

Sermon: Biblical Principles Touching on the Question of Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life

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There is much debate and confusion in the United States today over when life begins and if such life has value. Peter Singer, who has made quite a splash as a professor of ethics at Princeton University, says the following: “Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons.... The life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.”¹

The United States Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* surveyed views of various religious groups on the question of the origin of human life and concluded:

Texas [the appellant in the case] urges that apart from the Fourteenth Amendment life begins at conception, and is present throughout pregnancy, and that, therefore, the state has a compelling interest in protecting that life from and after conception. We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary at this point in the development of man’s knowledge is not in a position to speculate as to the answer.²

Confusion exists in America today over the status of life in the womb and thus over abortion. I want to suggest to you, however, that there is no confusion in the Bible on the sanctity of human life and on when that life begins.

Some in the pro-choice community wonder why the Bible does not explicitly condemn abortion, noting that the Scriptures do not command, “Thou shalt not abort,” as it says, “Thou shalt not murder.” We can respond by observing that the biblical *principles* against murder entail that abortion contravenes the expressed will of God. For instance, the Scriptures do not explicitly condemn slavery, but the general principles it sets forth about human relations, particularly in the New Testament, “[brought] the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die,” in the words of New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce.³ Another reason why there is no explicit prohibition against abortion is that such a command was not needed. Abortion was inconceivable to ancient Jews, given the high value placed on progeny.⁴ Furthermore, what historical evidence we have from the early church indicates that the early fathers routinely condemned abortion as immoral.⁵

God’s Sovereign Right over Our Bodies

The Scriptures themselves lead us to adopt the conclusions of the ancient Jews and early church. First, God asserts that he alone has the sovereign right to decide matters of life and death. In his great song of Deuteronomy 32, Moses speaks with God’s voice and in God’s place, saying: “See now that I myself am He. There is no

God besides Me. I put to death, and I bring to life. I have wounded, and I will heal. And no one can deliver out of my hand" (Deut 32:39). God thus claims for himself alone the right to give life and the right to take it away.

God asserts this sovereignty over human life because he is the giver of that life. The beautiful story of the Lord's creation of the first human being is told in Genesis 2, where Moses writes, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). It was God who created Adam and Eve, and it is God who forms every baby in the womb since the creation of the first man and the first woman.

The truth that God created us implies that he has a claim on our bodies. One of the common arguments of pro-choice advocates concerns the autonomy of woman over her own body. When I was a first-year student in law school and we were discussing *Roe v. Wade* and other abortion cases, there was one female student who claimed that since a fetus is part of its mother's body, the mother ought to have the same rights over her fetus that she has over her body generally. "A baby in my womb is nothing more than a leech on my body," she argued, "and just as I am permitted to pick off a leech, so I ought to be able to abort this baby at any time."

That woman's biology was wrong because a fetus is not simply part of its mother's body, like a hand or arm. A baby is a separate being. In addition, the Bible teaches that since God created us, even our bodies are not our own, and thus we are not free to do whatever we please with our bodies. Paul teaches the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:28 that all human

beings live and move and have their being in God. Our dependence on him for life indicates his claim as Creator to our bodies. Paul also instructs the Corinthians that the bodies of believers have been bought with a price through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross (1 Cor 6:19-20). Therefore, Christians are not free to do whatever they wish with their bodies. God alone is sovereign over human life.

Humans Made in God's Image

Second, the Bible teaches us that God is not only the sovereign author of human life who has a claim on our bodies, but also that he places a high value on that life because he has created us in his image. Genesis 1:26-27 reminds us of this truth, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'" Genesis 9 instructs us that even after the fall and the entry of sin into the universe, the Lord continued to create men and women in his image, although that image was corrupted by sin. God proclaims that he has stamped human beings with his image and hence our lives have value. "And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting," God told Noah. "I will demand an accounting from every animal and from each man, too. I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, *for in the image of God has God made man*" (Gen 9:5-6, italics mine).

God will require the life of the murderer because a killer has taken something

that is valuable—human life. And that life is valuable precisely because the Lord stamped it with his image.

Murder Prohibited

A third principle from Scripture that touches on the question of abortion is the prohibition against murder. The text cited above from Genesis 9 explains that murder is a heinous crime because human beings are made in God's image. We also know the straightforward words of the Sixth Commandment: "You must not murder" (Exod 20:13). We are to respect and honor life because God has created us in his image, and the image of God is universal. Whatever color we are, whether we are disabled or perfectly healthy, whether we are born or unborn, we are stamped with the image of God. Therefore, we are infinitely valuable before God himself.

If it is true that God counts human life as valuable because it is stamped with his image, the following questions arise: Does the Scripture give us any guidance as to when life begins? Does life indeed begin in the womb, perhaps even at conception? If the answer to this second question is "yes," then we can say that the Bible proscribes the taking of life in the womb by means of abortion.

