

Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate

Introduction

Efforts to ban abortion in America have been given considerable momentum by the powerful involvement of militant fundamentalists' who have made an alliance with conservative political groups. Evangelical moral and religious fervor has been combined with sophisticated political strategies, influential television programming, marketing expertise, and extensive funding.

The most prominent fundamentalist leaders have included Jerry Falwell, of Moral Majority (now defunct) fame, and TV evangelist Pat Robertson, founder of the 700 Club. Other leaders have included Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue (now Operation Save America); Tim Lahaye, founder of the American Coalition for Traditional Values; and James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family.

Abortion is obviously only one among many items on their social agenda,² but it is the one that is pursued with the greatest zeal. Many ironies attend this religious-political phenomenon, including the fundamentalists' rejection of their traditionally uninvolved political posture and the coalition they have formed with traditional Roman Catholics. Of particular theological interest, however, is their claim that the Bible is the source of authority and guidance behind the effort to outlaw abortion.

The Fetus as Person

The primary theological issue posed by the abortion debate centers on the personhood of the fetus. Evangelical Christians who have worked for a constitutional "human life" amendment to ban abortion argue that the Bible teaches that the fetus is a person and that abortion is murder. Harold Brown stated the position strongly: "The Bible prohibits the taking of innocent human life. If the developing fetus is shown to be a human being...[or] if human life has begun, then abortion is homicide and not permissible."³ Although their starting points are ostensibly different Brown's statement is in essential agreement with that of Pope Pius XII: "Innocent human life, in whatever condition it is found, is withdrawn, from the very first moment of its existence, from any direct deliberate attack."⁴

The late Francis Schaeffer was another influential evangelical who called for a ban on abortion and claimed the Bible as his authority. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, the former surgeon-in-chief of the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia who gained prominence as U.S. Surgeon General, wrote a book titled *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Interestingly, Schaeffer and Koop relied less on Scripture than on rational and "scientific" arguments to support their notion of the personhood of the fetus. In spite of all he had to say against "secular humanism," Schaeffer was greatly

*Paul D. Simmons,
Ph.D., Th.M.*

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influenced by Scholasticism. In their book, Schaeffer and Koop appealed to the general biblical principles of the uniqueness of each person and the worth of personal life that is rooted in the image of God.

The religious notion of the image of God had no biological counterpart. Even so, Schaeffer and Koop identified “image” with genotype. Thus, the unborn should be regarded as persons from the time of conception: “No additional factor is necessary for a later time. All that makes up the adult is present as the ovum and the sperm are united—the whole genetic code!”⁵

However, there are logical, moral, and biblical-theological reasons for not accepting the easy equation of conceptus with person. Logically, for instance, no one can deny the continuum from fertilization to maturity and adulthood; however, not every step on the continuum has the same value or constitutes the same entity. A good analogy is that of a fertilized hen egg. Given the proper incubation environment the egg becomes a chick and the chick grows to become a hen or rooster. However, few of us are confused about what we are eating when we have eggs for breakfast. An egg—even a fertilized egg—is still an egg and not a chicken.

The genetic definition of personhood confuses potentialities with actualities. Potentialities are certainly important but they do not have the same values as actualities. “An embryo is not a person but the possibility of the probability of there being a person many months or even years in the future,” Charles Hartshorne has argued. “Obviously possibilities are important, but to blur the distinction between them and actualities is to darken counsel.”⁶ The same point is made by John Stott, who called the decision to abort for reasons of maternal health “a choice between an actual human being and a potential human being.”⁷

The fallacy of the genetic definition of personhood is also seen when the argument is reduced *ad absurdum*. Every body cell of a person contains that person’s DNA, or genetic code. That is why, theoretically at least, persons may be cloned or duplicated. If one uses the genetic definition of personhood one would have to regard every body cell as a human being because each cell has the potential to become another person through cloning. Think of the

implications of this definition for surgery or the excision of cancer cells from the body!

The fatal weakness of this argument, however, is its radical reductionism. The easy equation of “person” with “fertilized ovum” (zygote) moves from a terribly complex entity to an irreducible minimum. A zygote is a cluster of cells that is hardly complex or developed enough to qualify as a “person.” A person, or human being, has capacities of reflective choice, relational response, social experience, moral perception, and self-awareness. Both the person and the zygote have life, and both are “human” because they belong to the species *homo sapien*. But a zygote or blastocyst does not fully embody the qualities that pertain to personhood. A great deal of complex development and growth are necessary before the attributes of “person” are acquired.

Morally speaking, to claim that a conceptus is a human being is to introduce what Sissela Bok has called “a premature ultimate.”⁸ People have an absolute value in Western morality, but fetuses do not. They have value, but they are not of equal moral value with actual persons—in particular, the pregnant woman.

