

**“The sacredness of life is in Christian eyes
an absolute which should not be violated”**

(Lambeth Conference of Bishops, 1958)

Can or Should One Apply This Statement to Abortion?

Note: There is a postscript included after the bibliography

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Word Count: 2479

Introduction

With the advancing technology of modern times, one comes across difficult ethical questions. On the one hand medics are capable of saving the premature, while somewhere else unborn of the same age are aborted. How do we approach human life in such? Or can it be that this debate is not relevant as the unborn is not human yet?

Some Christians are mute on this topic. This is unfortunate and unnecessary because there are good theological and reasonable arguments to take a firm stand in this debate. This paper will discuss the issues not only from a theological but also from a more secular perspective. It will give the Christian some baggage to determine his or her stance. Furthermore, there will be some suggestions on how Christians can participate in the debate overall.

Clarifying Terms

Terminology makes a distinction in development. Often the unborn is referred to as an embryo in its earliest stage of development and when this stage is over the foetal stage begins.¹ These terms do not make matters easier. Emotionally people tend to take a different stance towards 'something' which is called an embryo than towards the term 'baby' or 'child'. In this paper we will abide to the terms 'embryo' and 'foetus' because they signify the period of development.

Sacredness of Life

The phrase 'sanctity of life' needs to be clarified as well. 'Sanctity of life' is generally used by those who oppose technologies or practices that they believe violate the intrinsic value of human life. This phrase, although used by many, is almost becoming archaic and thus needs some explanation. It is best understood as the respect that is owed to human life as the gift of God (Acts 17:25). Furthermore, the Bible teaches that we have the duty to safeguard and respect human life (e.g.

¹ Normally eight to ten development weeks for embryonic stage.

Genesis 9:5). The overall teaching of the Bible is clear about the respect and responsibility humans have towards each others' life (Genesis 4:9; Deuteronomy 21:1-9).² For Christians this means that *all* human life is sacred and that this does not depend on culture, race, state of consciousness, colour, physical ability/disability etcetera (Acts 17:26).

Is the Unborn Human?

Important in the debate about abortion is the question whether we recognise the unborn as human or not. With modern technologies one can accurately follow the development of the unborn. This has its benefits but at the same time one can look at the unborn and examine it like any other part of the body. Many will look at an embryo and say that it is just a lump of cells. Still, there is much to say about the embryo in its earliest state.

Biological

Some argue that we cannot speak of a human in the very beginning of conception. The first cells are totipotent and can still develop in different kinds of tissues such as the placenta. One would not say that the placenta is an individual, especially not when the formation of the embryo did not yet start.³ Nevertheless, it is known that these cells function as an organism rather than a group of individual cells. In other words, these cells are setting the stage, as a unity in wholeness, for the person's development.⁴ To state that the embryonic cells are not to be qualified as a human because they are still in development is arbitrary. Development continues in young children for many years, yet one would not dare to state that a toddler is not a person until adulthood.

Others state that embryos are parasitic, and only benefits from the mother with nothing in return.⁵

But this view does not longer hold. Scientists discovered that there is no one-way relation as

2 Cf. Vere, 'Sanctity,' 757-758.

3 Ford, *When*, 157-158.

4 Flaman, 'When,' 41-48.

5 Baggott, *Human*, 33.

beneficial cells from the unborn pass into the mother's body during pregnancy. These cells will increase the activity of the mother's autoimmune conditions such as to rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis decreases.⁶

Biologically, the unborn is a human and depending on the mother for survival. The unborn cannot be seen as part of the mother as every cell of the unborn is genetically distinct from every cell in the mother's body. This, however, is not a harmful relationship, but rather beneficial for both.

Philosophical

Ever since 1970 some of the medical establishment went through 'semantic gymnastics' to deny the scientific fact that human life begins at conception.⁷ This dehumanisation of the unborn is not very compelling because an adequate answer to when human life actually begins is not given. This is why others follow the logical conclusion that human life starts at conception.⁸ In other words, all humans are human, whether embryonic, foetal, infantile, young, mature, old, or dying. Stating that the embryo is human is begging the question whether the embryo has human-rights. The question that follows is whether human-rights apply to humans because they *are* human, or because other humans say so. If the first option is true one is secure against cruelties (at least by right). If the second option is true, one's safety cannot be assured because human opinion changes over time.

