

Finding Grace in the Abortion Debate

Abortion is a polarizing topic that produces strong feelings in everyone. At one end of the spectrum we have women labeled "murderers" as they walk into a healthcare facility. We see anti-abortion radicals bomb abortion clinics and assassinate doctors who perform abortions. At the other end of the spectrum, we have pro-choice proponents declaring, "How dare you try to tell a woman what to do with her body!" As a physician, I have seen women go to a clinic for their fourth, fifth, or maybe even sixth abortion, with little remorse. In Russia, until very recently, this was quite common. Abortion was often used as a primary method of birth control. What I never find within the abortion debate is a sense of grace or compassion. Instead we find venomous accusations. Both sides in the debate want to legislate behavior. We have spent billions of dollars on commercials, billboards, lobbies, and political action committees, yet I cannot see how any of that money has helped a single mother who is in turmoil over the decision she must make. This is money that could be spent on improving foster care, promoting adoption, and counseling for pregnant women. It is money that could be spent on correcting the many social injustices that lead to unwanted pregnancies. At a minimum, we need to be more gracious and respectful of the differences that people hold regarding this issue. Concerning our differences the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America remarks:

The topic of abortion evokes strong and varied convictions about the social order, the roles of women and men, human life and human responsibility, freedom and limits, sexual morality, and the significance of children in our lives. It involves powerful feelings that are based on different life experiences and interpretations of Christian faith and life in the world. If we are to take our differences seriously, we must learn how to talk about them in ways that do justice to our diversity. The language used in discussing abortion should ignore neither the value of unborn life nor the value of the woman and her other relationships. It should neither obscure the moral seriousness of the decision faced by the woman nor hide the moral value of the newly conceived life.

Abortion is never directly addressed in the Old Testament. There are a few vague references that could support either side of the abortion debate, but one would presume that if this was a critical issue, it would have been addressed in detail, as many other issues were in Mosaic law. Perhaps the most direct command cited is, "Thou shalt not kill". The most common interpretation of this command is that we should not murder, with no reference made as to whether this would apply to an unborn child. Historically, we know that abortion was performed in the ancient world. Herbal concoctions were provided for contraceptive and abortifacient purposes. The most effective of these was an herb known as Silphium. This herb was in great demand throughout the Greco-Roman empire during the apostolic age. It could only be grown in Cyrene, a nation in the northern Africa. It was so popular that it was worth its weight in silver. Its popularity ultimately resulted in its extinction. We do not know how frequently it was used in ancient Judea. Heirs were very important in the Hebrew tradition, and more children resulted in more hands to work and increase wealth. Population growth was central to the survival of a clan, tribe, or nation. The neonatal, infant, and childhood mortality was such that only half of the children born were expected to survive into adulthood, so reducing the birth rate was counterproductive. People lived within a large extended family that was available to support a new mother. Having said that, it is reasonable to assume that herbal abortion was invoked

periodically, if not regularly. Hebrew sources give various interpretations of the biblical directive, "be fruitful and multiply." The Babylonian Talmud commands men regarding propagation but appears to excuse women from this command. Hebrew religious law did not regard a woman as pregnant until 40 days after conception. Greco-Roman, Hebrew, and medieval sources all contain extensive debate and discussion over the issues of contraception and abortion, with no uniform consensus. Generally speaking, however, there is no distinct protection made for the fetus until it had formed recognizable features. Prior to this point in pregnancy, a woman could abort without fear of reprisal. We see this reflected in the earliest Greek translation of the Pentateuch (the Septuagint, 3rd century BCE):

If two men are fighting and a pregnant woman is struck in her belly, and her child comes out not fully formed, he shall pay a fine. As the woman's husband shall impose, he shall pay it with a valuation. But if it is fully formed, he shall give a soul for a soul. (Septuagint, Exodus 21:22-23)

In the above scenario, the offending party is not considered to have committed murder until the fetus is fully formed. Early Church fathers in the Christian tradition appear divided over the issue. It was not until 1869, that Pope Pius IX outlawed abortion among Catholics.

