



## **Abortion and Creation: A Response for Communities of Faith**

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This paper aims to help communities of faith who are trying to find their way on the issue of abortion form their theological understanding and response to this problem. The primary question, therefore, is: What ought *our* response, as a community identified by its Christian confession, be to this issue? Thus, for the moment, the question of social policy, legal regulation, and the voice the church or individuals in the church should sound in the national debate is a secondary issue.

### I. ONE ISSUE—A TWO-FOLD ADDRESS

Problem pregnancies and abortions are a concern within Christian congregations. Our first sphere of response as Christians is that our confession and identity as the people of God mark us as communities of faith, called to say something definite about this problem and to respond to it in concrete ways—quite apart from what the wider world says or does. In this context we can approach consensus in our theology, and act as one body in our ministry. What our voice should be in the national debate and how public policy should respond, on the other hand, are matters over which Christians will widely disagree. While there is a basis in natural morality to agree with our fellow citizens that abortion is a grave ill in our national life, questions concerning the causes of the problem, the effects of law in controlling it, and the social policies needed to manage it are open ones. They are issues over which Christians may have no special insight.

We might draw the distinction this way. Our identity as Christians is a special calling before God, and our conduct as members of the body of Christ is defined by the love Jesus showed. Faith, hope, and love are the marks of members of commu-

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page 200

nities of faith. How that identity is realized in a world variously friendly, indifferent, or hostile to who we are, however, is a matter for individual Christians and churches to work through. That is why we can regard abortion as an issue to be addressed in two distinct ways: within the body of Christ; and within and to a world that does not yet understand itself created and redeemed by God through Jesus Christ. This paper will in turn address each of these perspectives.

To bring this complex issue into focus, so that we have a common basis for deliberation, let us imagine the typical case, so as not to be sidetracked by unusual cases. Good judgment and discretion will demand attention to particular circumstances and unusual cases, yet thinking and response formed by what is true for the large majority of cases will better prepare us for handling unusual cases as well.

Jessica is eight weeks pregnant, or ten weeks from her last menstrual period. (Over

seventy-five percent of all abortions are performed before this time. Biologically speaking, this is the time of change from embryo to fetus. All internal organs are developing and bone cells are forming. The fetus is 1 1/2 inches long and weighs 1/30 of an ounce.) She is nineteen years old (over fifty percent of the women seeking abortion are between eighteen and twenty-four), unmarried, and comes from a low to middle income family. Her boyfriend, Michael, while initially supportive, has made himself scarce, and wants little more to do with their relationship.

## II. CREATION AND COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

How many of us would greet the news of an unintended and problem pregnancy with the words of Mary, “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me as you have said”? Few of us would dispose ourselves so trustingly in the Lord’s hands. To those individuals who face such a pregnancy, accordingly, our first response must be understanding not condemnation. Or how many of us, professing that life—especially the innocent lives of children—is sacred, act upon our knowledge that the infant mortality rate in our nation is among the highest in industrialized countries, and that millions in our own nation live impoverished lives threatening their development and survival? If few of us have been moved to action by these distressing facts, it would seem that interest in our own well-being takes precedence over that of the youngest members of our own communities. The point, therefore, is that any simple condemnation we make upon those who choose their own life over that of the unborn recoils on us all.

The one central and unavoidable theological theme which will guide our way on the issue of abortion is that God is the Creator of all life. Nature may produce living things and we may beget life, but it is God who puts nature to use to generate all life. To call God the giver of life does not only refer to events long ago, but to God’s continuing activity in generating, upholding, and furthering life. To believe that the Lord is the Creator of all life means that God’s presence in our life and the natural world around us is real and actual.

Such a presence is surely the occasion for wonder and thanksgiving, although not an invitation to detect or manipulate God’s creating activity by inflating our capacities for knowing God’s will and elevating our place beyond being stewards of creation. God’s ways of creation are inscrutable; they remain forever God’s and not ours. The theme that God is the creator of life, then, aims to preserve this truth

and this mystery: We can never ultimately control life, but we are ever upheld in life by a source beyond our comprehension and control. But, at the same time, this theme is not a prohibition against intervening in the processes of life. Good stewards utilize their capabilities and judgment to preserve life against threats and to nurture the world entrusted to their care so that it flourishes. For them it is irresponsible to say “Whatever will be will be.”

