

Position Paper on Abortion

By Michael R. Jones

The issue of voluntary induced abortion has become a permanent part of the American political landscape. This issue engenders much ill-will on both sides of the political fence. Sadly, many do not consider it a moral issue but see it rather as an issue of personal rights or civil liberties. While I am a major proponent of civil liberties and am wary of government intrusion into the personal lives of the American constituency, I am opposed to abortion, especially abortion-on-demand and welcome the government's protection of the unborn.

Several issues are involved in the abortion debate, not least of which is the issue of personal freedom already mentioned. There is also the issue of unwanted pregnancies and the burden of supporting unwanted children that is placed upon the American taxpayer along with their continuing contribution or lack thereof, to society. More to the issue, however, are the questions of the personhood of the unborn and the value of human life. If indeed life does begin at conception then one must face questions of whether or not the act of abortion is murder and whether or not the personal freedom of the mother takes precedent over the personal freedom of the unborn to continue living. For the Christian, one must also consider how far one should or can go in the defense of the unborn.

The issue of government intrusion is not an unimportant one. The United States of America was founded upon the ideas of liberty of conscience and personal freedom and many Americans have worked, struggled, and fought to preserve these and other liberties. The issue of abortion is not, however, an issue of civil liberties nor of personal freedom.

Consider, however, that one of the basic functions of government is protection. The government has as its task not only to protect its citizens from foreign invaders, but to preserve law and order by protecting its citizenry against the criminal element and against those who would harm or take advantage of its citizenry. To accomplish this, the government issues laws and authorizes the judicial branch to enforce those laws by investigating, arresting, and punishing the lawbreaker.

In the course of issuing laws to protect the citizenry, the liberties of citizens are often curtailed. For example, the government says that a person cannot do drugs that are not approved by the proper government agencies. This is hardly an attempt by the government to curtail civil liberties, but is instead an attempt to protect the citizenry from unscrupulous drug manufacturers, whether they be corporate entities such as pharmaceutical companies or drug pushers on the street corner. Other examples extend to the rights of both men and women such as the prohibition against using one's body to harm another by striking them, prohibitions against appearing naked in public, or even the prohibition against operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated; each affects the rights of human beings in general.

While some issues such as those just given affect both men and women's rights, there are some issues that are unique to women's rights and abortion is perhaps the ultimate in the current political climate. Many fight any restriction on abortion on the grounds that any government curtailment of abortion is a curtailment of the woman's right over her own body. This however, demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of nature of government and the rights of an individual. We have seen that the government already tells men and women what they can and cannot do with their bodies yet some overlook the government's current curtailment of the behavior of women in certain respects already. The prohibition of prostitution and restrictions placed upon pornography are further examples of the government's seeking to protect its

citizenry, these cases, by saying that women cannot sell their bodies for sexual purposes. These examples force one to concede that even in a free society, no one has an absolute right over their own body, whether man or woman, pregnant or not.

Many would consider it noble to defend the defenseless or help the helpless. In seeking to limit abortion-on-demand the government is merely defending the unborn baby who cannot defend itself and helping the helpless unborn from those who would seek to destroy them. Thus they are fulfilling the mandate to protect their citizenry.

There is also the issue of the burden unwanted pregnancies place on the American taxpayer and on society. The following is often cited as a continuing reason for the legality of abortion: better to terminate a pregnancy than for that child to grow up in a horrible home life because the parents didn't want it, or to grow up in poverty because the parents couldn't afford it, or to grow up and become part of the criminal element because the parents couldn't provide it the nurture necessary to teach it how to become a functioning and contributing member of society.

This is little more, however, than an avoidance of personal responsibility. Rather than practicing reproductive responsibility, the proponents of this line of reasoning instead place the burden upon those who seek to curtail abortion when this is not where the burden should lie. While it is the responsibility of all of society, especially the church, to ensure that everyone has the most basic necessities of life, it is not the responsibility of society to perpetuate crimes against the unborn simply to allow some to avoid the consequences of their actions. The burden does not rest on the pro-life advocate to explain why people in situations with unwanted pregnancies should not be allowed to terminate, instead, the burden rests upon those with unwanted pregnancies to explain why they should be allowed to terminate them. They must explain why their rights to supercede the rights of the unborn.

