

Abortion

from *Biblical Ethics*¹

THE ABORTION CRISIS in American civilization has been called a modern holocaust. An exaggeration? Not if you maintain a biblical view of life. The purpose of this chapter is to review briefly the history of abortion in America, lay out a biblical view of life, and answer several salient questions.

THE HISTORY OF ABORTION IN AMERICA

By a seven-to-two decision in 1973 the United States Supreme Court, in the case *Roe v. Wade*, handed down one of its most radical decisions in modern history. Generally, when a case reaches the Supreme Court, the Court is asked to rule on a constitutional question. The Court decides what the Constitution says, and in this case the Court was asked whether states (in this case Texas) can restrict a woman's right to abortion. The Court could not cite any specific part of the Constitution that established the right of abortion; nor could they find such a right in the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the Constitution). Therefore, the Court set a precedent that did not appeal directly to the Constitution; instead, it declared that there is an implied right of privacy in the Constitution and on that basis established the right of women to have an abortion.

In its decision, the Court stipulated that abortions could occur up to the point of "viability" (when a child could live outside the womb) but did not define when this was. The Court further stipulated that the health of the mother must play a role in defining viability but did not define the "health of the mother" concept. The result is that the United States now has one of the most liberal abortion laws in the world. For all practical purposes, it is abortion on demand — abortion as a form of birth control. Whatever the specifics of the preg-

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nancy, if a woman can find a sympathetic doctor or clinic, abortion is guaranteed.

The Court argued that the weight of history was on the side of abortion. The idea that life begins at conception is a modern idea and must be rejected, it contended. Why? Because there is no consensus in the medical community or among theologians or philosophers as to when life begins, the Court would not decide the issue either. The weight of the Court's argument really rested on the proposition that the unviable fetus derives its meaningfulness solely from the mother's desire to give birth to her baby. In other words, the mother's rights are established absolutely to the total exclusion of the baby's.

Today American society tolerates several types of abortion:

- Therapeutic abortion — when the termination of a pregnancy is necessary for the sake of the mother's health
- Psychiatric abortion — for the sake of the mother's mental health
- Eugenic abortion — to prevent the birth of deformed, retarded children
- Social abortion — for economic reasons, especially as related to the financial needs of the family
- Ethical abortion — in the cases of rape or incest

Again, the result is a society where abortion on demand is available to anyone desiring it.

Although gruesome, it is important to review the methods of abortion practiced in America. Each method results in the death of a living human being:

- The dilation and curettage method (D and C) — Performed early in pregnancy, the surgeon cuts the fetus and the placenta into pieces, and they are removed from the womb.
- The suction method — The surgeon draws the fetus out of the womb via a powerful suction tube, killing the baby.
- The saline method — During the latter weeks of the pregnancy, the surgeon injects a salt solution through the abdomen of the mother, poisoning the baby in about an hour. Twenty-four hours later the baby is delivered stillborn.

- Chemical abortions — This is a more recent development, usually involving the administration of a drug (e.g., RU486) to the mother that in effect causes the woman’s body to abort a recently fertilized egg. This is the most problematic of methods because it does not involve a medical procedure, only the administration of a pill. There are major side effects, but this approach is probably where research on abortion methodology is headed.
- Partial-birth abortion — This term “means an abortion in which the person performing the abortion partially vaginally delivers a living fetus before killing the fetus and completing the delivery.”¹

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF PRENATAL LIFE

In 1973 the Supreme Court was right: There is no consensus in the culture about when life begins. God’s revelation in the Bible, however, has spoken to this issue. A thorough examination of His Word reveals that God views life in the womb as of infinite value and in need of protection. The challenge is that people in most areas of the culture — law, politics, and even religion — refuse to heed God’s clear teaching on this issue.

A cluster of verses in the Bible clearly establish God’s view of prenatal life:

- Exodus 21:22–24 — “If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage ... he shall surely be fined as the woman’s husband may demand.... But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”
- Whatever these difficult verses mean exactly, God views life in the womb as of great value. Whether by accident or by intent, to cause a woman to miscarry demands accountability on the part of the one who caused it. The Law did not treat the fetus frivolously.
- Isaiah 49:1, 5 — “The LORD called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me.... the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant.”

