

WHAT PRICE ABORTION?

by Ray C. Stedman

The problems of abortion yield themselves to solution only when viewed against the background of reverence for human life and its theological base, for, to quote John R. W. Stott, "Man is a unique creation, the object of God's loving care in both creation and redemption. The reason the Bible forbids the taking of human life, except judicially, is that it is the life of a human being with a divine likeness."

The humanist viewpoint, which views man as fundamentally an animal, gives us no reason to even confront the question, for if man is only another animal he can be treated like one, therefore, there is no moral or spiritual question involved. But if, as the Bible declares, man is uniquely singled out to bear the stamp of God's image, and to be the object of Christ's redemptive love, then destroying human life assumes moral and spiritual implications because it brings God into the picture and we face our responsibility to him and his unchanging laws.

"Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." (Gen 9:6 {RSV})

This is the recorded decree of God -- not because human life was cheap (the murderer's), but because human life (the victim's) was precious. This word from God bears witness to the value and sanctity of human life. This is the context in which the Christian views the problem of abortion.

I don't have to tell you how pertinent this subject is. Everybody is talking about it. But, as Christians, we must always come back to the Scriptures for our frame of reference and try to settle such questions as this on the basis of what the Word of God says -- regardless of what the world thinks and does about them.

To help us think it through, I'd like to point out what I think are the crucial questions on this issue and then summarize what I feel the Scriptures give us to reach conclusive answers to these questions. Unfortunately, this isn't one of those areas where we can cite passages that give us clear-cut answers. Our conclusions must be reached more from the standpoint of general principles than from specific statements. But I think the principles that apply are very clear, and we should not find it difficult to draw conclusions from them.

The first, and, perhaps, the most crucial, question is: "Is a fetus a human being at every stage of its development, that is, from conception onward? Is it to be regarded as human life from the very beginning?"

The position of secular writers on this question varies widely. Some take the stand that a fetus is not to be regarded as a human being until it is actually born and that any arrest of its life before birth is not the taking of life. Others do not agree to that. Many people would say the fetus becomes human life at the point of "quickening," that is, the first time that the fetus shows life, jumps within the womb. Others say the fetus becomes a human life at the time when the heartbeat can be detected.

It seems, though, that very few secular writers would take the position that it is human from the point of conception unless they are strongly influenced by moral or religious considerations. Roman Catholic writers might take that position. The position of the Catholic Church has been consistently against abortion, but, like so much that is happening today in the Catholic Church, the official stance is one thing, while its practice is quite another. Not much effort is being made to enforce the official position of the church due to the controversy raging today. Of course, Catholics would go even further, saying that even the act of contraception, of preventing conception, is proscribed by Scripture, because it represents an aborting of God's will. But that position would find few Protestant defenders.

When we come back to the Scriptures on the question of abortion, it seems to me that it is almost assumed in the Bible that human life is present in the fetus. It is like the argument about the existence of God -- very little Scripture could be used to answer the philosophical claim that God doesn't exist, because Scripture assumes that he does. This matter is much the same -- Scripture simply assumes that human life is present in the fetus and that it is there from the beginning.

Of the Bible passages that deal with this subject, a noteworthy one is Psalm 139, which refers unmistakably to the fetus before birth. Remember that this Psalm deals with a man's search for his own identity. Let's read at least the first half of this Psalm:

**O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!
Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
and art acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
Lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.
Thou dost beset me behind and before,
and layest thy hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, I cannot attain it. (Psalm 139:1-6 RSV)**

"O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me." Notice the use of personal pronouns all the way through. "Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up..." This portrays the wonder of the psalmist at the incredible intimacy of the knowledge of God. He goes on to say that it encompasses even his thought life. He acknowledges that God knows him better than he knows himself, that he understands the inner workings of his being, the unconscious developments of his life, that he is far more aware of every intimate detail of a man's life than the man himself. God's knowledge of man is far beyond what man is able to know of himself and is therefore a source of wonder to him.

**Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to thee,
the night is bright as the day;
for darkness is as light with thee. (Psalm 139:7-12 RSV)**

Notice Verse 7: "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" Here he's facing the implications of this knowledge that there is no conceivable state of being in which a human can exist (before he is encompassed in the body, after he is in the body, before birth or after death, or within the whole of life) in which God does not know him, and that there is no escape from the being and presence of God.

