

# Abortion and the Mercy of God

By Dr. Jim Denison

Every year, approximately 40,000 people die on American highways. Every ten days, that many abortions are performed in America. Doctors conduct 1.5 million abortions every year in the United States, more than the total of all America's war dead across our history.

Since the U. S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion in January of 1973, more than 48 million abortions have been performed in America. This is a number larger than the combined populations of Kentucky, Oregon, Oklahoma, Connecticut, Iowa, Mississippi, Arkansas, Kansas, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, West Virginia, Nebraska, Idaho, Maine, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, Alaska, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.

Depending on the year, an abortion occurs for every three or four live births in our country.

Abortion is *the* moral issue of our time. It seems impossible to wrestle with the difficult issues of our day without addressing this crucial debate. Most conservative Christians believe that life begins at conception and abortion is therefore wrong. But are we sure? Is this a biblical fact? If the answer is clear, why have so many denominational leaders taken pro-choice positions? Is there a biblical, cohesive, practical position on this difficult subject?

I began this essay with the conviction that the pro-life position is most biblical. But I did not know much about the legal issues involved, or the theological arguments for a woman's right to choose abortion. As you will see, the debate is much more complex than either side's rhetoric might indicate. But I believe that there is an ethical position which even our relativistic society might embrace.

## Choosing sides

An "abortion" occurs when a "conceptus" is caused to die. To clarify vocabulary, "conceptus" is a general term for pre-born life growing in the mother's womb. More specifically, doctors often speak of the union of a sperm and an ovum as a "zygote." A growing zygote is an "embryo." When the embryo reaches around seven weeks of age, it is called a "fetus." However, "fetus" is usually used in the abortion debate to describe all pre-born life.

A "miscarriage" is a spontaneous, natural abortion. An "indirect abortion" occurs when actions taken to cure the mother's illness cause the unintended death of the fetus. A "direct abortion" occurs when action is taken to cause the intended death of the fetus.

Why do so many people in America believe that a mother should have the right to choose direct abortion?

In 1973, the Supreme Court issued *Roe v. Wade*, its landmark abortion ruling. In essence, the Court overturned state laws limiting a woman's right to abortion. Its

decision was largely based on the argument that the Constitution nowhere defines a fetus as a person, or protects the rights of the unborn.

Rather, the Court determined that an unborn baby possesses only "potential life" and is not yet a "human being" or "person." It argued that every constitutional reference to "person" relates to those already born. The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees protections and rights to individuals, but the Court ruled that the amendment does not include the unborn.

The Court further determined that a woman's "right to privacy" extends to her ability to make her own choices regarding her health and body. Just as she has the right to choose to become pregnant, she has the right to end that pregnancy.

The Court suggested several specific reasons why she might choose abortion: "specific and direct harm" may come to her; "maternity, or additional offspring, may force upon the woman a distressful life and future"; "psychological harm may be imminent"; "mental and physical health may be taxed by child care"; problems may occur associated with bearing unwanted children; and "the additional difficulties and continuing stigma of unwed motherhood" should be considered.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1973, four positions have been taken in the abortion debate:

- There should be no right to an abortion, even to save the life of the mother. This has been the Catholic Church's usual position.
- Therapeutic abortions can be performed to save the mother's life.
- Extreme case abortions can be permitted in cases of rape, incest, or severe deformation of the fetus. Most pro-life advocates would accept therapeutic and extreme case abortions.
- Abortion should be available to any woman who chooses it. This is the typical "pro-choice" position.

### **Moral arguments for abortion<sup>2</sup>**

"Pro-choice" advocates make five basic claims: (1) no one can say when a fetus becomes a person, so the mother is the most appropriate person to make decisions regarding it; (2) abortion must be protected so a woman who is the victim of rape or incest does not have to bear a child resulting from such an attack; (3) no unwanted child should be brought into the world; (4) the state has no right to legislate personal morality; and (5) a woman must be permitted to make pregnancy decisions in light of her life circumstances. Many theologians, pastors, and denominational leaders consider these claims to be both biblical and moral.