Life Begins at Conception

The fourth principle from the Scriptures is that human life commences at the moment a child is conceived. Psalm 139:13-16 is perhaps the decisive passage regarding abortion and the sanctity of human life. David praises God for his intimate knowledge of and care for him. "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and

wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 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." Some of you like to sew; others of you enjoy pottery. Those are the two images David draws on in this passage. He compares God to the great tailor knitting together the little child in the womb of its mother. He compares God to the great potter forming a child inside its mother as a potter carefully fashions a lump of clay on a wheel.

There are three points I want to make about this critically important passage. First, Psalm 139 speaks of the growth of a baby in the womb as a divine work of great skill. This is not just some natural process, occurring as a consequence of chance or random selection. Rather, it is God who fashions the growing of a baby in a wonderfully marvelous way, forming that child in the womb every step along the way.

Second—and perhaps most important—the Scriptures in general, and Psalm 139 in particular, see life as a continuum from conception until death. Psalm 139 is filled with all sorts of "I," "me," and "you" language, the language of personal relationship. David speaks of himself as "I" and "me" and of God as "you." In verses 13-16 he speaks of himself in the womb before his birth as "I" and "me." In other words, David sees himself as the same person in the womb that he was outside of the womb.

John Stott, the great English Christian, writer, and pastor, has commented on the notion of continuity of life present in Psalm 139:

He who was thinking and writing as a grown man, David, has the same personal identity as the fetus in the womb. He is aware of no discontinuity between his antenatal, that is, before birth, and postnatal being. On the contrary, in and out of his mother's womb, before and after his birth, as embryo, baby, youth and adult, he is conscious of being the same person. Scripture views life as a continuum between the time of conception unto the time of death.⁶

Third, not only does Psalm 139 teach that life is a continuum and that the formation of a baby in the womb is a complex work of God, but it also depicts God as relating to children even while they are in the womb. David speaks of God relating to him in a physical way, creating him and interacting with him as he grows as a baby in the womb. God does not relate to products of conception and blobs of protoplasm. God relates to *people* in the way David describes in Psalm 139.

Other Scriptures confirm this conclusion that the Bible sees life as a continuum between conception and death. In Psalm 51:5 David laments, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Here the Israelite king sees himself as a morally responsible being, as having a sin nature from the time of his conception. Blobs of protoplasm and products of conception are not morally responsible beings; people are.

Isaiah speaks of his prophetic call as follows, "Listen to me, you islands. Hear this, you distant nations. Before I was born the Lord called me. From my birth he has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me. He made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver" (Isa 49:1-2). Again, God does not call blobs of protoplasm or products of conception to serve as prophets.

God calls human beings.

And as it was with the call of Isaiah, so it was for Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 1:4-5 the prophet writes, "The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'" God interacted personally with Jeremiah even when the prophet was in the womb, setting him apart for his later work as prophet.

In Luke 1:41-44, Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, is five months pregnant with John the Baptist. When Elizabeth's cousin Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, enters the room, John the Baptist, as a five-month old baby in the womb, leaps in his mother's womb with joy in the presence of his Savior, Jesus Christ. In other words, the Holy Spirit touched John the Baptist, five months old in the womb, so that even when he was unborn, he was able to sense that he was in the presence of Jesus Christ, his Savior. God does not have that kind of a relationship with products of conception and blobs of protoplasm. God has a relationship like that with human beings.

Another piece of evidence from the Scripture as to the sanctity of human life in the womb is that the Old and New Testaments sometimes use the same terms for children outside the womb they use for children in the womb (e.g., Exod 21:22; Luke 1:41, 44). In this regard it is interesting that though the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* was unwilling to decide when life begins, nevertheless it refers to the plaintiff in the case, Mrs. Roe, consistently in the case as "the mother." The reader of the Court's opinion is left wondering exactly how Mrs. Roe can be designated as a mother?

Is the biblical view that life is a continuum between conception and death

irrational? Is it unscientific? The evidence from the science of genetics leads us to answer “no” to both questions. As one Christian ethicist put it, after surveying the evidence from genetics about the events of conception:

When sperm and egg unite, a new individual, different from the father, different from the mother, has come into existence. The two sets of DNA that create the chromosomes necessary for life are all present, and there is a distinct person, different from father and different from mother, present from the moment of conception. When the sperm and egg unite, a genetically unique human being comes into being. While the developing child is dependent on the mother’s body for nourishment and oxygen, physiologically the unborn child is not simply a part or extension of the mother’s body. The unborn child is an individual in his or her own right with a separate and distinct life trajectory.⁷

Other Christian writers note that since “species-specific DNA strands, identifying the fertilized egg as human, are present at conception, a human person with rights is present at conception.”⁸

Pro-choice advocates consistently accuse those who are pro-life of trying to force their personal morality on others. But the pro-life community may fairly respond: “Why are you trying to force your values on a third party, the baby in the womb, who is independent of you? Why are you trying to force your values on him or her when that child has no choice in the matter? Indeed, you are demanding the ultimate sacrifice, the yielding up of the precious gift of life, from a helpless child who cannot resist your personal morality.”