How might this theological theme help us to see with some clarity on the matter of abortion? Any perspective which fails to see the creation of human life as God’s exclusive prerogative, and ultimately not the product of human or natural activity, diminishes our understanding of the presence of the Creator in our lives. The creation of human life is a mystery before which we stand in awe, and in which we intervene only circumspectly and always with respect. Such a view elevates our comprehension of the wonder of life, while it also humbles any thought of our control over it.

When we affirm, therefore, that God is the creator of life and that human life is created in the image of God, we receive that life thankfully as a gift from God. Even if that life is unintended and problematic for us, it would be a lack of faith if the creature were to presume to know better which lives the Creator willed to be born and which not. And it should be a sign of our hope in God's providence that we trust that what God creates will come to a good end—in spite of our intentions. How, then, can we respond to God's generation of human life except as Mary did? "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me as you have said."

To make this response will require strength, because real and legitimate pressures threaten to pull persons apart in this predicament. Yet as Christians, we count ourselves God's children through faith, and trust in God to provide for us. This means in turn that we extend ourselves in compassion to those in this plight who need strength to trust our Creator's wisdom, and that we support them—with housing, food, and financial resources if need be. This is what the community of faithful are called to do—uphold the lives of others as God upholds ours. Then we show ourselves to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Then our faith is active in love. Our theology is empty if we condemn women seeking abortions in desperation, but never offer to support them; if we condemn the world's practices and policies but do nothing to help those in our midst.

Now suppose Jessica decides that she could not be a fit parent at this time in her life. The thought of bearing the child only to give it over for adoption unleashes feelings of guilt and failure which tear her apart. After much anguished deliberation she chooses to have an abortion. How should her brothers and sisters in the community of faith respond?

A central difficulty in working our way through the issue of abortion is our uncertainty about how to regard it or about what kind of words to use to describe it. It makes a vast difference in our response whether we regard abortion as murder or the termination of pregnancy, or whether we call the life that is taken a person or an embryo. Because this is so, believers are ill-equipped to address and work through the issues involved in terms of their relation to God. Consequently, their consciences are adrift between moral anguish and amoral blamelessness, between seeing themselves guilty of a particularly grievous sin, on the one hand, or beyond any moral assessment for what was a purely private decision on the other. It is vital,

therefore, for the church to speak on this matter. In a matter as serious as abortion, interminable deliberation of all viewpoints or capitulation to private decisions breaks the rhythm of action, reflection, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation so vital to Christian life. For the sake of our identity, so that a fragile peace of mind not substitute for the peace that passes all understanding, we need to articulate a general understanding of this grave matter of life and death that will help us form our consciences and care for those who are in turmoil.

In assessing this matter, we can rule out two extremes. Abortion in the circumstances described is not murder, neither is it the mere termination of pregnancy. It is not murder because the need for an abortion comes about as an *unintended* consequence of one's actions. The goal of the abortion is to end pregnancy, not to cause the death of human life. Plainly, for persons who are loath to have to turn to this operation, the motive necessary for the charge of murder is wholly lacking. On the other extreme, to call abortion merely the termination of pregnancy avoids the fact that a life is taken. Abortion causes the loss of a human life. We must not disguise this.

How, then, are we to regard human life eight weeks after conception? Some argue that full personhood begins at conception, others that personhood comes with the ability to relate to other persons. We may find a way through this impasse if we consider typical human responses to events in prenatal life. In practice, persons within and outside the church do distinguish among the stages of prenatal human development, and the extreme views so often framing the debate do not seem to hold.

The experience of a miscarriage, for example, is usually an occasion for grieving, and a sense of loss follows. Furthermore, a miscarriage bewilders us and it does so more profoundly than the failure of an organ or the failure of some natural process in our bodies would perplex us. A human life has been unexpectedly cut short. Something new and hopeful ends, and all natural accounts ultimately fail to explain why. But now consider the magnitude of difference between the typical response to a miscarriage and a still birth. The loss of life in the latter case clearly wounds much more deeply. Most of us have come to think that it would be unfitting if someone mourned the loss of life at a miscarriage in the same way as at a still birth. Such attitudes indicate that in practice we distinguish among the stages of prenatal human development as that life develops from utter dependence upon to independence from the woman bearing it.

Church practice has moved in a similar way to show that we do make distinctions in our understanding of the connectedness of prenatal with maternal life. While special care may be extended to the parents in the event of miscarriage, funerals have not traditionally been given. While prayers may be said for the stillborn, they have not been baptized. We might argue that our practice should be otherwise, that indifference or inattention should be the rule until a baby is born healthy, or that funerals should be given for the miscarried. But what facts or reasoning could convince us to change these long-standing practices?

