was to be a Nazirite and would be forbidden to drink wine (Judg 13:7). These Biblical passages tell us about God and his working out of his purposes with people. They provide insights into God’s purposes in the lives of those who emerged as and were ordained to be significant in God’s kingdom. God protected them in the womb as well as in life, and we are to respect this aspect of God’s dealings with us as working together in his will. We as Christians must affirm and uphold the sanctity of life principle.

While it is true that the Christian so regards life, there is also another aspect to be considered. This leads us to the principle of the quality of life.

²⁸ N. L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 8.

²⁹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Part IV* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961) 3.415.

³⁰ Callahan, *Abortion* 329.

Some people are not so fortunate as to enjoy a good measure in this area of their lives. There are Biblical examples of God's people cursing the day of their birth (Job 3:5; Jer 20:14). Jesus said of Judas Iscariot: "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Matt 26:24).

"The universal prevalence of abortion, legal and illegal, and the extraordinary trouble women will go to to achieve an abortion, point to the existence of an 'instinctive' drive for abortion once the internal and external stresses on a woman's life reach a critical point."³¹ These stresses could include concern for the quality of life for the existing children in a family. A good example to show such stress is as follows: "A woman with an alcoholic husband, seven children, no friends, and arrears in the rent has social problems which cannot fail to influence her mental state and hence the justification for therapeutic abortion."³²

There are many more issues involved and principles that we could uncover, but suffice it to say that we should probably be more concerned with this second principle than the first. While the Scriptures establish the sanctity of life, the stress of Scripture is on the quality of life. According to the statistics done in this area, women seem to gravitate in this direction when the chips are down. In the pro-life movement great attention is given to life in the first nine months, but little afterwards.³³

In summing up this area perhaps we should conclude by noting how we treat the fetus at death. In most societies, including ours, the value of the fetus is undermined in its treatment at death. If through miscarriage or a stillbirth the Church does not give to it the full status of life in that it is not buried, not named, or not baptized, then "God had no plan for such a child."³⁴ In several hospitals known to me it has often been the practice to dispose of the fetus by way of the incinerator—a type of cremation.

VI. A THIRD WORLDVIEW: CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

Having considered the two worldviews on this subject, I would like to discuss a third view: Christian humanism. Again we must remember that we deal with this question of abortion only because of sin. We must deal with the situation as it exists and not use a sinless world as the ideal by which we judge.³⁵ "While as individuals we can through the atoning work of Christ upon the Cross abandon our disobedience and regain that fellowship with God which had been his original plan, we still live in a world which no longer represents God's will."³⁶

We look to the Scriptures again for guidance in helping us establish some principles. The central commandment of the NT is to love the Lord

³¹ Ibid. 65.

³² Ibid. 64

³³ R. P. Roth, classroom notes (1983).

³⁴ R. F. R. Gardner, *Abortion: The Personal Dilemma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 127.

³⁵ Thielicke, *Ethics* 241.

³⁶ Gardner, *Abortion* 117.

our God utterly and then to love our neighbor as ourselves. We must show compassion and mercy to one another and take charge of our environment, our present domain. Jesus taught some of the following principles: Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate; pass no judgment and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned; acquit and you will be acquitted.

Compassion, as Jesus taught it, considers both the fetus and the mother. "You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (Jas 5:11). With the knowledge God continually gives us in the advancement of medical science, we can stop the growth of a terribly deformed fetus. He has given us this right to have dominion over "everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life." We are created in the image of God and are his sons and daughters. He wants us to be able to care for ourselves. And he has shown us how through his own mercy and compassion for us. It is then the work of the Holy Spirit to inspire, instruct and mature us as we learn daily to know what it means to be human.

In his presidential address to the convocation of Canterbury, Archbishop of Canterbury Arthur Michael Ramsey suggested that the line at which abortion was legalized should be drawn to cover cases where there was risk to the life or mental or physical health of the mother. He said that the absolutist position virtually equating abortion and infanticide could not be held today. Although the human fetus was sacred, he said it was unreal to identify a fetus with a human life. One was the prelude to the other.³⁷

We must depend upon God for wisdom. In dealing with our imperfect world we cannot depend solely on human wisdom. We are continually reminded of our fallenness and our dependence upon God for making good decisions when we reflect upon the defective ones in our society. Our hearts are stunned into compassion when we visit places where many defective people are together (as in an institution) and we observe how cruel nature has meted out their fate. Or was it nature that did this? Perhaps somewhere along the line we could have prevented their despair. Had human responsibility been exercised perhaps there would have been another story.

