

Sanctity of Human Life: Abortion and Reproductive Issues

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The Assemblies of God bases its understanding of the nature of human beings on the Bible, which reveals that God created the universe, the world, and all living things (Genesis 1:1,11,21,25). Humans are the highest form of God's creative activity, and He is intentional in both their creation and destiny. "Let us make man in our image' . . . So God created man in his own image, . . . male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26,27). "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).¹

By making human beings in His own image, God set them above all other forms of life on earth. The term "image of God" signifies that, like their Creator, men and women are personal and spiritual beings, rational and relational. It implies that humans are intended for eternal fellowship with their Creator and requires both sexes for full expression. Though marred when the first human pair fell into sin (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12), the image of God is still intrinsic to human nature (Genesis 9:6), insuring that men and women are capable of response to their Maker. Creation in the divine image is not only an expression of the incalculable value God places upon human life, it also signifies that God has sovereign power over life. He is both giver and sustainer of life; He alone has the power to determine its beginning and ending.²

The nobility of human beings is seen in the divine mandate: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). Superior to all other life forms, humans are to assume the role of responsible custodians of the earth.

Every human life, from conception through death, is therefore to be valued, respected, nurtured, and protected. Every human life is to be lived in obedience to God and His Word. The Bible describes a moral order to which all persons are responsible. At the end of life, all persons will stand before God to give account for their actions. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Therefore, human beings are responsible to bring the light of God's Word to decisions that bear on the sanctity of life. To this end, the Assemblies of God offers the following biblical perspectives:

The Beginning of Life

Contraception. The Assemblies of God, finding no clear scriptural mandate, does not take an official stand on the appropriateness of contraception within a heterosexual marriage for purposes of regulating the number of children, determining the time of their birth, or safeguarding the health of the mother. These are matters of personal conscience as godly spouses prayerfully covenant with God about the growth of their families. While there are important

ethical issues in determining to have a family, the prevention of pregnancy is understood to be qualitatively different from the termination of pregnancy since the sperm has not fertilized the ovum and human life has not yet begun. The biological processes themselves teach us that in God's creative design not every sperm or ovum is intended to survive and unite. It should be remembered, however, that some methods commonly regarded as contraception, such as the IUD and the morning-after pill, are actually agents that abort, rather than prevent, pregnancy.

The Bible teaches that in the institution of marriage, children are divinely ordered both to fulfill God's divine purposes for the race and for the repopulation of the earth. The mandate to the first pair was, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Throughout Scripture, children are regarded as God's gift: "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). There are certain circumstances where couples may choose not to have children for very good reasons. However, the use of contraception merely to avoid the demands of child rearing ought to be prayerfully examined in terms of the purity of one's motives and the personal implications of the divine mandate.

In Vitro Fertilization. From a study of the Scriptures, God's plan for human conception is sexual union between a man and woman in a legal marriage covenant. Children of such a covenant ought to be the result of a joyous and loving sexual relationship in which the husband and wife are responsible for birthing and rearing godly offspring. However, infertile heterosexual couples who have pursued without success all viable treatments may be confronted with a decision to utilize in vitro fertilization.

There are numerous ethical issues to be evaluated in such a process, including the financial costs, the harvesting of sperm and ova, and the nurturing of multiple living human embryos, not all of which likely will be implanted in the uterus. The disposal of unused embryos is an acute ethical issue since they represent the beginning of human life.

Further, there may also be serious danger to the life of the mother in the event that multiple babies survive to full term, which might call for the selective abortion of one or more of the babies.

Given these grave concerns, it is imperative that those who elect this procedure prayerfully seek godly and knowledgeable counsel, and engage medical professionals with compatible ethical standards. We disapprove any procedure that results in the destruction of unimplanted embryos.