First, "pro-choice" proponents argue that a fetus is not legally a "person." They agree with the Supreme Court's finding that the Constitution nowhere grants legal standing to a pre-born life. Only 40 to 50 percent of fetuses survive to become persons in the full sense. A fetus belongs to the mother until it attains personhood, and is morally subject to any action she wishes to take with it.

Second, abortion must be protected as an alternative for women who are the victims of rape or incest. While this number is admittedly small in this country (approximately one percent of all abortions), it is growing in many countries around the world. As many as one in three women may become the victim of such an attack. They must be spared the further trauma of pregnancy and childbirth.

Third, no unwanted children should be brought into the world. If a woman does not wish to bear a child, she clearly will not be an appropriate or effective mother if the child is born. Given the population explosion occurring in many countries of the world, abortion is a necessary option for women who do not want children. The woman is more closely involved with the fetus than any other individual, and is the best person to determine whether or not this child is wanted and will receive proper care.

Fourth, the state has no right to legislate our personal moral decisions. The government has no authority to restrict homosexuality, consensual sex, cigarette consumption, or other individual decisions which many people consider to be wrong. Since there is no constitutional standard for when life begins, decisions made regarding a fetus are likewise a matter for individual morality.

The state should impose legislation on moral questions only when this legislation expresses the clear moral consensus of the community, and when it prevents conduct which obviously threatens the public welfare. Nearly everyone condemns murder, for instance, and believes that it threatens us all. But Americans are divided on the morality of abortion. It is hard to see how aborting a fetus threatens the rest of the community.

And so abortion should not be subject to governmental control. It is better to allow a mother to make this decision than to legislate it through governmental action. Many who personally consider abortion to be wrong are persuaded by this argument and thus support the "pro-choice" position.

Fifth, the rights and concerns of the mother must take precedence over those of the fetus. Even if we grant fetuses limited rights, they must not supersede the rights of mothers, as the latter are clearly persons under the Constitution. If we allow abortion to protect her physical life, we should do so to protect her emotional health or quality of life as well.

This was one of the Court's most significant arguments, as it sought to protect the mother's mental and physical health. Many "pro-choice" advocates are especially persuaded by this argument, and view the abortion debate within the context of a woman's right to control her own life.

### **Moral arguments against abortion**

"Pro-life" advocates counter each of these claims with their own ethical arguments. First, they assert that a fetus is a human life and should be granted the full protection of the law. The fetus carries its parents' genetic code and is a distinct person. It does not yet possess

self-consciousness, reasoning ability, or moral awareness (the usual descriptions of a "person"), but neither do newborns or young children. As this is the central issue of the debate, we'll say more about it in a moment.

Second, most "pro-life" advocates are willing to permit abortion in cases of rape or incest, or to protect the life of the mother. Since such cases typically account for only one to four percent of abortions performed, limiting abortion to these conditions would prevent the vast majority of abortions occurring in America.

Third, "pro-life" advocates agree that all children should be wanted, so they argue strongly for adoption as an alternative to abortion. They also assert that an unwanted child would rather live than die. By "pro-choice" logic, it would be possible to argue for infanticide and all forms of euthanasia as well as abortion.

Fourth, "pro-life" supporters do not see abortion legislation as an intrusion into areas of private morality. Protecting the rights of the individual is the state's first responsibility. No moral state can overlook murder, whatever the personal opinions of those who commit it. The state is especially obligated to protect the rights of those who cannot defend themselves.

But what of the claim that legislation must always reflect the clear will of the majority and protect the public welfare? The collective will of the culture must never supersede what is right and wrong. For instance, marijuana is so popular that as many as 100 million Americans say they've tried it at least once. Nonetheless, we ban it because its harmful effects are clear to medical science. The effects of abortion on a fetus are obviously much more disastrous to the fetus. And just because society is unclear as to when life begins does not mean that the question is unknowable.

If more of the public understood the physical and ethical issues involved in abortion, the large majority would consider abortion to be a threat to public welfare. Abortion threatens the entire community in three ways: (1) it ends the lives of millions, on a level exceeding all wars and disasters combined; (2) it encourages sexual promiscuity; and (3) it permits women to make a choice which will plague many of them with guilt for years to come. And so abortion meets the standard for legislative relevance, and must be addressed and limited or abolished by the state.

