

CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 10

“ABORTION”

“You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous – how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered!” Psalm 139: 13-17

In this message today we will deal with what is commonly recognized as the most divisive and controversial moral issue of the last several decades: Abortion.

Unlike some denominations, where a majority of the people could be described as strongly anti-abortion or, in a few instances, strongly pro-choice, my guess would be that individual Christians within the United Methodist Church would more nearly mirror our society as a whole, which seems to be very divided on this issue. Polls indicate that a majority of Americans apparently favor keeping abortions legal in the first trimester, but a majority also oppose late-term abortions, partial birth abortions, and abortions performed on minors without parental consent.

Today we are going to try to answer a number of questions surrounding this issue.

What Really Happened in Roe vs. Wade?

To begin lets go back to January 22, 1973, a day when three major news stories made the headlines: former President Lyndon Johnson died, a peace (of sorts) was announced in Vietnam, and the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the most controversial decision ever given by the justices – a decision that has divided our nation ever since – Roe v. Wade.

Due largely to the sexual revolution and the explosion of traditional family values, and based upon a suspect interpretation of the 14th Amendment, the court ruled that a woman's right to an abortion was guaranteed and protected by the Constitution.

In a nutshell, here is the Roe decision: The right to terminate a pregnancy is a matter of personal decision and is a privacy issue protected by the Constitution. Since abortion in the first trimester is deemed to be as safe (or safer) than carrying a child to term, states cannot restrict abortion rights in the first trimester. Abortion on demand in all fifty states was instantly the results of this first part of the Court's ruling. Later Supreme Court rulings have allowed states to attach certain conditions and requirements to first trimester abortions including waiting periods, and parental consent for teenagers. In Roe, the Court went on to rule that second trimester abortions are more medically challenging than first trimester abortions, and thus the state may regulate those abortions, but only to protect the health of the mother, not for the purpose of restricting abortions per se. Finally, the Court ruled that once an unborn child is viable, that is, when it can survive outside the womb, the state may regulate or even prohibit abortions except when necessary to preserve the life or health of the mother.

It is clear no one anticipated the results of this decision. Since 1973 the number of legal abortions steadily rose until 1990, and has declined marginally since. On average in America there are just over 1 million abortions performed each year. Estimates place the total number of legal abortions performed in America since 1973 at between 37 and 40 million.

For some of you this may be hard to understand, but there truly are thinking, compassionate, and committed Christian people on both sides of this issue. Let's try to understand how this can be.

Why some Thinking, Compassionate Christians Support Legalized Abortion?

The committed Christians that I know who support legalized abortion do so not because they think abortion is a good thing. Shortly after Roe v Wade, Dr. William Archer, a pro-choice physician who had written on the subject, noted. “No sensitive person feels comfortable about abortion...but I believe there are situations in which it is justified, as the lesser of two evils.” Most Christians who are pro-choice would not personally choose to have an abortion, but believe there are circumstances in which having an unplanned child might be so traumatic for a woman (or a child) that she should have the right to not have that child.

Most Christians who support a woman’s right to an abortion have done so out of a deep compassion and concern for women who have been raped, or were victims of incest, or some who discovered that their unborn children had serious genetic defects.

Many Christians who support legalized abortions do so because the alternative of illegal abortions seems barbaric in our advanced medical world... Let’s turn our attention for a few minutes to the other side.

Why some Thinking, Compassionate Christians Oppose Abortion?

I begin by noting that too often some who call themselves “pro-life” have been so passionate about their side of this issue that they have turned many people away from their views. Pro-choice advocates often point to the violence of extremists in the anti-abortion movement and wonder how these people can honestly believe they are standing for the love of Christ while killing abortion providers, acting out with hatred or anger toward those who oppose them, or treating women with unplanned pregnancies with such malicious contempt. Pro-life advocates wonder the same about the mass killing of unborn infants. Some others note that some in the pro-life movement, including Roman Catholics, do not allow for any artificial means of birth control and thus limit women the opportunity to determine whether they will have children or not.

But having noted this, it is important to recognize that the vast majority of people who are pro-life (and pro-choice) are not represented by the extremists! Most people who are anti-abortion are compassionate people. They also care about the concerns of the mother, and the welfare of their babies.

Yet, the bottom line for those Christians who oppose abortion is that life is a gift from God. They believe that conception and the development of a child in the womb are miracles and therefore sacred. They believe that only God should take life away. They note that most abortions (93%) are not for rape, incest, or genetic malformations, but for matters of convenience.

Some beliefs about when 'life' begins?