Reproductive Cloning. The Assemblies of God believes that reproductive cloning is immoral and a matter of grave concern. In the cloning process, the person is not conceived from the union of the father's sperm and the mother's ovum. The genetic material is drawn from only one person and manipulated in the laboratory, with some risk of contamination, before implantation in the surrogate. There are also grave physical risks for persons who may be cloned. Animal cloning has demonstrated the potential for birth defects and premature aging. Scientists have no way of knowing what type of horrors may be visited upon cloned individuals or upon humankind at large through such a process.

Abortion. The Assemblies of God views the practice of abortion as an evil that has been inflicted upon millions of innocent babies and that will threaten millions more in the years to come. Abortion is a morally unacceptable alternative for birth control, population control, sex selection, and elimination of the physically and mentally handicapped. Certain parts of the world are already experiencing serious population imbalances as a result of the systematic abortion of female babies. The advocacy and practice of so-called partial birth abortion of babies is particularly heinous.

Sexual responsibility. Contemporary demands for abortion often flow from the practice of sexual freedom without corresponding responsibility. The Scriptures speak definitively against premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse and declare such activity to be sinful (Exodus 22:16; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 6:9,13,18; Galatians 5:19). To add abortion as an after-the-fact birth control device is to deepen and compound the sin with resultant guilt and emotional distress. The Assemblies of God affirms the biblical mandate for sexual purity and responsibility that, when obeyed, will obviate and eliminate situations in which abortion might otherwise be contemplated.

The personhood of the unborn. The Scriptures regularly treat the unborn child as a person under the care of God.

1. The Bible recognizes that a woman is with child even in the first stages of pregnancy. When the virgin Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, an angel made this announcement to her: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son [*huios*]” (Luke 1:31, NASB). The angel then informed Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant: “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child [*huios*, “son”] in her old age” (Luke 1:36). Scripture makes it clear that in the prenatal phase both Jesus and John the Baptist were recognized as males well before the time of delivery. Moreover, John before birth is recognized as a “baby” (*brephos*) (Luke 1:41,44). This translates a Greek word used for children both before and after birth (cf. Acts 7:19). The Bible always recognizes the prenatal phase of life as that of a child and not a mere appendage to the mother’s body to be aborted at will.

Even when pregnancy in Bible times was due to an illicit relationship, the sanctity and value of that life was not questioned. The daughters of Lot willfully became pregnant by incestuous relationships (Genesis 19:36), and Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon though her marriage to King David came about through an adulterous relationship (2 Samuel 11:5). In none of these cases is the life of the unborn considered to be unworthy and requiring an abortion.

2. The Bible recognizes that God is active in the creative process of forming new life. Concerning Leah, the wife of Jacob, Scripture says, “When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb . . . Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son” (Genesis 29:31,32). When Job compared himself to his servants, he asked, “Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?” (Job 31:15).

That each person yet unborn has equal value and status before God is indicated in Job's declaration that God "shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands" (Job 34:19).

God spoke through Isaiah: "'This is what the Lord says—he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant'" (Isaiah 44:2). And again, "'This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things'" (v. 24).

David summed it up, "For 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" (Psalm 139:13–16).

3. The Bible recognizes that God has plans for the unborn child. Only He knows the potential of this new life. When God called Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry, He indicated the ordination was prenatal when He said: "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" (Jeremiah 1:5). When Zechariah the priest was ministering at the altar of incense, an angel announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son who should be called John. Then it was revealed that God had definite plans for this child. He was to be a forerunner of Jesus (Luke 1:11–17).

4. The Bible recognizes that God is sovereign in all things, including the quality of life of the unborn child. When people reject God, they may more easily cheapen human life and make it relative. Some are considered worthy to live; others are considered expendable. Who but God knows whether someone destroyed in the Holocaust might not have discovered a cure for cancer. Who but God knows what blessing millions of children killed before birth might have brought to improve the quality of life. When people set themselves up as God to determine if a life is worth living—whether before or after birth—they are usurping the sovereignty of the Creator. There are also things finite humans cannot understand. God's ways are above human ways. While medical technology may now allow prenatal diagnoses of some medical conditions, it is critical to remember that God's love is unconditional and above any consideration of physical or mental limitations. Thus, while it may be permissible to pursue prenatal testing so as to better provide for the needs of an unborn child, it is impermissible to use prenatal testing to determine whether or not an unborn child should be allowed to live.