Fifth, "pro-life" advocates want to encourage the health of both the mother and the child, and do not believe that we must choose between the two. As the rights of a mother are no more important than those of her newborn infant, so they are no more important than those of her pre-born child.

The stress, guilt, and long-term mental anguish reported by many who abort their children must be considered. The legal right to abortion subjects a woman to pressure from her husband or sexual partner to end her pregnancy. Killing the fetus for the sake of the mother's health is like remedying paranoia by killing all the imagined persecutors.

For these reasons, "pro-life" advocates argue that a moral state must limit or prevent abortion.

### **When does life begin?**

This is obviously the crucial question in the abortion debate. If life does not begin until the fetus is viable or the child is born, one can argue that the "right to life" does not extend to the pre-born and abortion should be considered both legal and moral. But if life begins at conception, there can be no moral justification for abortion, since this action kills an innocent person.

There are essentially three answers to our question. "Functionalism" states that the fetus is a "person" when it can act personally as a moral, intellectual, and spiritual agent. (Note that by this definition, some question whether a newborn infant would be considered a "person.")

"Actualism" is the position that a fetus is a person if it possesses the potential for developing self-conscious, personal life. This definition would permit abortion when the fetus clearly does not possess the capacity for functional life.

"Essentialism" argues that the fetus is a person from conception, whatever its health or potential. It is an individual in the earliest stages of development, and deserves all the protections afforded to other persons by our society.

Our Declaration of Independence begins, "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; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." If an unborn child is considered a person, it possesses the "inalienable" right to life as well.

So, can we determine when life begins? Our answer depends on the definition of "life." A "pro-choice" advocate recognizes that the fetus is alive in the sense that it is a biological entity. But so is every other part of a woman's body. Some consider the fetus to be a "growth" and liken it to a tumor or other unwanted tissue. Biology alone is not enough to settle the issue.

What about capacity? Many ethicists define a "person" as someone able to respond to stimuli, interact with others, and make individual decisions. A fetus meets the first two standards from almost the moment of its conception, and clearly cannot fulfill the third only because it is enclosed in its mother's body. Would a newborn baby fulfill these three conditions?

What about individuality? If we view a fetus as a "growth" within the mother's body, it would be easier to sanction her choice to remove that growth if she wishes. But a fetus is distinct from its mother from the moment of its conception. It is alive--it reacts to stimuli, and can produce its own cells and develop them into a specific pattern of maturity.

It is human, completely distinguishable from all other living organisms, possessing all 46 human chromosomes, able to develop only into a human being. And it is complete--nothing new will be added except the growth and development of what exists from the moment of conception.

It is a scientific fact that every abortion performed in the United States is performed on a being so fully formed that its heart is beating and its brain activity can be measured on an EEG machine. At 12 weeks, the unborn baby is only about two inches long, yet every organ of the human body is clearly in place.

Theologian Karl Barth described the fetus well:

*The embryo has its own autonomy, its own brain, its own nervous system, its own blood circulation. If its life is affected by that of the mother, it also affects hers. It can have its own illnesses in which the mother has no part. Conversely, it may be quite healthy even though the mother is seriously ill. It may die while the mother continues to live. It may also continue to live after its mother's death, and be eventually saved by a timely operation on her dead body. In short, it is a human being in its own right.*<sup>3</sup>

And note that you did not come from a fetus--you were a fetus. A "fetus" is simply a human life in the womb. It becomes a "baby" outside the womb. But it is the same physical entity in either place.

For these reasons, "pro-life" advocates believe that the U. S. Supreme Court was wrong in deciding that a fetus is not a person entitled to the full protections of the law. Apart from spiritual or moral concerns, it is a simple fact of biology that the fetus possesses every attribute of human life we find in a newborn infant, with the exception of independent physical viability. Left unharmed, it will soon develop this capacity as well. If a life must be independently viable to be viewed as a person, a young child might well fail this standard, as would those of any age facing severe physical challenges.