We now know, for example, that a genetically unique human life is present at conception. It would be reasonable to conclude, consequently, that we ought not distinguish our treatment of prenatal life from postnatal life. But are we then prepared to do all that we can so that every human life from conception on be born?

This question is especially acute in light of the fact that forty-five to seventy percent of all fertilized eggs do not implant, being sloughed off or absorbed into the uterine wall. Do we intend to reverse this natural course of events? And how should our theology understand the work of a Creator who, apparently, creates full human persons only to—in a matter of days—destroy a large portion of them? On the other extreme, impressed with the dire consequences of population growth and in the face of the earth's limited resources, we could reason that abortion is prudent planetary hygiene—even good stewardship. Can our theology adapt to accommodate facts and reasonings such as these?

While there may be a place for abstract reasoning about such an unfamiliar, seemingly indifferent Creator and such fearful stewardship, Christian faith witnesses to a God concretely revealed in the Scriptures, who subdues chaos and creates light out of darkness, who loves as a parent loves a child, and who wills life not death, even raising the dead to a new life at the end of time. In spite of evidence or abstract speculations to the contrary, we trust that God's creation of human life is not capricious but aims toward the good. Therefore, we accept the life God has chosen to give us, exercising good stewardship in our care of it.

This faith should guide church practice and the care of believers in the matter of prenatal life. Theology errs and consciences are afflicted when we stray from this faith, either claiming to know more or trusting less. We misguidedly go beyond faith if we claim to know the mind of God in the case of the miscarried or of the newly conceived who never develop. Similarly, we stop short of faith if we think we know better than the Creator which lives should be allowed to come to birth and which allowed to end. Neither view, it is clear, sees God as the present, ever-active, loving Creator of life; neither way puts ultimate trust in God, but rather—as if accepting or rejecting life were a personal prerogative—leaves consciences afflicted, ill-formed, and uncertain of their relation to God.

Our theology maintains that the life God creates is good. Our place as stewards of the creation is to welcome that life, trusting that God will provide where we cannot. To abort under the circumstances described is to fail to trust the work and promises of our Creator. An unintended pregnancy, rather than being an occasion to beseech God's mercy and strengthen our faith, hope, and love, becomes a flight away from the One who is our help. Of course, that flight is the path—in one way or another—of *all* God's creatures. So abortion cannot be an issue to separate those with and without sin; it is not the occasion to mark some with the scarlet letter. All of us have proven faithless at important junctures in our lives and so stand in need of God's reconciling love.

Still, a life full of promise has been ended, and that is wrong. The church must not refrain from saying this. Abortion, to repeat, is not the premeditated killing of another person. As we have argued, the lack of intent as well as our own acknowledgement of the dependent and developing character of prenatal life prevent such an understanding of abortion. Yet it is wrong to end such a life, which would develop naturally to have the same full and independent existence as you and me.

Having said this, communities of faith need also to become the vehicle for delivering the unconditional love and forgiveness of God in Jesus to those in their midst who choose this solution to the problem of pregnancy. It may be that special services of repentance and forgiveness are fitting. We say this mindful that all of us

have sought false gods to help us through our difficulties, and so all need to hear the story of God's acceptance of us in spite of our waywardness. We need to assure them that God still seeks them in love, and to support them as fully after an abortion as before.

Advances in medical technology will change the profile of the abortion issue. New forms of abortifacients (such as RU468), genetic therapy, and the capacity to push back the time of viability all increase our ability to affect prenatal life. It is difficult to know how these will alter the abortion issue as it typically confronts the churches. But in light of the above and with an eye to some current realities, we might keep before us the following perspectives. Our role as stewards of prenatal life is neither to reject such life nor perfect it, but to care for, preserve, and aid it. Secondly, we are always stewards with limited resources. We must make choices about expending those resources on any number of research projects, treatments, and technologies at all stages of life. Whether we like it or not, this will continually involve us in difficult choices about who shall live or die. This need not amount to a crude cost-benefit analysis regarding resources and the value of competing human lives, but neither is it a situation where theological direction

always lies unambiguously before us.

### III. LAW AND THE MORAL COMMUNITY: REASONING THROUGH ALTERNATIVES

Jessica's abortion is permitted by law. Should it be? We noted at the outset that this was a matter over which Christians may and do in good conscience disagree. Even assuming theological accord and moral agreement that abortion is wrong, there is still room for disagreement about whether there would be greater evils without some legal abortions.