The killing of innocent persons. God's Word is very explicit concerning the taking of innocent human life. "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) is not only one of the Ten Commandments, but also a moral imperative that recurs throughout Scripture (cf. Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9).

God inspired Moses to include in the Scriptures a law that brings the sanctity of the lives of unborn children into focus. "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” (Exodus 21:22–24).

It should be noted that the value of the life of both the mother and the child is such that even if there is no critical and lasting harm to either, the responsible party must be fined. However, if either the mother or the premature child is seriously injured or dies, then the severe penalties of the law are to be applied, possibly in this case, those having to do with manslaughter (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:22–25). It is clear that the life of the unborn child is precious, and even a non-premeditated injury inflicted on the unborn is a serious crime.

God's attitude toward the killing of innocents is clear. No one is guiltless who takes the life of another, with the possible scriptural exceptions of capital punishment administered by a system of justice (Genesis 9:6; Numbers 35:12), unintended killing in self-defense (Exodus 22:2), or deaths occasioned by duly constituted police and war powers (Romans 13:4,5).

John Calvin expressed the horror of abortion in commenting on Exodus 21:22,23: "The fetus, though enclosed in the womb of his mother, is already a human being, and it is a monstrous crime to rob it of life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fetus in the womb before it has come to light."³

Danger to the life of the mother. In the modern era, situations in which pregnancy seriously and imminently threatens the life of the mother are exceedingly rare. If, however, responsible diagnoses confirm that childbirth is likely to result in the death of the mother, historic Christian faith usually has favored the life of the mother above that of the unborn child. Unlike the unborn child, the mother is a mature person with established family and societal relationships and responsibilities.

However, vague threats to the mother's physical or emotional health must not become an excuse to place the child at risk. Any intervention required must have the intent of saving the mother's life, not the prior intent of causing death to the child. As in any emergency, in such times God's children ought to fervently and earnestly pray for divine intervention. In doing so, the persons involved must prayerfully evaluate the medical diagnoses with the assistance of humane physicians and godly leaders and make, responsibly and with a clear conscience, what will be a very painful decision.

The emotional and spiritual toll. The abortion industry rarely advises pregnant women of the potential impact of abortion on their spiritual and mental health. Desperate women who find themselves in an acutely embarrassing or inconvenient position because of an illicit affair or an unplanned pregnancy, and who are often coerced by selfish lovers and/or embarrassed families, are led to see abortion as a "quick fix." Nothing could be further from the truth. Women are usually unaware of the depression, guilt, and shame that may plague them for a lifetime. While God can and does forgive and heal the broken hearts of repentant sinners who come to Him for forgiveness, the actual deed can never be undone and probably will be remembered with pain and regret.

The woman's right to choose. In recent years, the argument is made that since the woman alone bears the physical consequences of pregnancy, she should always have the right to choose freely an abortion. The laws of many nations now guarantee that “right” within varying durations and circumstances of pregnancy. As this study has shown, however, there is no biblical basis for a pregnant woman to terminate her unborn child. The long historical tradition of orthodox Christianity prohibits abortion. The legality of abortion in modern cultures is rooted in concepts of individual rights, autonomy, and privacy pushed far beyond scriptural teaching. We therefore expressly deny that this supposed legal “right” automatically confers upon the pregnant woman the moral right to abort her unborn child.