Then he comes to an actual description of his embryonic state:

**For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are thy works!
Thou knowest me right well;
my frame was not hidden from thee,
when I was being made in secret,**

**intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in thy book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:13-16 RSV)**

"For thou didst form my inward parts; thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb." The Hebrew word for *knit together* really means "thou didst unroll me." You know how the fetus is rolled up; it develops in this fetal position. The idea here is that from the very beginning God forms and begins to unroll the fetus. The psalmist is impressed by the wonder of this: "I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was made in secret."

Do not be misled by the next phrase, "the depths of the earth." This doesn't mean that fetal growth takes place underground. It's really a poetic phrase that expresses something of the mystery of life. It pictures something that is hidden and therefore difficult to discover. While his life was at this stage, where it is difficult to understand or even investigate, God's understanding of the psalmist's being and identity was clear. Notice that there is no change in the personal pronoun: it is still "I" and "me" describing the fetal state, just as it is when he is speaking about himself as a grown person.

He says, "Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance." That is clearly the embryo. "In thy book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God!" The language here attempts to convey the fact that there is no conceivable state of the human being that does not involve identity before God. This is strong evidence that, in God's view (and he ought to know), the fetus is a form of human life even in its undeveloped state.

Note that nature itself confirms this. If you find a seed lying on the ground and want to know what kind it is, you plant it and see. The seed never makes a mistake. Inherent in the seed are all the characteristics of the grown plant. This is true in all the natural realm so it seems logical that it is true in human life as well: The moment the fertilized seed is there, all that it will become is inherent within it. Therefore, we conclude there is human life from the very beginning, from the point of conception.

Another reference that helps to confirm this view is Hebrews 7:9-10. It speaks of Levi as paying tithes to Melchizedek while he was yet in the loins of his father Abraham. Here, even the sperm of Abraham is regarded as having identity. Levi is identified even before he was conceived (and Abraham wasn't even his father -- he was his great-grandfather). Yet Levi is identified as being involved in the characteristic acts of Abraham before he was even conceived.

And you can carry this line of thinking clear back to the fact that in some sense the whole race is found seminally in Adam in the same way. Here we are facing an almost unexplorable mystery of life -- which is nevertheless true. That's why Paul can say in Romans 5 that we all sinned in one man, and he hangs a lot on that point of his argument.

Another strong confirmation of the human identity of the fetus is in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This is the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth while both were with child.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry. "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:39-44 RSV)

Now joy is a human phenomenon. Elizabeth was six months into her pregnancy, "this is the sixth month with her who was called barren," (Luke 1:36). So at six months we see there was a clear expression of a human emotion within the womb. And Mary had just conceived -- yet John in Elizabeth's womb is reacting to the person of Jesus in Mary's womb! This is a very strong point. A lot of the weight of argument lies right here.

This is saying that Elizabeth's unborn baby sensed the presence of the Lord Jesus in Mary's womb -- that's why it says that "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41), and "the babe ... leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44).

Here, we conclude, the emotion of joy is being expressed through the humanity of the fetus. Now this isn't just something that is imposed upon the fetus by God so that he makes it twitch, and then it is called a reaction of joy. That would make the terms meaningless; it must be that the fetus in some way feels and expresses joy. In another place, Luke 1:15, it talks about John's being filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb -- and only human beings are filled with the Spirit. All this we take as evidence that Scripture teaches that a human life exists from the very moment of conception.

Now we are coming to the second step. The first has been to establish that there is human life in the fetus. The second crucial question is this: "What does aborting that type of human life involve? Is it first-degree murder or is it considered a lesser crime?"

At the outset we suggested that we should not regard abortion in the same way as we would view a man's deliberately killing another in cold blood. In other words, it isn't first-degree murder to arrest this kind of life, though it is a form of taking life. The fact that there is a lesser penalty prescribed for an act of manslaughter as opposed to an act of murder doesn't mean there is no taking of a human life in a manslaughter case. It means that the circumstances are such that there is less culpability involved.

We have concluded, I trust, that the Scriptures say to us that the fetus is a person all the way. That's what Psalm 139 is saying. It uses the same personal pronouns for the fetal development before birth as it does after birth. I think we have to see it as a person. Now the lesser degree of blame attached to ending life through abortion is not because the fetus is not a person, but because it is more difficult to recognize it as a person. The degree of culpability is involved here. The degree to which a person acts deliberately and in full knowledge of what he is doing establishes the difference between murder and manslaughter.