The Christian ideal is always to preserve life and to protect it at whatever cost or sacrifice we must make. But there are times when compromise is necessary.

Perhaps if we jog our memories and reflect upon God's character as portrayed to us in Scripture we can glean a clue as to how we are to react to difficult situations. First, we note that God is a compassionate God. We saw this reflected when he was willing to compromise with Abraham to save a city. Second, God repents. He was sorry he ever made man and sent the flood, yet he established the rainbow and said he would covenant

³⁷ Milhaven, *Morality* 215.

with man never to flood the earth again. Third, God demands obedience; he follows through on his promises. God also changes his mind; he is flexible and willing to compromise.

This frees us up so that we can display similar attributes. We are not out of keeping with God's character if we reflect him in this way.

I cannot argue too strongly, however, that it is the Christian way to recognize that prenatal life is sacred and must be protected. Mutual care and concern is an obligation that God has entrusted to us. It is a mandate of Christian humanism. To destroy a life for reasons of convenience is to devalue that life. In other words, if the mother rejects the fetus because she simply does not want it, that is a totally unacceptable ethical ground for abortion. This was so often the case with the middle- and upper-class women in the early Church as referred to earlier. If a fetus is the result of intercourse by consenting parties, then the fetus has the right to live. This is where human responsibility comes in, and this God-given responsibility is not to be abrogated by us.

Only the most extreme circumstances can provide grounds for abortion when it cannot be resolved in any other way. Almost all ethicists agree that abortion is allowed if the mother's health is in jeopardy—that is, if the birth of the fetus would be fatal to her life.

The laws of our land—and those of other western nations—permit abortion in the following areas: when a pregnancy results from rape or incest and there is authoritative certification. If the woman conceives against her consent through rape or incest and she wants an abortion, her request should be respected. In this case she is more than just a body. She is a person created in God's image, and to deny her this is to deny her personhood. As Norman Geisler has expressed it: "A potentially human person is not granted a birthright by violation of a fully human person unless her consent is subsequently given."³⁸

Regarding incest Geisler states: "Allowing an end to blossom in the name of a potential good (the embryo) seems to be a poor way of handling evil, especially when the potential good (the embryo) may itself turn out to be another form of evil. It is better to prevent the evil from coming to fruition than to perpetuate it."³⁹

The third instance of a permissible abortion is when a child will be born with grave physical or mental defects. This option again affirms our responsibility in considering or being concerned with life after birth as well as life before birth. A friend of mine recently had to sacrifice a Down's Syndrome child in the hope of having a normal healthy child. The malformed child would not have made the bearing of a healthy child possible because of the medical expenses that would have resulted from the birth of the former. The decision was made to abort the malformed fetus. This proved to be a wise decision, because another fetus was conceived and turned out to be a healthy, beautiful child. The sacrifice was worth it.

³⁸ Geisler, *Ethics* 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

This is a good example of using the authority given to us by God to control and rule our lives rather than letting a bad situation develop and ruin several lives. To be responsible coworkers with God helps us care for and develop the world God has made for us in the quality of people we can produce to live in this world to glorify him.

I have treated the issue of accountability rather extensively. There are many new issues developing in the areas of biomedicine and technology that cannot be addressed here due to lack of space. But I feel that once science gets underway in making available to us many alternatives to enrich our lives, we will be besieged with a whole new world of ethical issues that will really send us to the drawing board for answers.

For example, sex selection in the child desired is on the horizon for married couples. *In vitro* fertilization and embryo transfer has come of age. The fertilization of human eggs in the laboratory is developing rapidly in acceptance. The gestation of embryos and fetuses in surrogate mothers is making parenthood possible for many childless couples. Artificial insemination is also helping many infertile couples. What about the moral implications of such techniques?

We have just begun to touch the tip of the iceberg regarding the ethical problems that are surfacing and will continue to surface in the future. The ethical dilemmas are going to increase rather than decrease. We are going to need all the help we can get from ethicists and theologians. Our work as Christians living in a world beset by sin is cut out for us. Easy, pious, simplistic answers will not do. The Church cannot ignore the issues. My question: Will she be able to meet the challenge of the future? I hope so.