Three Premises

This brings us to a threefold premise that consists of scientific, moral, and legal arguments: The scientific premise is that the human life begins at conception; The moral premise is that *all* humans have the right to live because they are human; The legal premise is that the law must protect the most basic human rights.

6 Pincott, *Do Chocolate*, 220-221.

7 Editorials, 'A New Ethic,' 67-68.

8 O'Rahilly and Müller, *Human*, 7-8.

Based on these premises one can conclude that human life, including that of the unborn, needs to be protected against all harm. Ignoring these premises seems to conclude that one is scientifically, morally or legally ignorant.⁹ This 'ignorance' is alarming because the premises are so basic that most can understand it.

Christian Stance

The human life arguments are not necessarily religious as they are appealing to reason instead of faith. For Christians it is important that they also have sound theological reasons. The moral view of a Christian depends on the understanding of God and His word. In the Biblical moral view one can detect absolutes. Adversely, secular society's moral views become more relative.

God's involvement

We already summarised texts in which one can see that human life is to be protected. For the sake of argument we will add Psalm 139. Here David clearly states that God was there when he was formed in his mother's womb—from the very beginning. In the New Testament we read that the baby in Elisabeth's womb leaped up when Mary visited them, indicating that the foetus was aware of things around him (Luke 1:36,41,44). The Bible annotates God's involvement with the unborn in every stage of development.

The Christian view

The answer to the question whether the statement at the Lambeth Conference of Bishops should be applied to abortion can be non other than yes. Christians who believe otherwise and hold the Bible as authoritative, need to go through misty hermeneutics to uphold their views. Furthermore, even without the theological background one cannot dismiss the facts.

⁹ Kreeft, *Three*, 34-37.

Dilemmas

It is not always straightforward to apply this absolutistic view on morals. When, for example, there are serious complications during pregnancy and the mother's life is at stake, this view becomes problematic. Here the Christian comes across a conflict that cannot be solved without compromising and thus adopting a more liberal stance.¹⁰ Treatment of the mother is imperative as the unborn is depending on her and will die when she dies. Sometimes mothers are advised to get a 'therapeutic' abortion because treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) could potentially harm or kill the unborn *and* to improve the mother's chances. However, recent studies demonstrated that the risks are not as big as one would expect, also women who carried to term had more chance to survive their disease.¹¹ Medical treatment should aim on rescuing *both* lives but if this fails, and if the unborn dies, it is unintentionally thus not morally wrong.¹² Despite all this, abortion to save the mother's life does probably not, strictly medically spoken, exist. Although it sounds 'noble and pure' to those who propose abortion, in reality it is a 'real stretch of our thinking.'¹³

Another dilemma could be that a young girl becomes pregnant after rape. In the UK, raped women can ask treatment in several forms—some of which include treatment to terminate a possible pregnancy.¹⁴ When one states that the right to life is inalienable, one cannot agree with treatments that intentionally kill the embryo. Understandably so, the victim goes through horrible emotions but emotions cannot be accounted for good moral decisions. Bad does not become good when one feels like it—if morality 'can mean anything for anyone, then it means nothing for everyone.'¹⁵

The indispensable content of these dilemmas evolve around the question whether one acknowledges the unborn as human or not. Even when the unborn will be harmed by treatments or is malformed in

10 E.g: conflicting absolutism; Cf. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 20.

11 Hoskins, *Principles*, 1298; Choi and Morrow, *Breast*, 166-167.

12 Prolifephysicians.org, 'Are There'.

13 Sloan and Hartz, *Choice*, 46-47.

14 Cf. Victim Support, 'Rape'.

15 Geisler, 'Can Atheists'.

any other way, one cannot deny the unborn the basic human-right, which is *life*.