The basis for lessening the degree of blame for a crime is not the quality of life that's involved, but the degree of understanding of the value of that life. The Scriptures, then, in my judgment, indicate that human life exists from the very point at which conception occurs. But abortion is to be regarded as something less than outright, deliberate murder. It doesn't bear that same degree of culpability if pregnancy is terminated.

That leads to the third question: "What effect does abortion have upon society?"

Here again we have general principles set forth in Scripture. That is, that when men act in ignorance (as Paul put it about himself), they are able to obtain mercy because they did things ignorantly, in unbelief. God's mercy does come in at this point; nevertheless, there are certain natural results that accrue which God does not set aside.

Despite the ignorance of man, there still is a penalty exacted by God -- which we term "natural result" or "natural consequence" -- that is not altered by mercy. Therefore, human society suffers the consequences of acts, like abortion, that are not a fulfillment of God's righteous will. The major thing we ought to bear in mind, and to teach, in a Christian stand against abortion is that there is an effect upon society. To a great degree the ignorance of men today about this whole matter of abortion is defended and preserved. We are being told that it is an individual matter and is justified on that basis: "Well, I haven't done any harm to anyone else. It's my body and I can do what I like with my own body." Christians have to come out and say, "Look, this is not true. No man is an island. We are all together in this, and what hurts one hurts all." The hurt that affects society as a result of this, and which God exacts, goes clear back to the idea that if any man takes another man's life, "by man shall his blood be shed," (Gen. 9:6 {RSV}). In other words, violence begets violence. Thus, when there is a violent termination of life (which abortion is to some degree), this begets more violence in society; and when it becomes widespread, it becomes increasingly felt in society.

For example, a large percentage of the population in Japan is regularly practicing abortion. Does this mean that we can expect that society to reap bloodshed within itself? Yes, we can. The bloodshed can come about in various ways, some of which will be obviously abortion-related and some of which will not. For instance, it

may take the form of a plague or of increased incidence of disease; it may even take the form of an outbreak of war, or an increased crime rate, or suicides. God is working within human society in all the various forms in which Satan, the "murderer" {John 8:44}, is permitted to exercise his will, and Satan is given more toehold in society as men give in at these points. Therefore, the devil is able to exercise his desire to murder in various ways. We can see this even now in the Japanese culture. They have tremendous numbers of traffic deaths, etc. For years Japan has had one of the highest suicide rates in the world. They've been involved in wars; in World War II God judged Japan as much as he did the United States.

An obvious example of this is the devaluation of life itself. If we consider the fetus to be non-human, then there's a decline in appreciation and understanding of the value of human life. And without a sense of the worth of human life, people act violently in a number of ways, one of which is the current loosening of abortion laws.

This is part of the larger picture, too, of the whole sexual behavior of humanity. Certain passages state that God judges society within that society itself and brings upon it weakness, death, darkness, and hurt, because of sexual immorality. For instance, "For this cause, the wrath of God comes upon the children of disobedience" (cf, Eph 5:3-6, Col 3:6 RSV). Widespread sexual immorality of any kind always brings judgment on a society. Abortion is a form of sexual immorality arising from the widespread practice of sexual promiscuity.

Another example of this truth is in Hosea, where we read about the case that the Lord has against the inhabitants of the land. Hosea begins with their lack of faithfulness: There is no knowledge of God in the land. Then he says the result is swearing, deception, killing, stealing and adultery, and they use violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed (cf, Hosea 4:1-3). Therefore the land mourns. The same progression -- disengaging from God, sexual promiscuity, immorality, then violence, then the whole land infected -- is what we see America going through today.

One further thing should be said on this -- that there is a place for therapeutic abortion in individual cases. Where, if a mother's life and a child's life is in jeopardy and it is a matter of saving one or the other, there is some warrant for choosing the mother as opposed to the fetus, because she is a more developed life, has more ties to life around, affects more people and so on. There is some justification in that. But abortion is certainly not justified in the case of the convenience of the mother versus the life of the fetus. That's another point entirely.

Sometimes, too, it's really hard to distinguish what would be additional justifiable cause for abortion: There are physical problems and emotional problems -- and where do you draw the line concerning emotional problems? These are hard decisions for which we have no concrete answer from Scripture. But this is something that Christians are going to have to wrestle with -- increasingly so, and no matter how difficult the task -- for we are to be "salt" in society.

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