## **The Bible and abortion**

These statements are based on moral claims and legal arguments. They are intended to persuade society regardless of a person's religious persuasion. But many in our culture also want to know what the Bible says on this crucial subject.

### **Silent on the issue?**

"Abortion" appears nowhere in the Bible. No one in the Bible is ever described as having an abortion, encouraging one, or even dealing with one. The Bible says nothing which specifically addresses our subject. And so many have concluded that the issue is not a biblical concern but a private matter. They say that we should be silent where the Bible is silent.

"Pro-life" advocates counter that by this logic we should be silent regarding the "Trinity," since the word never appears in Scripture. Or "marijuana" and "cocaine," since they are not in a biblical concordance. However, these issues came after the biblical era, while abortion was common in the ancient world. So this argument doesn't seem relevant.

If abortion is a biblical issue, why doesn't the Bible address it specifically? The answer is simple: the Jewish people and first Christians needed no such guidance. It was an undeniable fact of their faith and culture that abortion was wrong. How do we know?

Consider early statements on the subject. The *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* are a book of Jewish wisdom written between 50 B.C. and A.D. 50. They state that "a woman should not destroy the unborn babe in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures as a prey."

The *Sibylline Oracles* are an ancient work of Jewish theology. They include among the wicked two groups: women who "produce abortions and unlawfully cast their offspring away" and sorcerers who dispense materials which cause abortions (2:339-42).

The *Mishnah* ("instruction") was the written record of Jewish oral teachings transmitted since the time of Moses. These teachings were committed to writing around 200 B.C. In the Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin* we read: "We infer the death penalty for killing an embryo from the text, *He who sheds the blood of a man within a man, his blood shall be shed*; what is 'a man within a man'? An embryo" (*Sanhedrin* 57b, quoting Genesis 9:6).

An abortion was permitted only to save the life of the mother:

*If a woman was in hard travail [life-threatening labor], the child must be cut up while it is in the womb and brought out member by member, since the life of the mother has priority over the life of the child; but if the great part of it was already born, it may not be touched, since the claim of one life cannot override the claim of another life* (*Oholoth* 7:6).

The Jews in the Old and New Testaments did not need to address the issue of abortion, since no one considered it a moral option. In a similar vein, I have never preached a sermon against cigarette smoking or plagiarism. The Bible does not specifically speak to these subjects, and they are legal within certain limits, but no one in our congregation would consider them to be moral or healthy choices.

When the Christian church moved out of its Jewish context, it encountered a culture which accepted the practice of abortion. And so, after the New Testament, Christians began speaking specifically to the subject.

For instance, the *Didache* (the earliest theological treatise after the Bible) states: "thou shalt not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide."<sup>4</sup> And the *Epistle of Barnabas* (early second century) adds, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor more than thy own life. Thou shalt not procure abortion, thou shalt not commit infanticide."<sup>5</sup> These books were widely read and accepted in the first centuries of the Christian church.

### **Important biblical passages**

While the Bible does not use the word "abortion," it contains a number of texts which relate directly to the beginning of life and the value of all persons. Let's look briefly at the most pertinent passages.

#### Exodus 21:22

"Pro-choice" scholars usually begin the discussion with this statement in Exodus:

*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. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (Ex. 21:22-25).*

The ancient Jewish historian Flavius Josephus commented on this text:

*He that kicks a woman with child, so that the woman miscarry, let him pay a fine in money, as the judges shall determine, as having diminished the multitude by the destruction of what was in her womb; and let money also be given to the woman's husband by him that kicked her; but if she die of the stroke, let him also be put to death, the law judging it equitable that life should go for life."<sup>6</sup> (Antiquities of the Jews 4:8:33).*

But notice the translator's note: "The law seems rather to mean, that if the infant be killed, though the mother escape, the offender must be put to death; and not only when the mother is killed, as Josephus understood it."<sup>7</sup> And note this later statement by Josephus:

*The law, moreover, enjoins us to bring up all our offspring, and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to destroy it afterward; and if any woman appears to have done so, she will be a murderer of her child, by destroying a living creature, and diminishing human kind."<sup>8</sup>*

If this text does indeed teach that a person causing a miscarriage is only to be fined, while one causing "harm" is to receive severe punishment, we would have an important indication that the fetus is not as valuable as its mother. Is this what the text clearly teaches?

