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**December 6, 1989**

**Pastoral Theology as it Relates to Abortion**

## Pastoral Theology as it Relates to Abortion

The sanctity of life or abortion issue is a very “hot” topic currently in our American society. This single issue has the volatility to determine political “life” or “death” for our politicians depending on which side of the issue they take and which way the voters are leaning. It is the cause of riots in our big-city streets; it is the cause of demonstrations, fund raisers, and political lobbying. It can cause heated debates in beauty salons and barber shops, as well as factories and business offices. It has attracted widespread media coverage (whether nationally on the News, Night Line, or locally on the editorial page of the newspaper) as the whole population seems to be polarized on one side or the other of this very emotional issue. As recently as this past week, a Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in California made the discussion to not allow a female politician who is running for public office to participate in the Eucharist during weekly mass because she has taken a position contrary to that of the Church on the abortion issue. Is the issue one of separation of church and state, a woman’s right to freedom of choice or control over her own body, or is it really a much larger moral issue?

Abortion is not simply a topic for philosophic, political, social, or even religious debate because it is a reality. Abortions are taking place at an ever increasing number. The moral question needs to be answered because **if** the aborted fetus is a human being then these abortions are **murder** and nothing less! The numbers alone are staggering:

Legal abortions increased from 898,000 in 1974 to 1,574,000 in 1982, according to researchers at the Alan Guttmacher Institute. Of those obtaining abortions in 1981, 66 percent were under age 25, and 77 percent were unmarried. This last figure shows that abortions in the United States are most frequently sought as a “solution” to the problem of pregnancy outside of marriage.

Abortion represents a \$700-million-a-year industry in this country. The United States leads the world in teenage abortions, with over 500,000 every year...

These figures mean that each day an average of 4,257 [fetuses] are aborted in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

This is not just a theoretical issue. Abortion is big business. It generates millions of dollars a year and provides many jobs. It affects millions of women and as many men and as many families because each woman who has an abortion is the daughter of someone and perhaps even a mother herself.

The issue is obviously very complex and multi-faceted but if there is moral dimension to it at all, our whole approach will necessarily be affected. If the issue can be defined totally in terms of women's rights, human rights (i.e. the right to freedom of choice), or separation of church and state then our response to the issue will be one of "personal preference." But, if the issue includes a moral element then that moral question will necessarily take priority in our approach to the issue. And this is precisely the situation that we face in the abortion issue because the moral question of whether the abortion should be considered murder or not must take precedence over **all** other questions! This does not mean that the other questions are unimportant; it is simply a matter of priority. The murder of a human being (if that is what abortion is) should generate more concern than the violation of a person's right to choose something for the sake of convenience!

Apparently, abortion in the ancient world was not uncommon. In fact, both Plato and Aristotle accepted and at times even promoted the practice. However, Hippocrates (known for his Hippocratic oath for physicians) and the Code of Hammurabi (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC) prohibited it as did the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, New Jersey), 1985, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

Christian documents all the way back to the *Didache* (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century) specifically prohibited abortion and by 314 AD “Christian condemnation of abortion was reflected in canon law.”<sup>3</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new scientific discoveries showing that a new human being was in existence from the moment of conception only served to increase the concern for limiting abortion. It was only after 1967 that states in the USA begin to extend the conditions under which abortion could be legal to various social circumstances including the number of current children and financial need. And it was the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling of 1973 that effectively made abortion up until the very moment of birth legal in all 50 states.<sup>4</sup>

Why? What was the reason for this change from hundreds of years of legal precedent? One of the issues of the case was the distinction between “actual” versus “potential” human life. The resulting line of reasoning accepted the clear evidence (for it is **impossible** in light of the scientific evidence to conclude that the fetus is simply a lump of tissue) that the fetus was in fact a human life but it went on to say that it was only a “potential” human life and therefore not entitled to all the rights and considerations that an “actual” human life (i.e. the mother) would have. The state decided that its interest in the “potential” human life did not outweigh the rights of the mother with regard to her freedom to choose and to have control over her own body.

However, the distinction between “actual” and “potential” raises many more problems that it would seem to solve. For instance, when does “potential” become “actual?” Is it at the moment of birth? If so, why then? What is it about the moment of birth (or the moment of viability, for that matter) that makes it so significant?! If not, then should not infanticide be legal as well?

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-133.

This brings us to the very heart of the question. What criteria does one use in determining when “actuality” takes place and who is the one who should make the discussion? Should the criteria be based on function? If so, then a person who is in a coma or even sleeping (and therefore not “functioning”) could be killed without the act being regarded as murder! The idea of “function”, therefore, does not help to answer the question, either.