The Bible and the Fetus

This distinction seems basic to the biblical story in Exod. 21:22-25, which is important for the abortion debate. This passage from the Covenant Code sets forth procedures to be followed when a pregnant woman who becomes involved in a brawl between two men has a miscarriage. A distinction is made between the penalty that is to be exacted for the loss of the fetus and the penalty for any injury to the woman. For the loss of the fetus, a fine is paid, as determined by the husband and the judges (v. 22). However, if the woman is injured or dies, *lex talionis* is applied: “Thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (vv. 23-25).

The story has only limited application to the current abortion debate because it deals with accidental, not willful, termination of pregnancy. Even so, the distinction made between the protection accorded the woman and that accorded the fetus under covenant law is important. The woman has full standing as a person under the covenant; the fetus has only a relative standing, certainly inferior to that of the woman. This passage gives no support to the

parity argument that gives equal religious and moral worth to woman and fetus.

Cottrell challenges this view, saying that parity is actually assumed by the passage. His argument is that v. 22 refers to the early birth of an otherwise healthy child (no harm), and that *lex talionis* applies to both fetus and mother in case of injury. “What is contrasted,” he says, “is a situation in which harm comes to neither mother nor child, and a situation in which either one or the other is harmed.”⁹

However, Cottrell’s interpretation is problematic. Four things should be noted. First, he stands virtually alone among scholarly translators and interpreters of this text. The novelty of his interpretation seems to be dictated more by necessity than by the text. Second, the Talmud sees the event described in v. 22 as a miscarriage, equivalent to a property loss by the father. Although tradition does not establish truth, one would think that ancient interpretations would be helpful in dealing with awkward textual materials.

Third, Cottrell forces from his treatment of this passage the implication that God considers the unborn child fully human. One can hardly derive a theology or even a statement of personhood from this passage. The biblical writer was not dealing with such a complex question but with specific regulations that pertained to the covenant community for dealing with injuries to pregnant women. This passage is a statement not about personhood but about punishment for accidents or injury. The most that can be said is that a distinction in value is made—both fetus and woman had value, but not equal value, and thus not equal protection or standing under the law.

Fourth, there are other fundamentalist scholars who disagree with Cottrell. Waltke notes that Lev. 24:17 requires the death penalty for anyone who “kills any human life,” and says that the death penalty plainly was not prescribed in Exodus, Chapter 21, for killing a fetus. He concludes that the fetus was not reckoned as a soul in the Old Testament.¹⁰ W.A. Criswell agrees with Waltke, focusing as he does on the “birth and breath” criteria for personhood of Gen. 2:7. He says that the legislation in Exodus was “designed to protect pregnant women from injury”¹¹ and clearly recognized the different standings of women and fetuses under the law.

The Biblical View of Personhood

The biblical portrait of personhood begins not with an explanation of conception but with a portrayal of the creation of Adam and Eve. God created people as male and female. Three texts are of critical importance. The first is Gen. 2:7. “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The biological aspects of personhood are metaphorically portrayed in terms of “dust” or “clay” or, as in the story of Eve, from the rib of the earth creature (*ha’adama*), which points to the dignity of being human (Gen. 2:22). God, the origin and giver of life, breathes life into these creatures so marvelously fashioned. The phrase “became a living soul” designated the person as animated flesh. As the person is breathed into, so the person breathes.

The second text distinguishes persons from the animal creations. Gen. 1:26-28 declares that “God made man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.” The biblical portrait of person centers on the notion of *the image of God*, which is not a physical likeness but a similarity of powers or abilities. These powers are spiritual, personal, relational, moral, and intellectual. Of all the creatures fashioned by God, only people are able to relate to the Creator by obedience or rebellion. Only people experience those godlike powers of self-transcendence and self-awareness. This creature, like God, may be introspective, retrospective, or prospective. This creature may reflect upon the past, anticipate the future, and discern the activity of God in his or her personal life and history.

The third text portrays the person as a moral decisionmaker. In Gen. 3:22 God says, “Behold, mankind is become as one of us, to know good and evil...” To be a person is to be a choice maker, reflecting God’s own ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. People are free moral agents. This does not mean they have perfect knowledge of right and wrong as some intrinsic gift from birth. Decisions must be made on the basis of one’s understanding of God’s will. The fact that they “ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil” means that people are given the burden and responsibility of making decisions that reflect their unique place in God’s creation.

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The biblical portrait of a person, therefore, is that of a complex, many-sided creature with godlike abilities and the moral responsibility to make choices. The fetus hardly possesses those characteristics. At best it begins to attain those biological basics necessary to show such capacities with the formation of the neocortex, or no earlier than the second half of gestation.

The woman unquestionably fits the biblical portrayal of person. Certainly, the entire circle of those most intimately involved with the abortion question are persons—being capable of reflecting on the meaning of this moment, considering the date, weighing the facts of the past, anticipating the future, and making some decision. The abortion question focuses on the personhood of the woman, who in turn considers the potential personhood of the fetus in terms of the multiple dimensions of her own history and future. Because the pregnancy is hers, the decision to continue the pregnancy is uniquely hers.