The New Revised Standard renders the text, "so that there is a miscarriage." The New American Standard follows suit, as does the New Jerusalem Bible. But the New International Version translates the text, "she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury." The New Living Translation similarly states, "they hurt a pregnant woman so that her child is born prematurely. If no further harm results . . ." The English Standard Version renders the phrase, "so that her children come out, but there is no harm." Why this crucial difference in translation?

The Hebrew phrase is literally rendered, "And they come forth children of her." "Children" is the plural of *yeled*, the usual Hebrew word for child or offspring (the

Hebrew language has no separate word for "fetus" or the pre-born). "Come forth" translates *yatsa*, a word which does not specify whether the child is alive or dead, only that it leaves the womb. And so the Hebrew of Exodus 21:22 does not indicate whether the woman suffered a miscarriage (NRSV, NASB, NJB) or experienced a premature healthy birth (NIV, NLT, ESV). But it does refer to the fetus as a "child." And it is important to note that the text does not use *shachol*, the Hebrew word for "miscarriage" (this word is found in Exodus 23:26 and Hosea 9:14 among other occurrences).<sup>9</sup>

Verse 23 settles the issue for me: "But if there is serious injury..." (NIV), implying that no serious injury occurred in verse 22. In other words, both the mother and her child survived the attack and were healthy. And so this passage does not devalue the pre-born life or speak specifically to the issue of abortion.

*Genesis 2:7*

The Bible describes man's creation in this way:

*In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up--for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground--then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen 2:4-7).*

It seems that Adam did not become a "living being" until he could breathe. And so some believe that a fetus is not a "living being" until it can breathe outside the mother's womb. Until this time it is not yet a person. President Bill Clinton explained his pro-choice position as based significantly on this logic. He said that his pastor, W. O. Vaught, former pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, told him that this was the literal meaning of the text.

There are three problems with this argument. First, Adam was an inanimate object until God breathed into him "the breath of life," but we know conclusively that a fetus is animate from the moment of conception. Second, the fetus breathes in the womb, exchanging amniotic fluid for air after birth. Third, Adam in Genesis 2:7 was a potential life even before he became a human being. By any definition, a fetus is at the very least a potential human being. We'll say more about this fact in a moment.

### Psalm 139

One of David's best-loved psalms contains this affirmation:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made  
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,*

*intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139:13-16).*

David clearly believed that God created him in his mother's womb and "beheld my unformed substance" before he was born. "Pro-life" theologians point to this declaration as proof that life is created by God and begins at conception.

Of course, those who do not accept the authority of Scripture will not be persuaded by this argument. And some who do believe that David's statement is poetic symbolism rather than scientific description. He is simply stating that he is God's creation, without speaking specifically to the status of a fetus.

#### Jeremiah 1:5

As part of God's call to the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord issued this declaration: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). God clearly formed Jeremiah in the womb and "knew" him even before that time. He "consecrated" or called him to special service even before he was born. God's plan for Jeremiah began before his conception and his birth.

It's hard for me to see how those who accept biblical authority could make a "pro-choice" response to this statement. I suppose they could claim that the verse is symbolic and spiritual, not scientific, that it is a metaphorical description of God's eternal plan for Jeremiah. But the text seems to be specifically related to Jeremiah's conception and gestation.

#### Luke 1:39-45

Luke's gospel records the visit of the pregnant Mary to the pregnant Elizabeth:

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:39-45).*

When Elizabeth said that "the child in my womb leaped for joy" (v. 44), she made clear the fact that her "fetus" was a fully-responding being. She used the word *brephos*, the Greek term for baby, embryo, fetus, newborn child, young child, or nursing child. It is the same word used to describe Jesus in the manger, where the shepherds "went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the *child* lying in the manger" (Luke 2:16).

Paul used the word in reminding Timothy "how from *childhood* you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible makes no linguistic distinction between the personhood of a human being, whether before or after its birth.