There is no “difference in kind” that can be established as a criteria between an adult and a fetus. Only a “difference in degree” can be established. But this difference in degree is useless as a criteria for deciding when it is OK to kill and when it is not. You have not gained any ground because you still have to find a criteria for deciding where to draw the line. For example, is it worse to kill an adult than to kill a child? Obviously, moral decisions cannot be made based on any differences shown to obtain in degrees or we would be forced to answer the last question with a “yes.”<sup>5</sup>

Much time has been spent on looking at the issue from a philosophical/ logical perspective but there are still certain presuppositions that could be challenged and need support. The most obvious is, “Murder is wrong.” Why? Who says so?! Most people would not be willing to ask such a question but it really is a valid question. As Christians it brings us back to God and his revealed word for the answer.

Although there is no passage from the Bible that can be cited that specifically prohibits abortion, there are several passages that are relevant in the debate. Gen. 1:27 says that God created human beings in his own image. Therefore, every being that is human (i.e. not a beaver, etc.) has the image of God and thus has worth. This must be considered even with respect to a developing fetus. In Psalm 139:13-16 King David writes that God had been intimately involved in his fetal development while he was still in his mother’s womb. Indeed, life is a creation of and a gift from God from the very instant it begins. Add to these verses the sanctity of life as seen in the prohibition against

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Kreeft, *The Unaborted Socrates*, (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois), 1983, pp. 54f.

murder in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). It is unlawful to take any innocent human life including that of an unborn fetus.

Another line of argument from the Bible relates to Jesus and the incarnation. As we enter Advent and think about the significance of Christmas we are reminded again of the priceless gift God gave to us in sending his own Son to become a man to live among us! What implications does this have for the abortion issue?! When did God become a “man”? At birth?! No, at conception when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary (Luke 1:35)!

It is at this point that we can say that abortion on demand is wrong because the fetus is a living human being that has inherent worth because he/she has been given life by God and has been created in the image of God. Therefore, it should not be killed just as no other living human being should not be killed. It has inherent, inalienable human rights of its own which have been endowed by its Creator! The circumstances of its conception make no difference. Abortion should not be allowed even if the fetus was conceived as a result of rape, incest, failure to use birth control, etc. The fetus still has its own right to life.

Two additional questions are usually raised at this point, however. First, what if the fetus is known to have a birth defect or will in some other way suffer in terms of **quality** of life? This, however, is simply another way of asking if there is a “difference in degree” between the “defective” fetus and a “normal” human being which should affect the moral issue involved. The answer, as before, is that although we should feel the loss of having a “perfect”, healthy baby with the parent(s), this is no reason at all for having an abortion. After all, who should judge whether that life would be worth living or not? The second question is, what if the mother’s life is somehow endangered? This, of course, would be a sad case indeed. It usually is not a matter of choosing one life over the other, however, but of choosing to lose the baby only or of choosing to lose both the baby and the mother. In such a case, everyone agrees, the effort should be made to save the mother even though that effort might kill the fetus. Is

this a double standard? No. There is a vast difference between, on the one hand, abortion which **seeks** to kill the fetus and, on the other hand, an effort to save the mother's life which, as a secondary and **undesirable** consequence, happens to take the life of the fetus.

A church which takes seriously its opposition to the immoral killing of millions of innocent children will want to do what it can to alleviate financial and other burdens encountered by women who elect to carry an "unwanted" pregnancy to full term. This may include offering to take unwed mothers-to-be into church homes to care for them during their pregnancies as well as finding good homes for children that may have to be placed up for adoption by young and otherwise not capable mothers. Attractive alternatives must be provided for women who are not Christians and would normally consider an abortion as an option. Also, Christ's offer of forgiveness must be extended to the myriads of women who suffer the unbearable guilt of past abortions. If these things are not done and the laws are changed to reflect our position, then we will be forcing women to seek illegal, unsafe abortions in order to end their unwanted pregnancies.

This paper has necessarily been very superficial because of space constraints. There are many more questions and issues that could be raised with regard to abortion but herein lies a beginning for a "Pastoral Theology" on the issue. We must look to Scripture for the answers to the fundamental issues concerning human worth and the prohibition against murder. These can be argued from a secular perspective as well but as Christians the battle lines are drawn more easily and clearly when we look at the Bible.

How far should we go in the struggle to make our position law? This brings up the whole question of the legitimacy of civil disobedience which is another topic (paper?!) altogether! This is surely a life or death issue for the children being killed but there are many things that can be done short of civil disobedience. Therefore, suffice it to say that until we have exhausted all other possibilities we might save civil disobedience as a last resort. We should continue to demonstrate in even larger numbers. We should

picket (but not obstruct) hospitals and clinic where abortions are performed. We should continue to try and elect government officials that share our views. We should continue to lobby our legislatures in larger numbers until the laws reflect our position. Much can be done. Much has been done. Much more needs to be done and the Church has to do it.