Jesus did not mention abortion at all. What Jesus did talk about was treating the vulnerable with compassion. He spoke about extending grace and forgiveness to those who may have lost their way. Do we hear Jesus berate the adulterous woman who was about to be stoned? No! Judaic law dictated that this woman be stoned, but Jesus understood that legislating behavior does not change one's soul. Instead, he offered her hope for a new type of life. Jesus offered her acceptance, not condemnation. Do we hear him lambaste the Samaritan woman who had been with many men and was not married to her current partner? No! Other Jews would not have even spoken to this woman, but Jesus offers her his unconditional love, his "living water". Whatever else Jesus might say to us, he would say that any discussion of this topic must be done in the spirit of grace and compassion, both for the unborn child and for the pregnant woman who is struggling with her decision.

A large part of the abortion debate revolves around the question of when life begins. Genetically, the potential for life begins at conception. Within four to eight weeks the embryo begins to look human. Survival with assistance outside of the uterus is achieved by 24 to 25 weeks. Perhaps the real question is when does an embryo or fetus attain personhood or a human soul? There is nothing in the Bible to suggest unequivocally the point at which a human person begins his or her individual life. In any case, there is an underlying bias within Christianity for the sanctity of life. God "created male and female in his image". He fosters our spiritual growth and can sustain us through almost insurmountable obstacles. We do see God terminate life throughout the Old Testament, but no one is eliminated who repents from their wickedness and accepts his mercy. Jesus clearly viewed life as precious. He taught us that "Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." His parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son teach us that God will go to any extent to reclaim a life. Jesus perpetually healed and restored life. He never destroyed it. There should be a strong Christian bias to protect and sustain life and this should be extended to the unborn child. Treating unborn children as if they were disposable is deplorable, as is the concept that every child must be perfect to be deserving of life. Certainly abortion should always be an option of last resort and the church should do everything possible to reduce the need for abortion.

The immediate precedent to unwanted pregnancy is a failure of adequate contraception. It is a reasonable presumption that the intentional will of God is for sexual activity to be practiced within the context of marriage. This was certainly a more realistic expectation in ancient Hebrew culture where women married shortly after sexual maturity. It is more typical in modern Western culture for women to delay marriage well into their mid-to late 20s, or beyond. Given the intensity of the human sex drive, it is unrealistic to expect men and women to delay sexual activity until that point. The fact is that young adults that make a chastity pledge rarely delay sexual activity significantly longer than those who do not, and they are less likely to use contraceptives when they do start sexual activity. A study by Peter Bearman at Columbia University found that 88 percent of middle and high schoolers that make a virginity pledge have premarital sex anyway. The nonpartisan National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that “at present, there does not exist any strong evidence that any abstinence program delays the initiation of sex, hastens the return to abstinence, or reduces the number of sexual partners.” We should provide sex education within the context of the Christian faith, with an emphasis on long-term committed, intimate relationships. We should do everything possible to discourage casual sex and should attempt to counter media programming that condones this as appropriate behavior. However, we must at the same time prepare young people with appropriate information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Anything less is irresponsible. My experience as a gynecologist has taught me that providing information regarding contraception does not significantly increase the likelihood of sexual activity, but it does prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