This is a godlike decision. Like the Creator, she reflects on what is good for the creation of which she is agent. As steward of the powers God has given her, she uses them for good and not ill—for herself, for the fetus, and for the future of humankind itself. She is aware that God wills health and happiness for her, for those she may bring into the world, and for the human race. Thus, she is engaged in reflection on her own well-being, the genetic health of the fetus, and the survival of the human race.

Searching the Scriptures

Two principles of biblical interpretation must be kept in mind when the Bible is used to provide warrants or supports for a particular teaching. The first is that the text must be thoroughly examined for its specific meaning. The historical and textual context, the nature of the material, the meanings of terms, and other factors all need to be assessed in coming to a clear understanding of the meaning of the passage. The second principle of interpretation and application is that a text or passage cannot be used to settle a technical question that is not specifically dealt with in the text. Literary devices such as metaphor and symbolism cannot be pressed into service as scientific data, for instance, nor can a passage cast in a celebrative, doxological mood be used as if it were a descriptive, systematic, and thus definitive explanation of a more technical problem. In short a text must not be used to

draw conclusions that are not germane to the text itself.

These principles are important to bear in mind when we search Scripture for teaching regarding the personhood of the fetus. Antiabortion evangelicals are fond of citing over 100 biblical passages they regard as teaching that the fetus is a person. An examination of some of the more frequently cited passages reveals the problems involved in such applications.

Psalms 139:13-15 is an often-quoted text that bears examination: “For thou didst form my inward parts [kidneys], thou didst knit [weave] me together in my mother’s womb... My frame [bones] was not hidden from thee when I was being made in secret intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.” Antiabortion evangelicals take this passage as teaching that the fetus is a person. They further argue that the psalmist is saying that God caused the pregnancy and knew the psalmist during gestation.

Numerous problems are posed by this interpretation, not the least of which is the fact that the psalmist is not dealing with the question of abortion. He is free to use poetry and metaphor with no need to be precise or definitive about the point in gestation at which one is regarded as a person. In short a nontechnical, poetic passage is being used as if it were a careful, technical, and systematic declaration regarding personhood. The Hebrews were not thinking in abstract terms or dealing with the stages or processes of gestational development.

Further problems emerge if the passage is taken for its literal meaning. If it is truly a factual or technical statement, scientific understandings of gestation are challenged. The psalmist’s reference to being “wrought in the depths of the earth” reflects the notion that the fetus (or the self) was developed “in the earth” and then introduced into the woman’s womb. Plato’s *Republic* (III, 414, C-E) recorded the Phoenician myth that people were formed and fed in the womb of the earth, which provides an interesting comparison, if not parallel, to the psalmist’s statement.

It is also possible that the passage reflects the Aristotelian idea that the sperm was the complete seed from which the offspring came. The sperm, it was believed, was like the acorn or maple seed, requiring only a proper incubation environment. The woman was only the incubator for the genetic material provided by the man.

The text is a poetic way of celebrating God's love for people. The psalmist declares that God's love surrounds the person in every corner or dimension of existence. He captures the exhilaration and thrill of religious wonder as he reflects on the marvel of a person's being in and before God. The person is a creation of the power of God and is doubly blessed when his or her being is enraptured by the knowledge that we are not the power of our own existence and that we can know the Creator who has brought us into being. The 139th Psalm is understandably important in the worship and liturgy of Judaism and Christianity. It enables the believer better to celebrate his or her being and relates this being to God's caring love.

Those who treat this passage as a definitive, scientific teaching confuse poetry with prose and a mood of celebration with the need for explanation. The purpose of the passage is to capture the celebratory mood of joy and wonder in being for those who can reflect on their origins and contemplate what it means to be before God. It is not the intention or purpose of the text to deal with the question of elective abortion or the question of whether the fetus is a person. The speaker reflects the awareness that we all begin before birth and that the entire creative process is a source of mystery and awe. All people have their origins in the creative and mysterious ways of God who brings them into being. It is another declaration of the truth that "it is God who has made us and not we ourselves" (Ps. 100:3).

The passage thus reflects the foundational awareness for the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God as Creator. God is the source of all that is. God is the power that has transformed organic life from simplicity to complexity through a process of patient sovereignty. The most complex expression of life is found in personal existence—in the self-awareness and reflective self-transcendence of human beings. To know anything, however, is to know that life is not self-generating. Only God can bring something into being out of nothing. The distinctive question for religion is not *how* God has accomplished that miracle—that question belongs to the domain of scientific investigation. Biblical faith affirms that it is *God* who has made us.

A second passage often cited by antiabortionists is Jeremiah 1:5, in which the prophet declares, speaking for God: "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb, I sanctified you, and I ordained you a prophet

unto the nations." Shoemaker says that this passage ascribes personhood to all unborn fetuses.¹² The text will not bear the weight of such an application, however. The passage deals with Jeremiah's calling as a prophet. He is establishing his credentials as one who has been called and appointed by God. His emphatic declaration is that God brought him into being for this very purpose (cf. Isa. 49: 1-5). Thus, the passage is highly personal and specific. It is not a rational discourse on how God creates people or whether every fetus should be counted as a person. Jeremiah declared that God knew him, formed him, and consecrated him; he is making no similar claim for everyone. All of this supports his central claim that God is the reason for his existence and the source of his authority to preach as a prophet. Shoemaker's claim that this passage teaches that God causes every pregnancy is a bogus application, for it perverts and distorts the central meaning of the text which deals with calling, not conception.