I have read more than one article, in recent publications, reporting that when women see ultrasounds of their fetuses,

they recognize them as human and begin to bond emotionally with them. Some writers have suggested that crisis pregnancy centers should buy ultrasound equipment and hire ultrasound technicians, so that women who come into the centers could become aware of who is growing in their wombs. The rate of abortion goes down substantially once an ultrasound of the child in the womb is actually seen, for women recognize that life is inside of them from the very earliest days of pregnancy.

The Scriptures Prohibit Abortion

A fifth and final Scriptural principle pertaining to abortion is the Bible’s seemingly outright condemnation of the taking of unborn life. Exodus 21:21-25 is admittedly a difficult text, but I think the meaning can be discerned. “If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman, and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

Are these verses speaking of harming the woman or the baby? If the harm is restricted to the mother only, then Exodus 21:21-25 would probably be saying that a baby in the womb is not a life since the one harming the fetus would not be held accountable. But the better interpretation, for several reasons,⁹ is that the prohibition of Exodus 21 expands the biblical “law of retribution” to include harm to an unborn baby. If the two men fight and they injure the pregnant woman and she delivers the baby but the baby has no harm, then only a fine will be assessed

against the one responsible for hurting the woman and causing her to deliver the baby prematurely, with no harm. But where there is damage to the baby, under the law of retribution that God enacted in the Old Testament, then whatever harm is done to that child, that same harm will be visited upon the person who is responsible for the damage to the child in the womb.

God cares about human life, not just outside the womb but also inside the womb. God interacts with human life inside the womb. He calls the prophets while they are in the womb. The greatest example of God's work in the womb, of course, is that of Jesus Christ himself, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit as a real baby in the womb and who grew in his mother's womb the way any other human baby would grow. He endured the nine months of gestation and was born in the ordinary way. God thus showed the sanctity of human life in the most marvelous way possible, by himself becoming a baby in the womb. Is it not interesting that were Mary alive today, she would be a prime candidate for abortion? After all, she was unmarried and pregnant.

Concluding Thoughts

I want to offer some final observations in closing. First, we tend to think that since *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land, it must have strong legal underpinnings. We must understand that *Roe v. Wade* is based upon the so-called right to privacy in the Constitution. You might reply, "I have read the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. Where does the right to privacy appear within the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, or among the other amendments to the Constitution?" The answer is that it does not appear in the Constitution. It does not appear in the Bill of Rights; it does not

appear in any of the amendments.

The right to privacy is a right that the Supreme Court has made up out of whole cloth. The Supreme Court in the 1965 decision of *Griswold v. Connecticut*¹⁰ created the right to privacy on which *Roe v. Wade* is based. With these words the Supreme Court announced this new constitutional right: "The foregoing cases [the Court had surveyed cases involving freedom of association and speech] suggest that specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras formed by emanations from those guarantees that helped give them life and substance." In other words, the Constitutional right to privacy is predicated upon penumbras and emanations from those guarantees of the Bill of Rights that give them life and substance. Does anyone know what that means? Have you ever looked up the word "penumbra" in the dictionary? A "penumbra" is a shadow, specifically, the shadow created by the sun or moon during an eclipse. An emanation is simply something that comes forth from something else. So the Court has predicated the right to privacy on shadows it sees coming forth from the wording of the Bill of Rights and the 14th Amendment. Shadows and emanations are not exactly what the average observer would call a solid legal foundation, yet that is the legal underpinning for the right to privacy, which underlies the right to seek abortion up through the ninth month of pregnancy.

The New Testament Book of James has something to say about shadows. James writes, "God does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). Shadows shift; shadows hide; shadows change form and disappear. Shadows are ephemeral. God is not like shadows; he is eternally unchanging. *Roe v. Wade* is predicated sim-

ply upon the will of the Supreme Court and nothing else. It has no substantial legal underpinning. As Christians, we should cultivate respect for all other human beings, regardless of age, race, nationality, or ability. We must recognize and remind our fellow believers that all human beings are stamped with the image of God and have value in his sight and should have value in our sight because of that fact, whether born or unborn.