### **The rights of the innocent**

The Bible consistently defends the rights of those who are innocent and undeserving of punishment or death. For instance:

- "Do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty" (Exodus 23:7).
- "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family" (Proverbs 6:16-19).
- The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem "for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to pardon" (2 Kings 24:3-4).

It is clear that God cares for the innocent and defenseless of the world. Children, whether before their birth or after, would be among his most valued creations.

### **The witness of Christian history**

How has the Church viewed the issue of abortion across its history? Are "pro-choice" religious leaders in step with traditional Christian thinking on this subject? Or has the Church even spoken with a unified voice when addressing the question?

Early church fathers were clear in their opposition to abortion. Athenagoras (ca. AD 150), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), Tertullian (ca. 155-225), St. Hippolytus (ca. 170-236), St. Basil the Great (ca. 330-79), St. Ambrose (ca. 339-97), St. John Chrysostom (ca. 340-407), and St. Jerome (ca. 342-420) all issued strong condemnations of this practice.

However, these theologians did not specifically say when the body receives a soul. This is the process called "animation" or "ensoulment" by early philosophers. Many in the ancient world followed the thinking of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) on the issue. He believed that "ensoulment" occurred 40 days after conception in males and 90 days in females, and taught that abortion prior to this time was not murder.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), arguably the greatest theological mind after Paul, can be quoted on both sides of the issue. As regards whether souls are given to bodies at conception, Augustine said, "He...who formed them, knows whether He formed them with the soul, or gave the soul to them after they had been formed...I have no certain knowledge how it came into my body; for it was not I who gave it to myself."<sup>10</sup> He was

critical of a theologian who was too dogmatic on this issue, claiming, "how much better it is for him to share my hesitation about the soul's origin."<sup>11</sup> He did not believe that we can know when people "obtain their souls."<sup>12</sup>

And yet Augustine was convinced that those who die in the womb will be resurrected with the rest of humanity and given perfect bodies in heaven. If they died, they must have lived; if they lived, they will be resurrected. Babies deformed at birth will be given perfect bodies in paradise as well.<sup>13</sup> It would seem that Augustine believed life to begin at conception, as the moment the fetus can die, it must have been alive.

Theologians, popes, and church councils in the centuries to follow would continue to debate this issue. St. Jerome (ca. 342-420) could speak of the "murder of an unborn child" (Letter 22:13), and yet he could state that abortion is not killing until the fetus acquires limbs and shape (Letter 121:4). Pope Innocent III (ca. 1161-1216) stated that the soul enters the body of the fetus when the woman feels the first movement of the fetus (the "quickenings"). After such "ensoulment," abortion is murder; previously it is a less serious sin, as it ends only potential human life.

Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) condemned abortion for any and all reasons. However, he agreed with Aristotle's conclusion that a male child was formed enough to be judged human at 40 days, a female at 80. Only when the fetus could be considered human could it have a soul.

On the other hand, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) issued a decree in 1886 which prohibited all procedures which directly kill the fetus, even to save the life of the mother. He also required excommunication for abortions at any stage of pregnancy.

To summarize, Christian leaders across church history have been uniform in their condemnation of abortion once the fetus was considered to be a "person." Many in the ancient and medieval world were influenced by Aristotle's beliefs regarding the time when this occurred.

If they could know what we know about the fetus from its earliest stages of life, I believe they would revise their opinion and condemn abortion from the moment of conception. But it is impossible to know their position on information they did not possess.

### **What about rape and incest?**

The Bible makes rape a capital offense:

*If the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor (Deuteronomy. 22:25-26).*

God's word clearly condemns such a crime against women. "Pro-choice" advocates often point to this issue early in the debate, arguing that a woman should not continue to be victimized by bearing a child as the result of such a horrific crime.

Unprotected intercourse results in pregnancy about four percent of the time. If one in three women is likely to be raped in her lifetime, and incestuous relationships subject a woman to repeated sexual abuse, pregnancies resulting from rape and incest are so likely that abortion must be legal as a remedy for women subjected to such crime.<sup>14</sup> Nearly all pro-life advocates concede the point, allowing for abortion in the case of rape and incest.