A similar problem is posed by the antiabortionist interpretation of Luke 1:41-42, which deals with the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, both of whom are pregnant. Elizabeth, now six months pregnant with John the Baptist, the one destined to be the forerunner of Jesus, hears the voice of Mary, who had just discovered that she is pregnant. Luke says: "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 the woman.'" Again, antiabortion evangelicals focus on "the babe leaped..." and take this as a passage teaching that fetuses are people.

Problems abound with such an interpretation. The passage makes it clear, for instance, that it is Elizabeth who responds to God's revelation. She does the speaking, declaring the special blessedness of Mary and her child to be. The central point of the passage is theological and practical. It deals with the special role and authority of Jesus. The relation of John to Jesus was a source of considerable confusion during their ministries. The Gospel writers took pains to spell out the fact that John was a forerunner to Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. This crucial theological point should not be missed. John was a special servant of God, but he was subservient to Jesus, a point emphasized at Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:13-17, John 1:29-34) and elsewhere (cf. Mark 1:4-11, Matt. 11:2-6, Luke 7:18-23).

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It is faulty biblical interpretation to generalize from this passage to the personhood of every fetus. Such an approach confuses the intention and meaning of the text with a contemporary debate that is entirely foreign to the mind of the writer. One might more reasonably use the passage to argue that “quickening,” or that stage of fetal development about the fifth month when the woman first feels the fetus move, kick, or jerk, should be the point at which the fetus might be regarded as a person. Even this application is an inference, however, and should not be regarded as a clear teaching of the text in question.

Anticipatory Personhood

Some light might also be shed on the abortion debate by distinguishing between actual personhood and anticipatory or attributed personhood.¹³ To put it another way, there is both an objective and a subjective side to regarding the fetus as a person. Objectively, for instance, the fetus is not a person because it has not acquired the capacities or characteristics that define an entity as a person. Subjectively, however, the pregnant woman or the couple may regard the fetus as a person and provide it all the respect and protection a person should be accorded.

Couples who want a child and plan a family may and should regard the conceptus as a person. The pregnant woman may joyfully welcome the news that she has a baby on the way. By talking to the fetus, stroking the bulging abdomen, and celebrating the pregnancy, the woman or the couple brings the child into the circle of the human family. It is not yet a person, but it is already regarded as—it is named and accepted as—a person.

The essential difference between actual and attributed personhood is in the value of the fetus to those involved in the pregnancy. It is not vitality but the acceptance, affirmation, recognition, and love of the fetus that grants it personhood and ensures that it will become a person. The experience of the fetus as a person—as an entity of personal worth—is the basis for symbiotic bonding between mother and child. A woman who wants a child and values her pregnancy will be convinced that she is carrying a baby, a person. No other designation conveys the reality of this experience of one who is “other” than the mother. She recognizes it as an other self, it is not a “thing,” not simply part of her body.

This important human phenomenon of attributed personhood is often overlooked by those who oppose the legal availability of abortion because they believe that elective abortions are never morally justifiable. The search for objective criteria of personhood seems cold and calculating to those who have experienced only the joyous, celebratory side of pregnancy. They often react with fear, horror, and anger to people they believe to be unappreciative of the values of gestating life.

The mistake made at that point is to confuse anticipatory with actual personhood. To experience a fetus as person is not the same as discovering the personhood of the fetus. The fetus is not a person by any objective criteria, even though it may certainly be ascribed personhood on highly subjective grounds.

Not every pregnancy results in a personal relationship between a woman and fetus. Pregnancy is not always a happy occasion—it may be a destructive and threatening experience. Far from being regarded as a person to be protected and loved, a conceptus may be experienced as a threat to personal well-being or a reminder of sexual abuse or of the dangers attending the processes of conception and gestation.

We cannot conclude, on the basis of some positive experiences that cause people to sing the praises of God (as in the 8th and 139th Psalms, Jeremiah 1:5, and elsewhere), that every similar occasion should be so celebrated. The human experience of pregnancy is tremendously varied, and individual reactions to or understandings of God’s activity are understandably different. This problem raises the issue of divine providence in the human experience of pregnancy under adverse circumstances. If God is to be praised and God’s glory celebrated when people experience the joys of pregnancy and childbirth, is the experience of pregnancy always to be regarded as the action of divine providence?

Personhood and Providence

What is at the issue is the way God is related to the entire process of conception and birth, or to the processes of nature as such. Fundamentalists often portray God as the cause of everything that happens and argue that God governs all natural processes.