Biomedical Research

The Assemblies of God affirms and encourages reverent and responsible scientific research intended to enhance the health and well-being of persons created in the image of God. Christian faith is not to be interpreted in ways that needlessly hinder greater understanding of the human body and the discovery of cures for and prevention of dreaded diseases and defects. However, there are many temptations to pursue the life sciences for ignoble reasons. Therefore, all biomedical research should be monitored and regulated so as to insure respect for the sanctity of human life and the essential dignity of human beings who are created in the image of God. All researchers are finally answerable to God.

Stem Cell Research. Stem cell research shows great promise for the cure of numerous diseases and should proceed under appropriate ethical guidelines regularly reviewed and revised. There are stem cells, such as adult stem cells, that are readily available for research and whose procurement does not compromise the sanctity of human life. However, the practice of cultivating stem cells from the tissue of aborted fetuses (embryonic stem cells) perpetuates the evil of abortion and should be prohibited. Likewise, the cultivation of stem cells from the unused embryos left with fertility clinics raises serious ethical concerns for human life. Great care must always be exercised in the cultivation of stem cells to insure that the sanctity and dignity of human life are not compromised.

Genetic Intervention. The Assemblies of God is supportive of morally responsible genetic research and therapies. Genetic research conducted with reverence for life appears to have great potential for the health of human beings through the identification of and intervention in the genetic roots of hundreds of diseases. By the same token, used for proud and selfish ends, genetic screening and intervention also have the potential to bring great harm to the entire human race. In addition, the Assemblies of God believes legislation is necessary to prevent intrusive genetic screening and resultant discrimination as well as misguided experimentation and termination of life.

Christian Action

Whenever abortion and other immoral life-threatening practices present themselves, Christians have an obligation to address these evils in public forums and to seek legislative and judicial redress. Among the steps Christians should take are the following:

1. Christians should pray earnestly for God's intervention and the wisdom and resolve to resist abortion and questionable biomedical research and experimentation.

2. Christians should provide biblical moral instruction in their homes and all possible public forums. The church, rooted in the eternal truths of God's Word, should seek to lift the standards of society by overcoming evil with good.
3. Christians should actively support candidates who embrace the sanctity of life and should lobby on behalf of legislation to protect the unborn.
4. Christians should work through legislative and governmental agencies to insure appropriate ethical review of all biomedical research and to impose constraints on that which is evil or misguided. While strongly and fervently opposing immoral laws, Christians should exert their influence in peaceable ways consistent with scriptural principles (1 Peter 2:11,12).
5. Christians should counsel those with unwanted pregnancies about alternatives to abortion, such as adoption. They should generously support responsible Christian adoption agencies with their prayers, finances, and time as well as facilitate placement of unwanted babies in loving Christian homes.
6. Christians should compassionately minister to those who suffer remorse and guilt from having had abortions, or participated in abortions and other life-destroying activity or research, reminding them of these words of Jesus: "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

Nonviolent Opposition

Current laws virtually permit abortion-on-demand, at least in the early trimesters of pregnancy. The Assemblies of God strongly believes such laws are immoral and contravene the law of God. Every legal means should be employed to reverse the effects of these laws and dismantle the immoral industries they spawn. While opposing immoral laws that permit and protect the destruction of life, the Assemblies of God also denounces violent and lawless acts against both the purveyors and the participants in the abortion industry, occasionally carried out by people claiming to be Christians.

Conclusion

This paper cannot possibly address every single issue or dilemma that may arise. In rare and unusual circumstances where the Bible does not speak directly, affected individuals ought to prayerfully seek godly counsel and the guidance of the Spirit of God. All persons must finally give account to God for any actions that rob others of life, health, or dignity. With these eternal issues in view, the Assemblies of God intends to be both a witness to the truth of Christ and a healing and redemptive agency to assist, through its numerous ministries, those who may be caught in these dilemmas.

Notes

- 1 All biblical citations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).

2 The Bible does provide precedents for justly administered death sentences for capital crimes as well as for the exercise of self defense and duly constituted police and war powers (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 22:2; Numbers 35:12; Romans 13:4,5).

3 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, trans. Charles William Bingham, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 3:41–42.