

Another Look at Abortion Ex. 20:13; Ps. 139:13-16; Rom. 14:2-5;

Ex. 21-22 9/29/19

The debate over abortion continues to roil our country over 45 years after the Supreme Court Roe v. Wade decision. That decision declared that abortion is a legal right until the time of the viability of the fetus- when it can live outside the mother. In the last several years over 400 new laws in 32 states have been passed restricting abortion. Several states now permit abortions only until the time a heartbeat can be detected, or at 6-8 weeks into the pregnancy. Several states make no exceptions for rape or incest. The Alabama law makes performing an abortion a class A felony, meaning the doctor could serve up to life in prison. Many of these laws have not yet been put into practice, as court injunctions have stopped them from proceeding. In several states lawmakers and governors have stated that their endgame is to force the Supreme Court to re-examine and overturn the Roe vs. Wade decision.

I preached a sermon about abortion five years ago, but with these recent developments, I thought it was time to do so again. I believe that the church has some things to say about abortion that no one else is saying. Now, I need to point out that the Bible says nothing directly about abortion. Really! Surprising, isn't it? The word is never mentioned. That doesn't mean that the Bible has nothing to say about the issue, but what it

says, it says indirectly rather than directly, which should lead all of us to have some humility regarding our opinions on this subject.

Pro-life proponents point to the biblical principle of protecting innocent life. The 6th commandment reads, “*You shall not murder,*” (Ex. 20:13) or “*Thou shalt not kill,*” in the old King James version. The Bible makes exceptions for some kinds of killing- self-defense and capital punishment, for example, but those are the exceptions to the rule against taking life. Of course, this raises the thorny question of whether or not aborting a fetus is the taking of human life.

Pro-lifer Christians believe that it is. They cite passages like this one from Psalm 139. First, the Psalmist celebrates the wonder of the fact that God knows everything about him, and is with him everywhere he goes. Then he says,

¹³ *For it was you who formed my inward parts;*

you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴ *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Wonderful are your works;

that I know very well.

¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you,*

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ *Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me

when none of them yet existed. (Ps. 139:13-16)

The Psalmist rejoices in the idea that God knew him intimately in the womb, acting to form him and plan for his life. Pro-lifers believe that this points to the existence of human life in the womb. And since destroying human life is forbidden by the 6th commandment, abortion must be wrong.

Pro-choice Christians disagree that the Bible teaches that the fetus possesses human life. They note that Psalm 139 is filled with poetic language, making it a poor choice to draw scientific conclusions about when life begins. And they cite a passage from Exodus 21. *22 When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine.* (Ex. 21:22) Here, a pregnant woman is accidentally injured, causing her to miscarry. The penalty for the one who causes the miscarriage is not the usual penalty given for manslaughter, which is banishment from the community. That's what you would expect if the law regarded a fetus as a human being. Apparently, it doesn't, because instead of banishment, a fine is imposed.

Pro-choicers also point to another important biblical principle: the freedom of the human conscience in morally ambiguous matters. In the book of Romans we find early Christians deeply divided over several religious practices about which the Bible is unclear- eating meat previously offered to pagan idols and keeping the Sabbath. These matters may seem minor to us, but to Jewish converts raised under the Kosher laws, these were major issues. They even kept Jewish and Gentile Christians from eating together at the same table! Here are Paul's instructions to those divided Christians: ²*Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.* ³*Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.* ⁴*Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.* ⁵*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.* (Romans 14:2-5)

Here, Paul allows for freedom of conscience on issues on which the Bible is unclear or silent. This is also a principle that has been a hallmark of Presbyterians, as we assert in our "Historic Principles of the Church" that "God alone is Lord of the conscience."

So, with abortion we have a collision of two biblical principles- that life is sacred and must be protected, and that Christians have freedom to use their own conscience in morally ambiguous matters. So, how do we resolve this dilemma?

Let me start by saying what we don't do. We don't make one of the principles absolute and ignore the other one, as the extremists on both sides of the issue tend to do. Extreme pro-lifers want to take away women's ability to make choices about this matter, while extreme pro-choicers minimize the moral aspects of ending the life of a fetus. Keep in mind that those holding the extreme positions- that abortion should not be legal under any circumstances, or that abortion should be legal in all circumstances- those extreme views are in the minority, with about 60% of us somewhere in the middle, believing that abortion should be legal in some circumstances. Notice, that middle position keeps both biblical principles in tension.

Second, we need to continue to wrestle with the somewhat unknowable question of when human life begins. The Supreme Court set the standard as the time of viability, when the infant can live outside the mother's womb. But the time of viability is now earlier in pregnancy than it was then because of medical advances, and will probably become earlier still in the future. Almost all of us would agree that by late in a pregnancy,

we're dealing with a human child, a child that should be protected. But at what point does that happen? There is no easy answer to that question, so any answers we give must be provisional. Personally, I believe that human life begins sometime early in pregnancy, and therefore I urge people to explore all the options before deciding on abortion. Having said that, I must also say that sometimes abortion may be the lesser of bad choices in very difficult situations.

Third, we must keep in mind the real-world consequences of the decisions we make. If abortions are severely restricted or outlawed entirely, what is likely to occur? Although the abortion rate is at its lowest point since the time of *Roe v. Wade*, it is unlikely that the 800,000 plus women who will have abortions this year will suddenly decide to carry their fetuses to term if abortion becomes illegal. Many will attempt to have abortions in other, less-safe ways, which will result in the injury and death of some women. That's what happened prior to *Roe versus Wade*. The consequences of our decisions must also factor into our opinions.

In Wendell Berry's essay on abortion, "Caught in the Middle," he argues that the extremists on both sides fail to deal with the real world situations of women, who are often desperate to end their pregnancies for a wide variety of reasons, but many of these same women suffer with post-abortion guilt. Extreme pro-choicers can offer little comfort with their guilt,

because they refuse to admit that any moral issues are involved in choosing abortion. And many extreme pro-lifers have only judgment to offer, as they believe abortion is always murder.

Therefore, when I think about abortion, I have to think about the real women who have come to me to talk about abortion:

*The 18 year-old girl who got pregnant on the night of her senior prom. She knew that a pregnancy and birth of a child would mean the end of her college plans for the foreseeable future. She chose abortion, but later struggled greatly with guilt from that decision. Or,

*The 15 year-old who became pregnant while high on drugs. Her continued drug use jeopardized the health of the child. And she was certainly not ready to be a mother. She and her parents chose abortion.

*Or, how about the college student who became pregnant as the result of date rape? Would abortion have been an acceptable moral choice for her? With the support of her parents, she chose to go forward with the pregnancy and raised the child.

*And, what about the woman in her 40's whose health was threatened by pregnancy and child-birth? Is abortion morally permissible for her?

In any discussions about abortion, I must keep these women in mind, as they remind me of the real-world complexity of these issues.

Finally, in discussing abortion, I go back to the words we read in Romans 14:3: *³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.* Those with whom we disagree on this matter are not our enemies. Many of them are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, whom Christ commands us to love. And, if we genuinely listen to one another, perhaps we can find a way forward on this very difficult, heart-wrenching issue. What do you think?