Oppressive societal realities such as crime, drugs, poverty, racism, broken homes, inadequate education, and unaffordable healthcare certainly lead to many unwanted pregnancies. The church as community, and each of us individually, must devote our God-given resources and talents to correct these injustices. Our civic and faith communities currently fall woefully short in providing sufficient resources conducive to helping the impoverished bring new life into the world. If we are committed to support life for the unborn, we must be willing to support the pregnant mother throughout her pregnancy. This entails providing her adequate healthcare, nutrition, education, and psychological, as well as spiritual, support, both during and after pregnancy. Shelter should be provided for homeless mothers and fathers. Protection needs to be provided for abused mothers. Policies for social interdiction must be enforced so that newborn and young children are not physically, sexually or emotionally abused. There needs to be free intervention and treatment readily available for addicted mothers. We must be willing to provide nurseries and day care. We need to encourage the members of our faith communities to adopt and provide foster care. Free parenting education must be readily available. Correcting these social injustices is the true "pro-life" agenda. Our society is not adequately addressing these injustices now. I walk our young children home from the Values Through Sports program in West Kensington, Philadelphia. I take three or four children, each with a different last name back to the same mother who appears "high" whenever I see her. I see her standing there with the snap of her pants and her zipper undone because she does not have a single pair of pants that fit her. She lives on one side of the street, but when one of the fathers beats her up, she moves across and lives on the other side of the street with neighbors. One of her children has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and is learning disabled. Another is hyperactive and has Attention Deficit Disorder. None of her children receive reasonable parenting by anybody's definition. I don't see anybody lining up to help this woman. Should she get pregnant, I don't see any support structure

in place to help her. I don't see anyone rushing to adopt a baby born into these horrid conditions. I am personally against abortion. I do see it as taking a life, but I do not see myself as having any right to legislate this woman's decision for an abortion if she were to get pregnant again. Unless one is willing to work tirelessly to provide her some semblance of social justice and intervene on her behalf, they have no right to judge her, to restrict her options.

Ethical considerations of unintended pregnancy must take into account the conditions under which the pregnancy occurred. Most people would agree that there are extraordinary circumstances, such as rape and incest, in which a woman should not feel morally obligated to carry a pregnancy to term. In circumstances where there are extreme fetal abnormalities, it is also unfair to expect a woman to carry a pregnancy to full-term. Keeping these exceptions in mind, it is reasonable for the church to encourage women to continue their pregnancies. This, however, must be done within the context of a willingness to help sustain them and their unborn child with the resources and emotional support necessary. There must be a willingness to continue this support after the child is born, or if the mother is unable to parent her child, to help her find a nurturing foster family or adoptive parents. Recognizing the turmoil a woman undergoes when there is an unintended pregnancy, the church should do everything in its power to provide compassion and support regardless of the ultimate decision a woman makes.

It is not the church's job to legislate morality. Legalism does not change behavior. If you don't believe this, re-read your Old Testament. God made a covenant with the Hebrews. If they followed his laws, they would be rewarded, and if they did not, they would be punished. What is seen for the next 1500 years is the nation of Israel cycling back and forth through obedience and rebellion. They were not able to sustain moral behavior through the law. God therefore brought a new covenant into the world through Jesus. In this new covenant, we do not earn God's love through our behavior. He tells us through Jesus that his love is unconditional, and his grace infinite. Jesus shows us that you do not change behavior through condemnation, judgment, and punishment. You change behavior by offering people an alternative model of living that unconditionally accepts them into a community of love, joy, and hope. This is exactly what Jesus did for the Samaritan woman at the well. Its impact was so profound that she became his first Samaritan disciple.

The University of Notre Dame theologian, Richard McBrien, makes the point:

To have made the moral argument against abortion, for example, is not necessarily to have made the legal argument as well. St. Thomas Aquinas himself had insisted that if civil laws laid too heavy a burden on the "multitude of imperfect people", it would be impossible for such laws to be obeyed and this, in turn, could lead eventually to a disregard for all law.

Moreover, unenforceable laws are worse than no laws at all. And without a sufficient consensus within a society, no law is enforceable. Civil laws, therefore, can demand no more than a moralistic society can agree upon.

He legitimately points out that you cannot legislate moral behavior unless there is an overwhelming consensus within society regarding a specific behavior. The prohibition of alcohol is a good example of this failure. Drunkenness and disregard for the law actually increased during prohibition. There is obviously not a consensus within this country regarding abortion. Far too much time and money has been spent in trying to legislate this issue. Our

money and efforts could be used to correct the oppressive social circumstances that lead to abortions, promote adoption (especially hard to place minority and handicapped children), and support the hundreds of thousands of children who are languishing in foster care. Focusing our efforts in those areas would certainly be a more compassionate use of our stewardship dollars.