The belief that the workings of nature are virtually the actions of God is important to the absolutism of the fundamentalists’

stance against abortion. Not only is the conceptus regarded as being equal in value and personhood to the woman, but conception is seen as an act of God. The pregnancy would have to be a direct threat to the life of the woman for termination to be justifiable or an act of self-defense. All other pregnancies are to be accepted, regardless of such extenuating circumstances as rape, incest, or fetal deformity.

Donald Shoemaker argues that abortion is forbidden in cases of rape. He begins with a non sequitur about not executing the rapist for the crime and asks rhetorically if we then are to mete out capital punishment upon the innocent unborn. He then sets forth his clinching argument: "God forbid that we should regard any situation so tragic that God could not have prevented it if he so chose." He applies the same logic to cases of incest and fetal deformity. For him, "God makes no mistakes."¹⁴

In effect, Shoemaker is arguing that God is responsible for the pregnancy by rape, that the pregnancy is God's will because he could have prevented it but did not. Logically, Shoemaker would also have to argue that God is responsible for the rape, because the rape could have been prevented and because the rape was necessary for the impregnation.

What is at stake in the fundamentalist posture is a Calvinistic stress on the sovereignty of God. The fundamentalist view combines theological beliefs about the power and activity of God with a type of "law of nature." As Waltke says, "the causal connection between sexual intercourse and conception...is simply the means whereby God, the first cause of all things, gives his blessing."¹⁵ In other words, however it happens in nature is the way God does it. No moral significance is attached to the fact that between 25 and 50 percent of all fertilized eggs are not implanted and thus pass through a woman's monthly menses. Spontaneous abortion is not morally questionable because it is caused by God.

This line of reasoning extends to the problem of radical fetal deformity. Shoemaker assures believers in such cases that "God makes no mistakes." Former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop argues that God created genetic handicaps.¹⁶ He cites God's speech to Moses in Exod. 4:11: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I the Lord?"

The explanation offered for why God would do such things is either that the person is being punished for sinning, or that the experience

is an opportunity for Christian growth in spirituality. Shoemaker comforts the woman raped and impregnated by assuring her that "no testings will overtake one except those God has permitted men [sic] to experience."¹⁷

Such views of divine providence pose profound problems regarding the use of Scripture and a Christian understanding of the problem of evil. Using God's statement to Moses to explain genetic deformity betrays careless exegesis leading to faulty conclusions. The context was Moses' reluctance to become God's spokesman because he feared he would not be persuasive. "Dumb," "deaf," and "blind" are metaphors for the ability to speak and understand God's truth. This passage has nothing whatever to do with genetic handicaps.

Of greater significance is the question of the moral nature of God. Jesus emphatically rejected the notion that God causes evil things to happen to people either as punishment for sin or as a test of faith. (Matt. 12:22-26, Luke 11:14-23). The Christian belief is that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that divine actions are good (Matt. 19:17). To argue that God either causes or permits rape or incest and consequent pregnancy, or that God causes every hideous anomaly, is to say blasphemous and heretical things about God. Central to the teaching of Jesus was the idea that God is love and goodness. Jesus emphatically denounced and refuted the traditional theology that God caused evil things to happen. He drew a very simple test for deciding: "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your Children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask?" (Matt 7:11).

To some people, it is more acceptable to portray God as cruel than to suggest that God may not be in total control. However, to blame evil on God is to risk confusing the work of Beelzebub with that of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:22-36, Luke 11:14-23). Jesus made it plain that an accounting would be made of those who attribute evil to God.

The second problem posed by a fundamentalist notion of providence is that people are portrayed as the passive victims of whatever may befall, rather than as stewards in the processes of nature and medical science. God gives people only strength to bear tragedy; women have no permission to interrupt a pregnancy regardless of fetal condition, circumstances of impregnation, or threat to

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their own well-being. To the fundamentalists, it is unthinkable people—who are made in the image of God—may have to make some godlike decisions regarding their stewardship of their procreative powers, as in abortion. This is forbidden territory for human intervention.

However, the fundamentalist argument is contradictory. Although it argues that nature's way is God's way, it also argues that doctors should intervene to keep nature from terminating a deformed fetus by miscarriage, or spontaneous abortion. The fundamentalists cannot have it both ways. To adopt the passive, noninterventionist posture is to undermine religious support for all of medical science.

Is it not more consistent to follow the clues given in a doctrine of Christian stewardship? As stewards, people work with God for the good of the entire created world. The fact that humans have knowledge of the processes that hinder or help in working toward this goal gives them a divine mandate to make choices for human good and against those evils that afflict the human family. Therapeutic abortions may well be seen as morally responsible actions in the face of tragedy or evils that contradict the will of God. No woman who is impregnated by rape or incest is obligated to bear the further burden of completing the pregnancy and bearing the child. God coerces no one to become a parent and certainly is no party to evil and violence of rape or incest. To terminate such a pregnancy is to act with God to prevent further threat to the health and well-being of the woman.