¹ Section 1531 (b), *The Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act* (HR 1833) as vetoed by President William Clinton on April 10, 1996.

- Referring to Messiah, God called Him for His mission *from the womb*. Prenatal life is precious to God.
- Jeremiah 1:5 — “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.”
- Luke 1:15 — “[H]e will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.” As with Isaiah, God viewed Jeremiah and John the Baptist from the womb as of infinite value. He even filled John with the Holy Spirit when he was in Elizabeth’s womb.

No other passage deals with the question of prenatal life so powerfully and conclusively as Psalm 139. In this wonderful psalm, David reviews four phenomenal attributes of God — His omniscience, His omnipresence, His omnipotence, and His holiness. In reviewing God’s omnipotence, David reviews God’s power in creating life, which he expresses as God weaving him in his mother’s womb. God made his “frame,” his skeleton. Then, in verse 16, he writes, “Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance.... ” Undoubtedly, David is referring to the embryo. If correct, then the divine perspective on life is that it begins at conception. So awesome is God’s omniscience and His omnipotence that He knew all about David even when he was an embryo! This is God’s view of prenatal life. Therefore, abortion brings God’s judgment.

ETHICAL QUESTIONS RELATING TO ABORTION

1. Is the fetus a human being? At conception, all aspects of humanness, as defined by DNA, are present. Genetically, it is quite difficult to argue otherwise.

2. Is the human fetus a person? This is a question increasingly pressed today. The biological term *life* has been exchanged for the legal term *person*. This is a critical switch because only persons have rights, including the right to life. Paul and John Feinberg argue in their book that at conception the DNA strands of the embryo are species-specific. Furthermore, although the fetus is dependent upon the mother, he or she is an independent individual. Also, there is substantial identity between the embryo, the viable fetus, the infant, the child, the adult, and the elderly person.² The fetus is a person.

² Paul and John Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1993), 58.

3. How do the rights of the fetus relate to the rights of the mother? American culture has so totally focused on the rights of the mother that it gives no thought to the rights of the fetus. As this chapter has shown, this is wrong. There must be a balance of rights. Somehow Christians must make the case for protecting the rights of the unborn child. Paul and John Feinberg have suggested a starting point:

While it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to convince a pro-abortionist of the personhood of the fetus, nevertheless from a purely ethical point of view it still makes sense to demand that human life should not be arbitrarily terminated, particularly when less dramatic solutions exist. Such solutions should be sought on the side of both the fetus and the mother. Having once been conceived, the fetus has no choice but to grow, just as it had no choice in its conception or its blond hair or blue eyes. Hence, the fetus is without recourse or remedy. The same is not true of the mother, who has at least three alternatives other than abortion. She can exercise initial will power by abstinence, which is grossly out of fashion today. She has the option to use contraceptives to prevent the unwanted child. And finally, given the birth of the child, the mother can allow the living but unwanted infant to be put up for adoption.³

Abortion is, therefore, an unacceptable practice from God's viewpoint. He views prenatal life as of infinite worth and value. To wantonly destroy it is to destroy what He views as precious. American society may have the legal right to enforce abortion (following *Roe v. Wade*), but it does not have the ethical right before God to do so. Is it a modern holocaust? With approximately 4,000 abortions every day of every year⁴ since 1973, it is difficult to argue otherwise. Multiply it out. That's 1,460,000 human babies killed per year. By the thirty-year anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* in 2003, approximately forty-three million children had been exterminated.

³ Ibid., 71-72.

⁴ Marvin Olasky and Joel Belz, *Whirled Views* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1997), 27.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Summarize the Supreme Court's legal argument in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. In your opinion, what did the Court ignore? How would you critique their decision?
2. What types of abortion are recognized in our culture today?
3. Why might pills like RU486 be potentially problematic for those who are against abortion? Go to your local library and find information on how safe this pill really is.
4. Using the verses cited in this chapter, write a biblical position paper on why abortion is not in God's will. Be sure to stress Psalm 139.
5. Is the fetus a human? A person? How would you present an argument that the fetus is of great value and should be protected by American law? How would you make an argument that life begins at conception?