However, it has been established by numerous surveys over the years that rape and incest victims represent approximately one percent of the abortion cases recorded annually in this country. A decision to limit abortions to this exception would prevent the deaths of nearly all of the 1.5 million babies who are aborted each year. Only about three percent of the abortions performed each year in America relate to the health of the mother, and three percent relate to the health of the child. Ninety-three percent are elective.

To allow for abortion because of the very rare incidence of abortions performed because of rape and incest is something like suspending all marijuana laws because of the small number of patients who could benefit from its medicinal effects. We could stop the use of traffic lights because of the incidents when they slow a sick person's rush to a hospital, but would we not cause more harm than we prevent?

At the same time, Americans must be conscious of the fact that rape and incest are far more common in some other countries and cultures. Rape in particular is a typical means of coercion and military control in some societies. There the percentage of abortions related to rape may be much higher than is the case in America.

This caveat stated, I'm not sure that even this decision is the moral choice. I must quickly admit that my status as an American, Anglo male makes it very difficult for me to commiserate with women who have experienced such trauma as rape and incest. But it is hard for me to understand how the child which is produced by this terrible crime does not deserve to live. Ethel Waters, the famous gospel singer, was the product of a rape. So was a student I taught at Southwestern Seminary, an evangelist with a global ministry today. I tread very lightly here, but would at the very least suggest that this issue is far from the primary cause of abortion in America today.

### **Conclusion: a way forward?**

"Pro-life" advocates typically believe that life begins at conception, so that abortion is wrong. "Pro-choice" advocates typically believe that life begins when the fetus is viable independent of its mother or at birth, and that abortion should be a legal choice for the mother prior to that point. The framers of the Constitution did not address this issue. The Supreme Court in 1973 interpreted this silence to mean that constitutional rights to life do not extend to the pre-born. And yet the Bible speaks with a single voice in viewing the

pre-born as the creation of God and as children deserving of protection and care. In light of these contradictory facts, is there a way to move forward?

Given that the participants in this debate come from a variety of religious and personal worldviews, it seems implausible to find common ground by beginning with biblical teachings or religious convictions. So I suggest the following non-religious, constitutional strategy.

First, we should build a consensus for permitting abortion to protect the life of the mother or in cases of rape and incest. These account for a small percentage of the 1.5 million abortions performed each year. Even though some (like me) question the morality of this position, most would concede the point in order to reduce the 93 percent of abortions which are elective in nature. Allowing for this exception removes the most obvious and emotional obstacle to the "pro-life" position.

Second, we should understand that the pre-born possess at least the potential for "life," however it is defined. Many of us believe that a fetus is a human being by every definition of the term except independent viability, and note that the pre-born will attain this status unless harmed. But even those who disagree with this assertion will admit that every fetus is in the process of becoming a "person."

Third, "pro-life" and "pro-choice" advocates should work together to fulfill President Clinton's desire that abortion be "rare." Even the most ardent "pro-choice" supporters surely would support an agenda intended to decrease the number of abortions performed each year.

One way to achieve this goal would be for both sides to promote adoption as the best answer to an unwanted pregnancy. Both sides could also support abstinence and birth control education. Many "pro-life" advocates view birth control measures as promoting sexual promiscuity, but we may have to choose between sexual activity or unintended pregnancy and a resulting abortion.

Both sides could join forces in educating the public about the actual characteristics of the fetus. It has been proven that women are far less likely to choose abortion when they see a sonogram of their unborn child or learn about its present capacities. Adoption would then become a more likely option for the mother to choose. Leaders from both sides could be asked to adopt a united agenda aimed at decreasing the number of abortions performed each year in our country. If this strategy is successful, it may change the public's opinion regarding the morality of abortion.

Fourth, whatever the "pro-choice" position decides to do to help limit abortions, "pro-life" advocates must do all we can to care for both the unborn child and its mother. We must care for the mother and the father of the child, and do all we can to help those who have chosen abortion in the past. We must work hard to advocate adoption and to provide life necessities for at-risk families. We must be "pro-life," not just "pro-birth."