Aborting a fetus that is radically deformed may well be a morally responsible action to prevent the greater evil of a child's being born with a fatal, incurable disease (such as Tay Sachs) or totally incapacitating anomalies (such as anencephaly). People cannot be indifferent to the anguish and burden of genetic deformities and illnesses. Nor can they be passive in the face of increasing genetic knowledge. Mistakes—often horrible and uncorrectable mistakes—are made in nature. Genetic codes can be terribly confused. Being stewards with God requires us to make decisions about the genetic health of our children. Choice, not chance, is the divine mandate.

The third problem with the fundamentalist view of providence concerns its limited and inadequate view of grace. Shoemaker declares that God gives "sustaining grace" to those afflicted with pregnancy by rape or incest

or those bearing fetuses that are radically deformed. That God does provide sustaining grace in such situations we do not doubt. But does grace not also give us permission to act in spite of ambiguity and to lay hold of the promise of forgiveness?

Karl Barth understood the paradox in the command of God with regard to abortion. He set the subject in the context of "the protection of life" and explained "the great protection of life" and "the great summons to halt issued by the command" forbidding the willful taking of human life.¹⁸ Barth thundered God's "No!" to any such action.

However, there is another side to God's command, said Barth. After hearing the "No!" we must be prepared "to stand by the truth that at some time or other, perhaps on the far frontier of all other possibilities, it may have to happen in obedience to the commandment that men must be killed by men."¹⁹ Certainly, the life of the unborn is not an absolute. It cannot claim to be preserved in all circumstances. God may command the active participation of others in the killing of germinating life.²⁰ When he does, it does not constitute murder.²¹

It is noteworthy that although antiabortionists quote Barth to support their stand, they never mention the fact that he also supported abortion. Barth saw a paradox at the heart of the biblical message concerning human stewardship in the protection of germinating life. The freedom to abort is a necessary part of the meaning of the grace of God in the tragic circumstances of life.

Personhood and Religious Liberty

The uniqueness of personhood is also at stake in the concern with religious liberty. The special relationship of the individual to God, the capacities for spiritual and moral decision making, and the sanctity of religious belief are all brought together in what is meant by soul competence and liberty of conscience. The biblical emphasis on individual responsibility to and before God is expressed in terms of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9), which sharpens the notion of *imago dei* and moral knowledge. The truth cuts two ways: (1) The person has direct access to God and has both the ability and moral responsibility to know and do his will, and (2) No other person or group has the right to stand between the believer and God. Religious imperialism and moralistic authoritarianism contradict this biblical truth.

The arrogance of judgmentalism—pronouncing judgment on or impeding another’s exercise of conscientious belief—is the biblical meaning of “playing God,” as the story of Joseph shows (Genesis, Chapter 45).

Conscience is the name given the governing principles of life to which a person is ultimately committed. The totality of the self and thus the integrity of personhood is involved in the moral dictates of conscience. This is the primary arena of the spirit’s struggle with the moral claims made by the will of God. It is here that one obeys or disobeys God. One’s relationship to God is premised on one’s obedience to conscience. The depths of one’s own being, therefore, and the ground of meaning of one’s own existence are expressed in the struggles of conscience.

The violation of conscience is therefore of ultimate concern on religious grounds. To override or disobey conscience is to do violence to the transcendent dimensions of human existence. To the one whose conscience is captive to God and open to divine leadership, decisions relating to moral issues come with the full force of the Divine Command.

The liberty of conscience thus establishes an important constraint on public policy. The claims of conscience establish the outer limits of state authority and the intrusion or imposition of any other coercive force, such as other religious authorities. The individual cannot surrender the claims of conscience to the state any more than the state can claim to be able to set the limits to which conscience is the basis for restricting the powers of Congress to prohibit the free exercise of religion or to impose alien doctrines on people who do not share a particular dogmatic formulation. Belief is not to be prescribed, nor is acting on one’s religious convictions to be subject to punishment by the state.

The First Amendment says quite simply that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The two critical portions are what have been called the establishment and free exercise clauses. Congress is constrained and limited in its law-making capacities in these two vital areas of life. This simple but profoundly important amendment was intended to guarantee that—

- Congress would not make any religious group or church the established, favored, or official church of the nation;

- Congress would not interfere in doctrinal disputes, settling by law theological controversies that had not gained consensus among various bodies (no one group’s doctrines would be made law for everyone);

- Dissent on religious opinion could not become the basis for criminal prosecution, nor would acting on grounds of religious belief be the basis for ostracism or discrimination under the law;

- Government would not interfere with religious exercises; it would occupy itself with maintaining domestic tranquility (including ensuring that religious groups could not harass or persecute other religious groups) and defending the country against enemies both domestic and foreign; and

- Religion would be entirely voluntary; the people would be free to be religious or not religious; the mind was not to be coerced in matters of religious opinion.