The discussion above, however, does suggest some helpful common perspectives for Christians concerning the legal question of abortion. In the first place, it would suggest that, as prenatal life develops, it deserves a commensurate increase in our concern and care. Prior to viability the legality of abortion may remain a flexible issue. But at viability (normally in the six month of pregnancy) no circumstances could justify abortion. Christians, therefore, must deplore the absence of legal protection for such human life. What the law should do to protect pre-viable life, how we should respond to the fact that women are disproportionately burdened, and what laws can realistically accomplish in the given social climate are questions over which well-intentioned people will disagree. We might characterize the problem confronting policy makers in this way. For the most part, unintended or problem pregnancies are a symptom of complex social problems affecting our national life. Poor education, family dysfunction, poverty, poor psychological development, and indifferent social policies all can be contributing factors. Abortion is for some one way to treat the desperate problem that such a pregnancy can be. But the questions remain: Should abortion be an unavoidable treatment open to those who stand to suffer from unintended pregnancy as we work to cure the root causes? Or does abortion create side effects and leave wounds which only worsen the collective health of our moral community?

Secondly, the above discussion would not let resorting to abstractions or ideologies lead us to choose a slippery course of action, when long-standing practice

in dealing with prenatal life suggests a path around it. In particular, some will argue that once any exception is made in the respect owed a human life, no persons are safe from being classified as sub-human. The right to an abortion, they claim, is the first step to infanticide and euthanasia. Others argue that when the law can control women by denying access to abortion, it is encouraged also to sanction other forms of legalized suppression or control over women.

But neither of these courses is inevitable. We must be wary of such charges, and examine the validity of arguments of connection, that one step necessarily leads to the next. Both positions just stated show a suspicion of others and their capacity to make distinctions, and even presume depraved motivations. All differing positions—no matter how they are reached—are regarded as little more than masks covering ulterior motives. In certain circumstances in public life such suspicion may be well-placed. But in the present debate we should be more charitable, assuming that no one desires more abortions and no one believes that they are inherently good. Abstractions and ideologies, on the other hand, which cannot distinguish between a newly fertilized egg and a new born baby, confuse our reasoning about the legality of abortion. Long-standing common practice, by contrast, shows a discriminating sense and judicious judgment concerning the development of prenatal life far superior to adherence to abstractions or ideologies alone.

Jessica's abortion may then be legal, but is it helpful, does it build up our common life? In other words, is it moral? Certain conduct may be legal but not moral (e.g., adultery). The theological vision of life discussed above cannot countenance Jessica's abortion. But suppose she is not a Christian. Can we justify such an abortion according to generally accepted moral standards? Or, must we say that it is always immoral, a regrettable concession to our waywardness, an unfortunate acknowledgement that we cannot make legal requirements too restrictive or else they do more harm than good?

This raises the question of the relation between the legal, moral, and theological aspects of this issue. Christian denominations typically conceive the interrelationship between these areas differently. The general view, however, is that the law stipulates basic rules for communities to exist with civility, morality broadens our responsibility to our neighbors, and theology calls us to care for our neighbors as members of God's household. Like concentric circles, these areas define the reach of our freedom and responsibility: The law commands us not to murder; morality bids us to help and defend our neighbors; and theology prevails upon us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Lutherans have traditionally drawn these circles in a recognizable way. First of all, they have held the view that there is a morality natural to us all; right and wrong are not simply in the eye of the doer. That is not to say that what is right or wrong is easily determined, or that our judgments are infallible. Although all persons can come to see that "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is our natural moral standard, what this means in practice is a matter for joint deliberation as well as individual judgment.

This natural standard, secondly, stretches us to seek out and do what is good for our neighbor. It extends, in fact, to loving our neighbor as ourself, so that ultimately love is the basis of morality. For traditional Lutheran Christianity, therefore, the circle of natural morality and the conduct commended by theology

are the same. The difference, to put it visually, is that theology adds a third dimension which forms a sphere over and around the circle of morality. As the moral conscience develops it comes to see that it stands before a standard which transcends itself. For when we do not love as natural morality bids us, we come under *divine* judgment; when we love self-sacrificially, we pattern our love after *divine* love. Faith in the Triune God may be unique to Christians, love of neighbor is not. All who seek the good are led to love of neighbor as the standard for our moral life. It is that which builds up the communities in which we all live.