There is much recent talk in this debate about the issue of personhood with regard to the fetus. Some seek to define when life begins with the pro-life movement often coming down on the side of life's beginning at conception and the pro-choice movement coming down on the side of life's beginning at birth (or later). So people debate what it is that makes a person, they debate sentience and traits of personhood in an attempt to discern what makes a person a person and when a human being becomes a person.

But perhaps all of this obfuscates the real issue. Perhaps the real issue is not "When does life begin?" so much as it is "What is the nature of the fetus?" Why do pro-choice advocates seem constantly to avoid the genetic component? They obscure the issue with questions of potentiality and consciousness and self-awareness and self-motivation and in the process seem to forget that they are talking about human beings.¹ The fetus is human and abortion shows, not respect for the fundamental rights of humanity, but disrespect to humanity itself. It is interesting to note that at least one pro-choice advocate admits that the same personhood and sentience arguments that support abortion may also be used to support infanticide.² At least this one pro-choice advocate is consistent.

The issue is not one of personhood so much as it about the proper value for human life. A human fetus is just that: a *human* fetus. Because a fetus possesses all the characteristics that

¹ See, for example, Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion" in *Do the Right Thing: Readings in Applied Ethics and Social Philosophy*, Francis J. Beckwith, ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), 184.

² See, for example, Peter Singer, "Taking Life: The Embryo and the Fetus," from *Practical Ethics in Writings on an Ethical Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 160-164.

make a human being human, the human fetus doesn't just represent the future of humanity; it is the future of humanity. Arguments about the personhood of the fetus miss the point that the fetus is *human*. Even if there is uncertainty about the personhood of the human fetus, society must err on the side of caution by erring in favor of life, rather than against it.

Christians, however, are bound by the teachings of Scripture and so the Scriptures must not only inform but direct the Christian's position on this issue, as they should inform the position of any Christian any issue. Consider that in the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament value was placed on the unborn as well. In the legal codes of Exodus 21:22-25, the same legal ramifications are cited for the killing of an unborn fetus as for the killing of an already-born child. Some have tried to distort the issue by seeking to make these verses refer to an accidental miscarriage, but the text does not support this conclusion since not only is the word for "miscarry" not used, but the death, even if accidental, was considered a criminal offense and was actionable under the law.³

The Scriptures clearly place great value on human life, including the life of the unborn. The Lord, speaking to his prophet, Jeremiah said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5, NKJV) and in so saying implies that the unborn has both value and dignity since the Lord is setting this one apart and commissioning him with a task. In the New Testament, John the Baptist is spoken of as "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15) and when his pregnant mother meets the pregnant Mary, who is carry the Christ-child, the as yet unborn John the Baptist "leaped in her womb" (Luke 1:41). These verses demonstrate the position of the Scriptures with regard to the value of the unborn: they are valued with the full value of human beings even while in the womb. This understanding of Scriptural teaching should guide the Christian in their search for a position in relation to this question.

When one considers these arguments, it is impossible simply to say that abortion is a woman's choice, since her choice involves another human being. It is also not proper to say that the woman's life and happiness takes priority over the rights of the fetus since both are equally human. Nor is it sufficient to say that the law of the land permits it therefore it is acceptable both legally and morally since the ultimate moral standard is not the laws of men, but the law of God.

What should be the Christian's involvement in the abortion debate? How far should one go to defend the rights of the unborn? First of all, one must understand that it is not permissible to harm another in the course of defending the rights of the unborn. The same God that teaches respect for the life of the unborn also teaches respect for the lives even of criminals. As far as civil disobedience is concerned, each Christian must decide for themselves how far to go in practicing civil disobedience, engaging in protests and becoming involved in the legal process. Primarily, the Christian must be careful not to become so firmly entrenched in their opposition to this issue that they fail to remember that there are people involved who may seek abortion because they are desperate and think that they have no other recourse and nowhere to turn for help and guidance. The church must seek to provide support for these women and to demonstrate the love and mercy of God by providing a place for them to find acceptance and care. With regard to those who have already had an abortion, the church must seek to extend the forgiveness of God to them, making it clear that there is forgiveness and mercy with God despite their past decisions. This will not win very many arguments, but it will help the church in her mandate to disciple the nations through the gospel.

³ J. Kerby Anderson, *Moral Dilemmas* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 7-8.

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