In sum, a careful delineation of spheres of influence was articulated that established the types of activity that were appropriate to and to be permitted by both church and state. Each was to be free from undue coercion or influence by the other. Religions were to be free to promulgate doctrines and participate in political activity, but political power would not be used to coerce unbelievers to conform in belief or practice. Unlike the councils called by ancient kings and emperors at the behest of religious leaders to settle theological controversies, Congress is not a doctrine-making or orthodoxy-assuring body. Furthermore, no favoritism or partiality toward any religious group is to be shown in public policy. Government policy toward religious groups is to be evenhanded or neutral. Laws that reflect moral opinions based on a narrow construction of religious doctrine are forbidden in a land founded on the principle of a free church in a free state. The framers of the Constitution knowingly and explicitly rejected the church-over-state, state-over-church, and theocratic patterns.

The linkage between abortion and contraception is well established in Roman Catholic history. That this narrow religious opinion might become the controlling

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theological perspective for domestic and foreign policy on human fertility control is cause for both grief and alarm—grief because of the misery to which such a policy contributes and alarm because it violates the First Amendment.

The abortion issue is a point. People's attitudes toward elective abortion are rooted in profoundly held religious and moral beliefs. The American commitment to pluralism in religious conviction is solidly rooted in constitutional guarantees. The question now is whether the intolerance of a fundamentalist minority and political leaders who are committed to do battle with the First Amendment will permit room for differences of opinion and practice. Shall religious liberty be protected or violated in the name of dogmatic religion and political imperialism? Even William F. Buckley, Jr., acknowledges this as the core of the question:

I respect those [who] believe that the right to abort is an exercise in the implications of pluralism and that under the circumstances the anti-abortion sanction is to be resisted as an effort to impose a single cultural authority over the whole of society.²²

In the absence of consensus among religious groups as to fetal personhood and the value of fetal life or its claims on the pregnant woman and the community, no law could be based on the most narrow and rigid proposal without violating the First Amendment.

At stake in the abortion debate is the role of religious liberty as a constraint in the politics of dogmatic belief. The quest for political power by various religious groups is often little more than a smoke screen for religious bigotry and intolerance. Beneath the types of actions undertaken and the types of proposals supported are profound assumptions regarding the relation of morality to public policy and the relations of church to state.

The establishment clause of the First Amendment is violated by the intent of all efforts to pass a human life amendment or to define the fetus from the moment of conception as a person and citizen under the Constitution. These efforts are an attempt to enact one group's dogma as everyone's law. Such a notion of personhood is understandable and supportable only as a religious understanding, not as public policy. Nor is the dogma of fetal

personhood widely held even as a religious belief. The vast majority of Americans do not find it persuasive. Those who reject it do so out of equally powerful theological and biblical understandings. Difference of opinion on religious grounds is precisely what the Constitution is designed to protect.

The free exercise clause is violated by efforts to coerce the conscience of or to punish those who act out of conscientious belief to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. The violation of the free exercise clause may well be the single most important consideration in the public policy dimensions of the abortion debate. The question is whether we are to respect and protect honest differences of opinion or whether we seek to violate the integrity of belief of those who disagree with us.²³

Conclusion

The biblical understanding of personhood explains the profound silence of the Bible on the matter of elective abortion. That it contains no prohibitions against abortion is rather amazing if, as some contend, the Bible is so clear in its teaching against the practice. Certainly we know there were harsh penalties for abortion among the Hebrews' mid-eastern neighbors. The Assyrian code (ca. 1500 B.C.) declared that "any woman who causes to fall what her womb holds...shall be tried, convicted and impaled upon a stake and shall not be buried." The Hebrews knew of such codes, which tacitly acknowledged that abortion was practiced.

The absence of specific prohibitions in Scripture could mean either (1) that no Hebrew or Christian ever terminated a problem pregnancy or (2) that abortion was a private, personal, and religious matter not subject to civil regulation. The latter seems the most plausible explanation. Hebrew law, in contrast to the harsh and repressive attitudes found in neighboring cultures, gave considerable status to women. Women were equal bearers of God's image and equal sharers in the task of stewardship (Gen. 1:28-30). The emphasis fell upon the woman as one with the godlike ability and responsibility to make reproductive choices. Such choices were not socially regulated except as specified in Exodus, Chapter 21.

The same pattern prevailed in the New Testament era. Even Paul, the great apostle who gave directions for moral living to Christians in a pagan society, made no mention of abortion.

For all his practical guidance, not once does the subject appear in his lists of vices or prohibited actions. Apparently he regarded abortion as a matter to be dealt with on the basis of faith, grace, and Christian freedom. In such matters, the believer was to “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling...” (Phil. 2:12).

The absence of prohibitions against abortion in the Bible does not mean either that abortion was widely practiced or that there was a cavalier attitude about pregnancy termination. Then as now elective abortion posed substantive issues with which a woman or couple must come to terms. Respect for germinating life, one’s own beliefs, and one’s life plan all enter into the decision. Certainly reasons beyond mere convenience are needed to make the morally serious decision to terminate a germinal existence. Abortion is never to be taken lightly, but it is not a forbidden option.

