

ABORTION AND THE QUESTION OF HUMAN VALUE

by

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It would not be an overstatement to conclude that no issue has so polarized our nation during the last few decades as the issue of abortion. Proclaimed a deciding factor in many election campaigns, it was and is the issue of many controversial court cases. Ethicists are enjoying the attention the abortion issue elicits but can present no authoritative answers. At best they tell us only about alternatives and consequences. Feminists promote abortion as the doorway to equality of the sexes while their opponents view it as a sharp decline in morality. It is a troublesome issue for politicians because there appears to be no middle ground upon which to stand.

A minimal amount of sober reflection brings the realization that during the last twenty to thirty years the U.S. has undergone an obvious shift in its moral axis. In the fifties and early sixties, for example, the public consensus was that the doctor who performed an abortion was a criminal and that anyone who wanted an abortion had murderous intent. Today the pro-abortionists are seen by many to be the emancipators of women.

What is not immediately obvious in this change of political and moral climate is the collision of two conflicting world views, the Judeo-Christian consensus and postmodern humanism. "What is man that thou art mindful of him" (Psalm 8:4) is pitted against, "Man the measure of all things," (a humanistic slogan).

More specifically there is a clash of conflicting human rights: the woman's rights over her own body and her privacy vs. the right to life of the fetus. Traditionally when a crisis situation has arisen forcing a choice between the mother's life and the life of the fetus, the mother's life has been given priority with every effort then being made to save the fetus as well. The focus of this discussion does not include a decision which involves immediate danger to the mother's life. Nor does it deal with aborting a pregnancy due to rape or incest. This is an excruciatingly difficult moral decision, but it is a *different* moral decision than the choice to abort a pregnancy that does not endanger the mother's actual life and resulted from a sexual union to which she agreed. This paper addresses what is widely called "abortion on demand."

Feminists are confident that widespread acceptance of abortion on demand will free women from the oppressive chains imposed by the out-dated rules of patriarchal Christianity. They view control over their own "reproductive rights" as an essential element in their struggle to achieve equal footing with men in modern society. The pro-lifers feel that the new loosening of controls on abortion will lead to a worse repression of both sexes and the unjustified destruction of countless children's lives.

THE CRITERIA FOR DEFINING MAN AND HIS VALUE?

Traditionally western society has believed that there was a qualitative difference between man and the animals. Today many are of the opinion that man differs from the beast only in degree (quantitative rather than qualitative difference). This belief eliminates the uniqueness of human life. The direct result of this thinking is that not only does the *definition* of man become relative, but so do the standards for assigning *value* to man. Our value and dignity as human beings becomes a matter of judgment based on currently held values rather than an absolute standard.

The heart of the abortion controversy is this subjective manner of defining *what* is human (a person with full rights and value). It is not a question of *when* life begins, since we know with certainty that life (*homo sapiens*) begins with conception.⁷ In the 1973 landmark abortion case *Roe vs. Wade*, what the Supreme Court did not know with certainty was the point at which the developing fetus became a person with constitutional rights. Their decision was that it began with the third trimester of pregnancy.⁸

The determination of when life has value is often made on arbitrary and relative criteria. Let us look at four examples of this type of evaluation.

The first example is one in which human value and personhood are determined by certain *physical* characteristics. Francis Crick, the Nobel prize-winning biologist, has advocated legislation in which newborn babies would not be considered legally alive until they were two days old and had been certified as healthy by medical examiners.¹⁰ On November 12, 1973, ten months after the Supreme Court's decision to legalize abortion, *Newsweek* ("Shall This Child Die?") reported that doctors were already permitting babies with birth defects to die by withholding treatment. The doctors claimed that these newborn babies had little or no hope of achieving personhood. They thus redefined humanness as the ability to meet a certain physical standard making handicapped persons something less than human.

Secondly, human value is sometimes seen as an *economic* issue. The question is whether or not a being is capable of making a positive contribution to society. Many cite dwindling resources in the face of population growth as a persuasive argument for abortion.¹ For example, the then Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill.) argued in the *Congressional Record* (June 27, 1977) that abortion is a much better deal for the taxpayer since it is considerably cheaper than welfare. No one would deny that an additional child or a handicapped child can be a burden (financially and otherwise) to a family, but is human worth a monetary issue? If this kind of reasoning becomes prevalent, people will have to be careful not to become inconvenient to society!