The crux of this issue seems to hinge on defining when exactly life begins. If life really begins at conception (as most opponents agree) then killing that life anytime thereafter constitutes murder and breaks the 6th commandment, and violates the Biblical Spirit of the "Sanctity of Human Life." But, if life begins at some point later than conception (as most pro-abortionists believe), then destroying that tissue does not constitute killing, as the tissue is not yet alive.

Many theories have been espoused to help determine when exactly life begins, ... and the bottom line is...no one really knows! Some believe that life begins at the moment of conception, as soon as the zygote cell divides it takes on life. Some believe it is more likely to happen 2 weeks after conception when a yellow streak develops in the embryo. This yellow streak will grow and develop into the spinal cord and brain. 3 weeks from conception the embryo is about 2 mm long and has started to develop visible external body parts. It is no longer a blob of tissue. At about 4 weeks the heart starts to beat and pump blood. With the significance placed on "life is in the blood", some people believe this is the point when the fetus becomes a living person.

About 6 weeks from conception primitive brain waves can be detected, and as we all know that is a tell tale sign of life. At about 12 weeks the fetus begins to look like a baby. At 16 weeks fetal movement begins, often called quickening, an involuntary movement of arms and legs, certainly a sign of life. Some people put the line of demarcation at about 24 weeks when the fetus becomes viable, (able to live outside the womb) with current technology. Most Jewish traditions teach that a person is not fully alive or human until the head is delivered from the birth canal, or until about half the body is delivered in a breech baby. Some others believe that (just like it was with Adam) not until the baby inhales its first breath is it really alive... As you can see, it's not an easy answer. Let us turn then to exploring some:

Biblical and Theological Perspectives

At the very least my hope has been to open the door to understanding why thinking, caring people can have opposing views regarding abortion. But now we ask, do the Bible, Christian theology, and the tradition of the church teach us anything with regard to abortion?

We must begin by acknowledging that the Bible never specifically mentions abortion. Though it was known and practiced in ancient times, especially in ancient Rome, neither the Old Testament or New Testament addresses it directly. But there are passages of scriptures that might inform our position on this issue.

The first is rooted in a concept we've discussed in conjunction with three different sermons in this series: the right God claims to determine when life ends. Genesis 9:5-6 makes clear that ending human life is not within our jurisdiction. This is God's domain. The primary implications of this claim apply to those who are already born, not the unborn. But the principle must inform our views on abortion. Life itself, and the ending of it, is something that God has not given us authority over.

Second, we have this beautiful picture painted in our text this morning, and also in Jeremiah 1:5 of God shaping each of us in our mother's womb. Until late in this century, God alone peered into the womb to see the child growing. God is said to be at work in the womb, knitting us together. God even knows who we will become and, while each of us is in our mother's womb, God is shaping an individual's character, innate abilities, and physical attributes.

Third, we get a sense of the significance of the unborn when Mary goes to visit her elderly and pregnant aunt Elizabeth. When Mary speaks, John the Baptist leaps in his mother's womb, a sign Elizabeth takes to mean that the Holy Spirit has prompted her unborn child to recognize the special nature of Mary's likewise unborn son.

Fourth, I think a word must be said contrary to the popular discussion about "choice" and the rights we have over our own bodies. The Apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 6: 12-20 that Christians have a different perspective on an individual's dominion over his or her body. Our bodies are not our own – they are gifts from God – and God still claims ownership of them because we were "bought with a price". In fact, Paul says our bodies are "members of Christ" and "Temples of the Holy Spirit". For these reasons we are to "glorify God" in our bodies.

And finally, among Biblical passages, we would have to look at Mary's story as indicative of how God works. God took a 13 year old unmarried peasant girl and placed within her womb a child who would save the world. This reminds us that God takes the unlikely, difficult and painful circumstances we find ourselves in and uses them to do God's work!

Moving beyond scriptures, it is important to note that while the Bible doesn't specifically mention the word abortion, the early church did discuss it, and it was universally condemned.

From as early as Clement of Alexandria in 200 ad, to the 16th century Jesuit Thomas Sanchez, the church has maintained a pro-life stance almost without exception, up until about 1960.

The United Methodist Church has taken a strong position on abortion that is often misunderstood. Here is our official position as stated in the United Methodist Book of Resolutions:

“The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence...In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection.”

While allowing for the possibility of abortion under certain “tragic” circumstances, the position rejects abortion as a means of birth control, which is the primary reason for most abortions that are performed today.

And now, one final word...to those of you women here today who may have chosen an elective abortion. I want you to know that you have not committed the unforgivable sin! Your choice is no different than many of our own, but probably has left you scarred and scared! God wants you to know that His everlasting arms, His eternal forgiveness, His overarching Mercy, His amazing Grace are yours for the asking! That’s true for all of us sinners...so let us pray!

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