The abortion question focuses on the woman as person—as a moral agent given freedom and responsibility. She reflects on the meaning of her pregnancy, considers her circumstances, examines her motives and moral commitments, and anticipates the future. The decision is uniquely hers, for the pregnancy is highly personal.

Contemporary Christians will do well to follow the biblical pattern in treating the subject of elective abortion. The claim that the Bible teaches that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception is problematic at best. Such a judgment rests on subjective and personal factors, not explicit biblical teachings. The Bible’s portrait of personhood centers on the woman and the man who unquestionably bear the image of God and live in responsible relation to God. Further, the absence of civil prohibition—even in a theocratic society such as that of the Hebrews—is a worthy model to follow. The biblical writers’ silence reveals a becoming reticence to judge too quickly the morality of another person’s choice. It is eloquent testimony to the sacredness of this choice for women and their families and to the privacy in which it is to be considered. God’s grace is extended to those who accept the responsibilities of parenthood and to those who must make difficult choices in the midst of the moral ambiguity of tragic and perplexing circumstances.

Endnotes

- ¹ Not all fundamentalists are political activists. Many are still convinced that politics is a dirty business that compromises Christian convictions, and they remain aloof from the world of organized politics and its strategies to dominate public policy. The term “militant fundamentalist” is intended to designate those who are deeply committed to and actively involved in efforts to achieve their moralistic and religious goals through political processes.
- ² Other issues include opposition to gay rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, sex education, drugs, and pornography. Militant fundamentalists are strongly anticommunist and advocate prayers in public schools, a hawkish foreign policy, public support for private (religious) schools, and laissez-faire capitalism.
- ³ Harold O.J. Brown, *Death Before Birth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 119.
- ⁴ Pius XII, *Address to the Italian Catholic Society of Midwives, Acta apostolice sedis*, 43 (1951): 836-839.
- ⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, “Whatever Happened to the Human Race?” (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1979), p. 41.
- ⁶ Charles Hartshorne, “Ethics and Process of Living,” Paper presented at the Conference on Religion, Ethics and the Life Process, Institute of Religion and Human Development, Texas Medical Center, March 18-19, 1974.
- ⁷ John Scott, “Reverence for Human Life,” *Christianity Today*, June 9, 1972, p. 12.
- ⁸ Sissela Bok, “Who Shall Count as a Human Being?” in Robert L Perkins, ed., *Abortion: Pro and Con* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1974), p. 92.
- ⁹ Jack W. Cottrell, “Abortion and the Mosaic Law,” *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1973, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Bruce K Waltke, “The Old Testament and Birth Control,” *Christianity Today*, November 8, 1978. The New King James Version of the Bible uses this “parallelism” approach, showing the influence of the fundamentalist movement on biblical translations. The text has been changed to correspond to the fetus-as-person argument.

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- ¹¹ W. A. Criswell, *The Criswell Study Bible* (Dallas: Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, 1979), p. 102.
- ¹² Donald Shoemaker, *Abortion, the Bible and the Christian* (Cincinnati: Hayes, 1976), p. 37.
- ¹³ See Paul D. Simmons, *Birth and Death: Bioethical Decision Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 171ff, in which the importance of this distinction is applied to considerations regarding biotechnical parenting.
- ¹⁴ Shoemaker, p. 30.
- ¹⁵ Bruce K Waltke, "Reflections from the Old Testament on Abortion," address to the Evangelical Theological Society, December 29, 1975, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ See C. Everett Koop, "Deception on Demand," *Moody Monthly*, May 1980, p. 27.
- ¹⁷ Shoemaker, p. 30.
- ¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III,4 (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1961), p. 416.
- ¹⁹ Barth, p. 416.
- ²⁰ Barth, p. 420.
- ²¹ Barth, p. 421.
- ²² William F. Buckley, Jr., "Firing Line," October 5, 1977.
- ²³ See Paul D. Simmons, "Religious Liberty and the Abortion Debate," *Journal of Church and State*, Summer 1990.

Dr. Paul Simmons, Ph.D., Th.M., is Clinical Professor, Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine, University of Louisville School of Medicine, and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Philosophy, University of Louisville. He is an ordained Baptist minister and has been pastor of churches in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee. He is Director of his own Center for Ethics: Ministry, Medicine and Business. He has also served as Adjunct Professor at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary.

Professor Simmons was professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1970-1993, and Director of the Clarence Jordan Center for Christian Ethical Concerns, 1977-1992. He has a special interest in the intersections of religion and science, and of morality and public policy. His method brings biblical, theological and philosophical perspectives into conversation with scientific and legal dimensions of particular problems.

He has written five books: The Southern Baptist Tradition: Religious Beliefs and Healthcare Decisions (2002); Freedom of Conscience (ed, cont) 2000; Birth and Death: Bioethical Decision Making (1983); Issues in Christian Ethics (1980); and Growing Up with Sex (1973) for early teens (9th ed.1997). Books in process include Dying in the Lord: Might My Physician Assist? and Controversial Issues in Medical Ethics: Religion, Science and Public Policy.

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