It may be that these steps would eventually help to change the legal status of abortion. A constitutional amendment extending legal protection to the fetus would be more likely to pass if more Americans were taught to view the fetus as a life. Alternately, it would be more likely that the courts would recognize the rising consensus against abortion and rule in light of this conventional wisdom.

### **Conclusion: choosing life**

Mother Teresa, writing to the U. S. Supreme Court as it was considering petitions related to the abortion issue, stated boldly:

*Your opinion [in Roe v. Wade] stated that you did not need to "resolve the difficult question of when life begins." That question is inescapable. If the right to life is an inherent and inalienable right, it must surely obtain wherever human life exists. No one can deny that the unborn child is a distinct being, that it is human, and that it is alive. It is unjust, therefore, to deprive the unborn child of its fundamental right to life on the basis of its age, size, or condition of dependency. It was a sad infidelity to America's highest ideals when this Court said that it did not matter, or could not be determined, when the inalienable right to life began for a child in its mother's womb.*<sup>15</sup>

She has been widely quoted as stating, "It is a deep poverty to decide that a child must die so that you may live as you wish."<sup>16</sup>

I attended my first National Prayer Breakfast in 1995, where I heard remarkable speakers address the president and other national leaders. Those attending were still talking about the previous year's keynote speaker. Mother Teresa, 83 years old in 1994, had said to the 3,000 in the audience, "I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?"

Later in her speech she implored the gathering, "Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child."<sup>17</sup> She received a standing ovation. After her speech, she approached President Clinton, pointed her finger at him, and said, "Stop killing babies."

Would abortion be a moral choice when a family is very, very poor; they have 14 children, and another on the way? That child was John Wesley. What about a father who is ill and a mother with tuberculosis; their first child is blind, the second is deceased, the third is deaf, and the fourth has tuberculosis. Now she is pregnant again. Her son would be called Beethoven.

A white man rapes a 13-year-old black girl and she becomes pregnant. Her child is Ethel Waters. A teenage girl is pregnant, but her fiancée is not the father of the baby. Her baby is Jesus.

In a church I once pastored, a woman gave me her unsolicited testimony regarding an abortion she had chosen eleven years earlier. Here's her story:

*I cried tears of shame, tears of pain, tears of heartache. I cried for my sin so black I didn't believe that there could ever be a way that I could make amends--ever be a way that I could atone for what I had done. That there could ever be a way that I could be clean again. For 11 years I cried for myself, because I couldn't get away from what I had done.*

*But God blessed me. In the depths of my dark and lonely valley he was there. His grace and mercy are great--his love is so wonderful. He wooed me back to his side, saying to me, My child, my child, I love you. O my child I love you. Yes, I forgive you.*

*I am blessed. I know that I am forgiven. I have forgiven myself--God has headed me. But many are not so blessed--they never get to meet my Jesus; they never experience his love and forgiveness. For them, the crying goes on.*

1 <http://tourolaw.edu/Patch/Roe>.

2 For more on the ethical arguments for and against abortion see Milton A. Gonsalves, *Right & Reason: Ethics in theory and practice*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Columbus: Merrill Publishing Co., 1989).

3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985 [1961]) 3.4.416.

4 *The Didache, or teaching of the twelve apostles* (Nashville: Christian Classics, 1980) 2:2, p. 27.

5 *The Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5, in Christian Classics p. 118.

6 *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978) 4:3:33, p. 100.

7 *Ibid.*, 100.

8 Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:25, p. 632.

9 For further discussion of this linguistic issue see Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996) 32-5.

10 Augustine, *On the Soul and its Origin*, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed, Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1991) 1:25; vol. 5, p. 325.

11 *Ibid.*, 1:17; p. 322.

12 *Ibid.*, 4:5, p. 356.

13 Augustine, *Enchiridion* 85; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 3:265.

14 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Reproductive Choice: Basic to Justice for Women," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996) 2:27.

15 Mother Teresa, "Recalling America," in *First Things* May 1994, 9.

16 *Illustration Digest* Nov-Dec-Jan 1993/4, 15.

17 Mother Teresa, "Whatever you do," speech to the National Prayer Breakfast, February 3, 1994; <http://www.priestsforlife.org/brochures/mtspeech.html>