Second, we should warn our society about God's attitude toward the sin of abortion. Abortion is the taking human life. In Ezekiel 3 God tells the prophet he is to be a watchman on the walls of the city. The watchman who warns the city of the approach of the enemy will not have the blood of the people on his hands after their destruction. But if the watchman is silent and the enemy comes and defeats the people of the city, their blood will be on his hands (Ezek 3:16-19). Similarly, we as believers, who know the truth of God's word, are watchmen on the walls of the city that is our culture. God wants us to issue a clear and unequivocal warning that abortion is wrong in his sight and that he will not endure forever the society that sacrifices its children to the gods, whether the god is Molech or the modern god of convenience (Ezek 25:35-39).

Third, we ought to seek to change our laws so that all people, born and unborn, receive justice. God shows himself, particularly in the Old Testament, to be a God who is incredibly interested in his people's dispensation of justice. He is profoundly concerned that all people, especially the helpless in this world, receive justice from the powerful (e.g., Amos 5:24; Mic 6:8; Ps 103:6). For instance, we should support with letters and phone calls bills in Congress that ban partial-birth abortion.

Fourth, we need to provide legitimate alternatives for women seeking abortions. We need to support, financially and otherwise, those women who say, "Yes, I'm willing to carry my baby to term," since their decision is one that pleases and honors God. We need to love and forgive women who have had abortions and seek to be a means by which the Lord might flood their lives with his grace. On many occasions, we also need to be a means of love and support for men who have been caught up in the sin and trauma of abortion. We need to support and promote adoption. We need to work for respect of human life at the end of life as well as the beginning of life.

Most of all, of course, we must continue to proclaim the gospel in a dark world. Only the gospel has the power to change the hearts of men and women. And it is a darker world than we may think. As one theologian has written, "Nothing shows the moral bankruptcy of a people or of a generation more than disregard for the sanctity of human life."¹¹ The prevalence of abortion—well in excess of a million a year in this country—indicates just how dark the times are, just how morally bankrupt we are.

A pastor I know well told me of a providential encounter he had some years ago with the owner of an abortion clinic in his community. My pastor friend asked the owner of this abortion clinic, "Don't you know that abortion is killing babies in the womb?" And the owner of this abortion clinic answered, "Oh, yes. We know we are killing babies. But you cannot imagine how lucrative this business really is." That is an example of the darkness of the world in which we live, but that is the very world to which God has called us to be salt and light, and to proclaim the gospel. The

gospel is the only thing that can really change our world from the inside out.

Sometimes, by God's grace, we win a battle here and there. We counsel with a girl at a crisis pregnancy center, and she turns from her decision to abort her baby. We seek in our legislatures stronger restraints on abortion rights, and sometimes God gives us victory. And we argue with love and compassion and the truth, so that sometimes even the most adamantly pro-choice minds are changed.

One example of a changed mind is Dr. Stanley Fish, who is now the chairman of the Humanities Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Dr. Fish, a well-known liberal who advocates a radical philosophy called deconstructionism, was to debate abortion and related issues with Robert George, an ethicist at Princeton University who is a pro-life Christian. Professor George set forth a very solid and well-reasoned argument for the pro-life position, and when it came time for Dr. Fish to respond, something surprising happened, as Christian commentator Charles Colson reports:

Stanley Fish has written that reason is useless in settling disputes, especially controversial ones like abortion. Why? Because different viewpoints make it impossible to find common starting points for debate. "There is no truth, so that's all that's left," Fish says, "So all that is left are unarguable assumptions that can neither be proven nor disproven." For Fish, the abortion debate provided the perfect illustration. As he saw it, the claim that the fetus has a right to life is a purely religious assertion. So, if you're religious, you "buy it," if you're not, you don't.

Professor George's answer was, in effect, "Not so fast." You can defend the right to life without even mentioning religion. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that

what's inside the pregnant womb is a distinct and unique person every bit as human as you or I. George made a brilliant case and then sent his paper to Fish in advance of the convention.

During the panel discussion attended by 200 people, Professor Fish rose to respond to George by saying, amazingly, "Professor George is right. And he is right to correct me."

It was an astonishing admission and the next sound in the room was that of 200 jaws hitting the floor at once. Fish not only repudiated his previous pro-choice position on abortion, he chastised abortion rights advocates for ignoring what science has to say about the fetus' humanity.¹²

May God grant us similar boldness to speak the truth about abortion in love, and may he, by his grace and through his gospel, grant us similar victories in the future, all for his glory.

ENDNOTES

¹Quoted in *SALT*, a publication of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, vol. 9, no. 4 (1999) 2.

²*Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

³F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 197-198.

⁴David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 23.

⁵Francis J. Beckwith, *Politically Correct Death* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 140-141; John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1993) 118-119; James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, "Abortion" (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1986) 2-3.

⁶John Stott, *Our Social & Sexual*

Revolution, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 166.

⁷Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 135.

⁸John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) 60.

⁹Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 32-35.

¹⁰*Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965).

¹¹John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 122.

¹²Transcript from the radio program "Breakpoint," September 16, 1998, ©Prison Fellowship Ministries.