Others used *mental* criteria as a third way of assigning humanness and value. Joseph Fletcher, ethicist and proclaimed father of situational ethics, defines humanness as a being capable of mental function. He says: "Human beings, in order to qualify as human, have to be something more than just biologically classifiable. . . (they must also be) possessed of functioning cerebral cortex (and) some minimal level of intelligence."¹⁴

Winston L. Duke, a nuclear physicist, stated that "A philosophy of reason will define a human being as life which demonstrates self-awareness, volition, and rationality. Thus it should be recognized that not all men are human . . . it would seem . . . to be more inhumane to kill an adult chimpanzee than a newborn baby, since the chimpanzee has greater mental awareness."¹⁵

A fourth arbitrary definition of humanness has to do with *social and cultural* criteria. Ashley Montagu, a British anthropologist, believed that a baby is not born human. Instead, it is born more or less with a capacity for becoming human as he or she is molded by social and cultural influences.¹⁶ Human value according to this criterion is on a sliding scale. Hence, a thirty-year-old Ph.D. may be more human than a two-year-old. Humanity then is not an endowment, but an accomplishment.

Each of the definitions cited above will eventually lead to the conclusion that some life is devoid of value because it is physically or mentally weak, or simply too expensive. Ethicist Daniel Callahan noted the consequences of this type of thinking: "A power group society could, by the use of this principle (of defining humanness any way we wish), define the chronically sick, the senile, the elderly as non-human, and thus justify the taking of their lives on the grounds of the social good to be obtained."¹⁷

PERSONHOOD AND HUMAN VALUE AS INHERENT

Palmer and Colton in their college textbook on Western civilization commented that the Greeks showed man his mind but Christianity gave man his soul.¹⁸ What they are saying here is that Christianity gave man dignity and worth because he was seen as a person created in God's image. The Judeo-Christian world view has always been that man's value is inherent because his Creator made him to be good and declared it so (Gen. 1:31). The Creator demonstrated His regard for man when He sent His Son in the likeness of man to redeem him.

This belief in a transcendent Creator influenced the author of the Declaration of Independence when he wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with *certain inalienable rights* . . ." (emphasis mine). Certainly he was not saying equal endowment in the areas of physical or mental capacity, but equality in the area of dignity and human worth. The value of man is decided upon by Someone outside the natural realm of man and is therefore not open to peer judgment.

That man is valuable to God and that man is to treat his fellow man with dignity is revealed in the Ten Commandments in which man is instructed to love God (Who loves man), for if he loves God (Who loves man) he will also love his neighbor as himself (Ex. 20). Dr. Arthur Guett, the Nazi director of public health, substituted the state for the Creator when he proclaimed in 1935:

"The ill-conceived love of neighbor has to disappear, especially in relation to inferior or asocial creatures. It is the supreme duty of a national state to grant life and livelihood only to the healthy . . . in order to secure the maintenance of a hereditarily sound and racially pure fold for all eternity. The life of an individual has meaning only in the light of that ultimate

aim, that is, in the light of his meaning to his family and to his national state."¹⁹

Historically, Western civilization attained great personal freedom because of its view of man in respect to God.

Is this paper suggesting that abortion is murder? Only if the fetus is a person. Earlier in this discussion it was established that human life definitely begins at conception. But does the person or soul begin at conception? The psalmist seems to answer in the affirmative when he says: "My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be" (Ps. 139: 15-16). Jeremiah 1:5 assigns personal pronouns to a fetus as does Luke 1:15-19 in which John is filled with the Holy Spirit before birth. The Bible seems to view life as a continuum from conception to death. Because of the biblical idea that humans have dignity as the result of their creation in God's image, we should begin to treat them with dignity where Scripture begins...at conception.

A SHIFT IN CULTURAL CONSENSUS

Abortion is now legal because Western civilization has shifted away from a Judeo-Christian consensus. The focus has moved from the *sanctity* of life to the *quality* of life. Noting this shift, Archibald Cox, former law professor and special prosecutor of the Watergate case, was prompted to comment on the Supreme Court's decision: "The opinion fails even to consider what I would suppose to be the most compelling interest of the state in prohibiting abortion: the interest in maintaining that respect for the paramount sanctity of human life which has always been at the center of Western civilization."²⁰

Unborn babies are being destroyed at a rate of one and a half million a year which amounts to one third of all the pregnancies in the United States. Since the 1973 court decision it is estimated that over 58 million abortions have occurred in the U. S. As staggering as this statistic is, the really frightening consequence is that what is actually being consumed is man himself as he is being redefined in humanistic terms.

THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

Because the Christian value of the sanctity of life and the dignity of man is being undermined, it is precisely at this point that Christians (individually and corporately) need first of all to re-affirm and proclaim the biblical mandate to uphold the sanctity of life. Secondly, the church and its members need to concentrate on the application of this principle (of the sanctity of life) in their everyday lives.²¹ No matter how heinous a sin, we are never to cease loving the sinner or put him in any other class than a man in God's image. He never enters the realm of the beast. The doctor who does the abortion and the woman who gets one are both people for whom Christ died. Loving the sinner, while abhorring the sin was the example of Christ.

A woman on welfare who has six children and no husband and who is desirous of an abortion does not have an immediate need for a lecture on morals! What an opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ to bear witness by ministering to her in love and acceptance and by providing her with biblical counsel and relief for her material needs! She of course needs to know of the reconciling work of Christ, and when she responds to His love, the Holy Spirit will convict her on moral issues. But what if she does not respond to God's love? Christians should continue to meet her needs! The whole person needs saving, not just the soul. Often by ministering to the physical, tangible need we are privileged to meet the deeper spiritual one as well.

The church must deplore the double standard that allows the morally loose male to "sow his wild oats" while escaping the consequences of pregnancy. Christians must go on record for a sharing of the consequences. Women should be on their guard against the emotional rhetoric that abortion will free them from exploitation as sex objects. In fact, the very opposite may be true. Feminists need to ask why the "sexist" establishment supports abortion. It may be that abortion enhances the male's freedom to exploit by sparing him from the worry of paternity! In other words, the chauvinist welcomes the feminist, pro-abortion stance because it frees him of potential responsibility and obligation.

Neither is abortion the harmless procedure it is sometimes presented to be. In a paper, Dick Calvert of Duke University Medical School said, "Four studies have demonstrated that two or more abortions can significantly impair a woman's future childbearing ability." She has an "increased risk for miscarriage, and for premature or low birth weight infants."

Churches and parachurch organizations need to provide the kind of services that dispense Christian love and counsel concerning biblically acceptable alternatives to abortion. The alternatives might be in the form of homes for unwed mothers, material support, adoption services, and medical attention, as well as providing the emotion support and encouragement for women who have decided against abortion. Some have already launched such a ministry.²²

Christian silence on the issue of abortion may be because they didn't perceive what the real issue was, nor its logical consequences. Abortion was thought to be a Catholic issue or one in which either position (pro or anti) could fit biblical revelation. Today many good books have been written by both Catholics and Protestants (see "For Further Reading"). Moreover, now the majority of evangelical leaders and scholars have spoken against this practice. But ignorance about abortion and its consequences is still appalling. Christians must seek to inform themselves about the issue and act quickly.

It is the attitude of many Christians that "I personally oppose abortion, but I do not think it is right for me to impose my Christian morality on anyone else." But Harold O. J. Brown (founder of the Christian Action Council) wrote: "The first amendment prohibits the state from dictating to the conscience of its citizens. It does *not* prohibit the conscience of the citizen from speaking to the state. If we understand the first amendment correctly, we will recognize that far from telling us that those of us who have religious convictions may not speak to the state, it is intended to *protect* our consciences so we will be able to speak to the state. If Christians may not be a

witness to the state of standards of right and wrong as they see them because these standards have a religious origin, then there will be no standards in America, a country founded on Christian principles."²³

We must be careful not to buy the myth of separation of religious ideas and the state. The authors of the first amendment were well aware that religious ideas could never be separated from the state in all its functions. "Thou shalt not kill" (the Hebrew word means "murder") was commanded by God. The state happens to concur with this religious-originated law and is not inclined to legalize murder so it can maintain separation of church and state!

But the question of legality is not the root of the issue. The crucial questions are ones which were raised earlier: "What is human? How are we to value something that is human?"

The pro-life position argues that the fetus is fully human from conception. Tradition, as well as much scientific evidence lends support to this position. Thus, the burden of proof is on the pro-abortionist to show that the fetus is not a person. This is especially true in light of the seriousness of the taking of life. If there is a *possibility* that the fetus is fully human, then it is surely better to assume that it has a right to life rather than run the risk of needlessly denying this life.