On the face of it, therefore, morality presumes that we do what we can to support human life, and that we do not take from it the means it needs to live. In the question of abortion, consequently, we need to supply reasons why we should not give of ourselves to support all prenatal life. One support of such reasoning may come from facing directly the fact that the cost to women of childbearing is considerable. The life growing within her places heavy physical and emotional demands. She alone bears the entire burden of the pregnancy after conception, and we must not minimize this burden even if it is natural and common. Is, then, the burden of an unintended or problem pregnancy one we can morally expect her to bear? In light of the moral view outlined above, that we should extend our life for life which would perish without us, it would follow that she should support that life. Though the law may not require us to be Good

Samaritans, our natural morality draws us to love of neighbor, to give of ourselves especially to those most needing our help. We generally reason that the pain, stress, and risks of nine months are outweighed by the entry of human life into the world.

The risk from childbearing to physical health is roughly equal to that from donating a kidney. Let us, therefore, imagine that a medical condition existed where the eight-week-old embryo growing in Jessica would die unless it received a part of Michael's kidney. How many men would easily accept this sacrifice as their moral responsibility? Yet a sacrifice of that magnitude is what Jessica and all women like her routinely face. The law does not presently demand that she—or Michael, for that matter—make this sacrifice, even if it is a matter of saving the life of a newborn. What is legally expected in this instance, we have concluded, is a matter over which we can legitimately disagree. Morally, however, our consciences tell us that we—women and men—are called to give support to life, even if it involves such sacrifice.

Are there other circumstances which could reasonably justify our not meeting this moral call? Unusual instances such as threat to the mother's life or a birth deformity that promises suffering or an early death, introduce a truly tragic dimension to this issue. Tragic instances such as these, where life struggles against life or is incompatible with life, necessitate particular considerations difficult to specify in advance. Here discretion requires that our concern to seek justification for the taking of life or our efforts to weigh better and worse alternatives are probably misplaced. We should rather help individuals work through the dilemma of carrying a burden where no ways are good ways. Likewise, in the cruel circumstances of rape or incest, the question of injustice can be argued to override the call to support that life. While there may be a slim place for pointing gently to what may be a better way, the cruelty of the injustice acted out upon the woman outweighs any idea that she now must morally justify the actions which that immoral act forces her to take. Non-judgment, help, and support are the fitting responses here.

Outside of these tragic circumstances, socio-economic pressures are also often presented as reasons to justify abortion. For many women the prospect of childrearing means a life of aggravated poverty. It is a social fact that the demands of childrearing fall disproportionately upon women, many of whom must additionally work outside the home to support children. Though all can agree that our major social problems in this area—some so severe that social institutions themselves appear at times to be morally indifferent—must be addressed, how best to tackle them is a social policy question over which people will legitimately differ. As we said at the outset, the church may have no special insight into the best *means* of achieving what may be commonly held ends, and Lutherans traditionally have guarded against mandatory support for a particular political party or social platform.

As desperate as such socio-economic pressures are, they are not on the same level as the tragic cases noted above. Unintended pregnancy may deepen the desperation resulting from bleak socio-economic conditions, but it is not in itself life threatening or the direct result of an act of cruel violation. It is hard to imagine that the great potential of every human life could be so compromised by anticipated socio-economic circumstances that it would be better if it had not been born—especially assuming that adoption is an available alternative. Though socio-economic conditions would thus not seem to justify abortion, still we need to understand the desperation felt by women, trapped by unresponsive social institutions and material want, that



makes abortion an understandable option. Their plight demands our civic action and our compassion should they seek this solution. While understanding and not condemning them, we cannot, however, give moral sanction to such abortions as justifiable.

Jessica's abortion is legal. Whether it should be is a matter of legal and social policy on which opinions may legitimately diverge. But it is immoral. And as a pregnancy approaches viability, natural morality compels us to urge increased regulation of abortion. Our intention in saying this is not to afflict more deeply consciences already in anguish. It is rather to guard against the sedation of already sleepy consciences. Abortion is not needful; it does not build up the life of our moral community. There may be tragic cases where it is not our place to judge, but to help; there may be desperate circumstances where we should not condemn, but understand. Even in far easier conditions the panic of unintended and problematic pregnancy can make anyone's moral strength falter. Be that as it may, however, for the vast majority of cases abortion is not a morally acceptable choice.

Christians, we have seen, might legitimately disagree over the legal regulation of abortion. But in their theological understanding it is to be hoped that they might come closer to a common view, or at least be able to rule out certain viewpoints. Certainly communities of faith must find practical ways, both spiritually and materially, to support persons involved in problem pregnancies. It is our calling to accept women who are rejected and to welcome unwanted lives. This is a large task, yet it is within the capacities of local congregations to help provide these services to women and children in need. If we ourselves are not hospitable to the outcast—God's children all—then no one will listen to us no matter what we say.