Compromising

Living in a democracy, Christians are free to express their values on human life. They cannot force their morality on other people and thus need to aim legal ways instead. One way to accomplish a change is through politics. The Christian ideals are clear—a total abolishing of the practise of abortion. This, however, will not likely happen in one time thus Christians should consider a compromised stance. We can find an example of compromising the ideal in the Bible. In Genesis God sets the ideals for marriage (Genesis 2:24). Later Moses allowed the people to divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1). According to Jesus, Moses accepted divorce because of the hardness of the people (Matthew 19:1-9). Jesus implied that Moses compromised the ideal in such a way that at least the divorced woman could be married by another man. Likewise, Christian politicians should consider a compromised agenda. That is to say, they can try to change the conditions and time-scale for abortions—focussing on the politically feasible and not on the ideal. This way, they can change the abortion law in gradual reductions.¹⁶ This requires a change of thinking for many Christians. Understandably so, compromise on abortion can be seen as agreeing with a terrible sin. Still, in a fallen world one will encounter conflicting moral issues. In cases like this, Christians have to choose between two evil options—choosing the less evil and thus saving a few is better than saving none. This tactic, of restricting access to abortion through state laws (in the USA) and offering viable alternatives for women in need, has been described by a worried pro-choice columnist as 'death by a thousand tiny cuts.'¹⁷

Attitude

The tensions are high in the abortion debate. Still, Christians need to maintain their best behaviour.

¹⁶ Cook, 'Abortion,' 131-133.

¹⁷ Harris-Perry, 'On Roe'.

Even though one might think of abortion as a murder, it is better to control one's tongue (James 1:26). Normally women do not go through abortion light-hearted, many simply do not know what else to do. Most women are, just like the adulterous woman in John 8:1-12, aware of what they have done. Jesus did not preach a sermon or told her how bad she was. The woman probably knew what Jesus' ideal was, still He demonstrated compassion, grace and love. If one states to be a follower of Christ, one should do as his Master (1 John 2:6).

Women, who consider abortion, generally have no reasonable idea of the alternatives or are strongly influenced by their surroundings. It would be good if local churches become known as active pro-life communities. The topic should be in every church's agenda. Education is crucial to help Christians understand the dilemmas that some women go through. Many of the human-right issues discussed in churches are about foreign dilemmas. While this is of great worth, Christians cannot close their eyes for the neighbours closest to them. Information centres can be of great use for women who feel they are stuck. Christians can even consider to take up arms with non-Christians in setting up such centres. This may be considered as another compromise, but can prove to be even more effective in reaching women as some may have not much affinity with Christians. In a society where one's own choice is celebrated, Christians have a good message. Christians ought to promote freedom of choice—freedom of speech and to choose religion, schools, healthcare, etcetera—but this freedom should not harm anybody else.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper it becomes clear that Christians cannot accept legalised abortion. The question whether the statement of the 'Lambeth Conference of Bishops' should be applied to abortion has to be answered positively. As discussed in this paper one cannot dismiss the fact that we are talking about humans from the very beginning. Scientifically, morally, and legally the

unborn should be entitled for all basic human-rights and thus be protected as any other human-being.

Despite what has just been said, the issue of abortion can become more complicated in cases where a mother needs treatment for a life threatening situation, such as cancer. Medical staff need to do their utmost to save the unborn from harm. However, it cannot be considered as immoral or wrong when medics *unintentionally* fail to save the unborn. In these cases the mother's life should have priority as the unborn (in an early stage) cannot survive without her.

Compromising the Christian stance and setting out a feasible goal instead of aiming on the ideals may prove to be the best tactic in politics. Acknowledging the struggle many will have with this compromise, it has to be said that saving a few is always better than saving none. This way Christians work in small steps and at the same time hope that one day society and science will acknowledge the human-rights of the unborn.

Christians need to live out the fact that they are followers of Christ. This means that they have to portray a compassionate, loving and merciful attitude towards women who have had an abortion. Education is imperative for Christians and non-Christians the like. Here lies an important role for churches. One step further, community Churches can set up information centres for women who are struggling with a pregnancy that does not comply to their wishes or situation. These centres can be set up by a joined effort of people from different social groups. This will help women to feel at ease with the people that offer them help.

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Word Count: 2479

Postscript

I have written this paper with mainly the Dutch society in mind. As far as I know the Dutch have only two parties who are against abortion. Both parties are Christian and do not receive many votes. As a consequence, they hardly receive enough votes to shift towards a ruling position. Normally they need to form coalitions with other parties. In such situation they cannot 'push' their ideals. This, of course, is very frustrating. It is this situation that triggered me to think further than the ideals. Note, however, that a compromised situation is not my preferred model, neither is it for those Christian parties.