Because God's image is stamped on each person, any being that is human is valuable beyond any measure of time, money, or even emotional distress. This is a difficult principle to put into practice. Is the person in the womb worth nine months of physical discomfort and possible emotional anguish? Is this child worth the thousands of welfare dollars which he or she may cost?

Granted, the cost of a pro-life attitude is high: in health, in emotions, in waylaid careers, and in plain and simple dollars. Yet a reverence for life has for centuries been a binding principle in Western society. If we lose the reverence for any life, including the one not yet born, then we run the great risk of cheapening our own.

REFERENCES

1. This death of God theology was first promulgated by theologians Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul M. Van Buren. *Time Magazine* in its stories in the 22 October 1965 and 8 April 1966 issues brought this subject to the attention of the public.
2. The quote "God is dead" and the consequences of His death are found in Nietzsche's work: "The Gay Science," published in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Viking Press, 1954), pp. 95-96.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming Revell, 1977), pp. 178, 180.
4. See B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).
5. For an excellent treatment on the subject of the difference between man and things see Mortimer J. Adler's book *The Difference in Man and the Difference It Makes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967). This work

is especially interesting since Adler, a humanist, shows the logical consequences of viewing man as different only in degree from things.

6. "Abortion -- Or Compulsory Pregnancy," *Journal of Marriage and Family* (May, 1968), pp. 250-51.
7. This is an established biological fact but recently some medical textbooks have changed the definition of pregnancy. Conception ceased to mean "fertilization," and is now defined as beginning with "implantation" of the embryo in the womb. This subtle change was made no doubt to accommodate the increasing use of intrauterine devices (IUDs) as a method of birth control. IUDs are *not* a contraceptive, but an abortifacient.
8. The Supreme Court legalized all abortions for whatever reason up until the end of the second trimester of pregnancy. This they judged to be the age of "viability," meaning that the fetus could survive and hence the states could regulate abortions after this point. However, they added an exception clause having to do with the "mother's health." The terms "viable" and "mother's health" are open to wide interpretation. Hence for all practical purposes, an abortion cannot be denied even up to the point of delivery if some reason (such as mental health) is found that might threaten the mother's health.
9. The issues of concern here are those such as euthanasia, the right to die, genetic engineering, test-tube babies, human guinea pigs, etc.
10. *Nature* 220 (2 November 1968): 429-30.
11. See C. Everett Koop, *The Right to Live; The Right to Die* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1976). See also the moving article by Sondra Diamond entitled "On Being Alive," *The Human Life Review* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 86-87. See also the article on "The Deformed Child's Right to Life" in *Death, Dying and Euthanasia*, eds. Dennis J. Horan and David Mall (Washington, D.C.: University Publications of America, Inc., 1977).
12. For some very provocative discussion on the subject of overpopulation and dwindling resources see Robert L. Sassone, *Hand book on Population* (Santa Ana, Calif.: by the author, 1973) and R. J. Rushdoony, *The Myth of Overpopulation* (Nutley, N. J.: Craig Press, 1969).
13. See the following articles: C. Everett Koop, "The Slide to Auschwitz," *The Human Life Review* 3, no.2 (Spring 1977); Leo Alexander, "Medical Science Under Dictatorship," in *Death, Dying and Euthanasia*; and Charles Carrol, "Abortion Without Ethics," *Abortion and Social Justice*, eds. Thomas W. Hilgers and Dennis J. Horan (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972).
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15. Winston L. Duke, "The New Biology," *Reason* (August 1972).
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17. Daniel Callahan, *Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1970), p. 125.
18. R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950).
19. Arthur Guett, *The Structure of Public Health in the Third Reich*, cited by Clifford E. Bajema in *Abortion and the Meaning of Personhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1974), p. 13. For a fuller explanation of Nazi ethics, see Frederick Wertman's book *A Sign for Cain* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), or Gitta Sereny's book *Into That Darkness; From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).
20. Archibald Cox, *The Role of the Supreme Court in American Government* (New York: Oxford Press, 1976), p. 52.

21. Helmut Thielicke, *Nihilism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 84.
22. An excellent treatise that exhorts us to do just that is Francis Schaeffer's book, *The Church Before A Watching World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IntVarsity Press, 1971).
23. Two such groups that are offering these services are: Christian Action Council, 788 National Press Building, Washington, D.C. 20045; and National Birthright, 11055 South St. Louis Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60055.
24. Harold O. J. Brown, *Death Before Birth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977) p. 143.
25. See John W. Whitehead, *The Separation Illusion* (Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1977).

FOR FURTHER READING

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