

Perspectives On Life Before Birth

Gen. 1:27; Psalm 8:4-6; 139:16; John 1:14

Introduction

When Elaine & I recently went to watch the movie **"Unplanned"** at Cineplex in Langley we couldn't help but notice that in response to the threat of protests by abortion advocates the theatre was taking special precautions by: (a) blanking out the name of the movie we had come to see and, (b) posting a security guard inside the theatre who checked us over before we were seated. It seemed ironic that a movie chronicling the story of a former abortion clinic manager turned pro-lifer was believed by some to be more dangerous for viewers than any of the R-rated movies with excessive violence being featured.

Clearly abortion remains one of the most emotionally loaded and divisive issues facing us today. The debates over abortion are admittedly complex, too complex to be reduced to a slogan on a placard. **SLIDE2** Behind the various positions and perspectives are people, real people with real stories and a wide spectrum of emotions. **BLANK3** But just because it involves complex emotions and issues Christians shouldn't opt out of personal decision-making or engaging in public discussion on it merely because it is complex or because some people are closed or even hostile to hearing alternate points of view.

I do not come to this topic as a novice nor as an expert. I have known first-hand the dilemma of having to decide what to do when prenatal screening showed genetic abnormalities in our unborn child and as a friend and pastor I have heard people share their secret sorrows at having an abortion.

I know enough to know that the reasons people choose to consider and to have an abortion are many and involve a complex mix of difficult emotions & decisions that are best processed in conversation and consultation with others, including health care professionals and people in their faith community. While the primary aim of today's message is to look at life before birth in the light of scripture, it's important to remind those who have had this tragic procedure that, through Jesus Christ, God offers unconditional love and forgiveness.

Before we look at the perspective and wisdom that the scriptures give us on life before birth, I wanted to first explore some **perspectives** our current culture has on it as well as some of the foundational beliefs and implications of it.

A) A Pop Culture Perspective – When is a person? **SLIDE5**

Popular culture is clear in declaring that even though life begins before birth, until that life form growing in the womb is born, “it” is not a person and has no say or inherent rights on what happens to “it”. What happens in a woman’s body concerns her and her alone. In a culture where individualism and one’s right to choose is the highest value abortion on demand seems to be the only reasonable choice, the only choice that gives women the right to choose. As a result of this ideology, abortions are performed on a scale few people realize.

- In the **United States** about 50 million unborn babies have been aborted since Roe v. Wade in 1973.
- In **Russia**, the number of abortions surpasses live births (1.3 million/yr)
- In **China**, official data put the number of abortions at around 330 million since the one-child policy was enacted in 1978 (the majority = girls)
- And in our own country, in 1988, the Supreme Court removed all restrictions on abortion. Since then, two million unborn children have been aborted.

And yet, from time to time, cracks in this ideological consensus appear from some unlikely sources, even in a sit-com like **“The Big Bang Theory”**. Several years ago, when one of the show’s characters, Bernadette, got pregnant, her husband Howard and their friend Raj used a home ultrasound kit. When they heard the baby’s heartbeat, Rajesh exclaimed, ‘You guys made a person!’ to which Howard responded, **“We did!”**¹ (not “a fetus” or “life form”)

That such a scene could slip into a popular show provides an insight into what people really think when they are not thinking too hard, because according to our current culture and Canadian law, a fetus isn’t a person until “it” is born.² We use language to try and keep the distinction, but intuitively we can’t.

B) Some Alternative Perspectives **SLIDE8**

¹ <http://www.aei.org/publication/on-abortion-tv-shows-its-conservative-side/>

² The Canadian criminal code reflects this perspective by stating that an unborn fetus only has the legal rights of a person *after* it is born. See “Toronto area killing reignites emotional debate: can an unborn fetus be a murder victim?” <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/toronto-killing-reignites-emotional-debate-can-an-unborn-fetus-be-a-murder-victim>

I recently read an amazing book by long time British neonatologist and academic researcher, Dr. John Wyatt: **SLIDE9** Matters of Life & Death: Human dilemmas in the light of the Christian faith. Dr. Wyatt has been “deeply struck also by the profound intuitions about abortion which many people in our society reveal, including many who have no Christian or religious faith.”

He recalled a conversation he had with a BBC producer making a major television documentary about abortion. She had interviewed a considerable number of women and doctors by way of background research. She told him in private that she had been “*struck by the fact that when talking about abortion, SLIDE10 the doctors and other professionals were careful to use medical language such as ‘termination of pregnancy’, in order to avoid giving offence. By contrast nearly all the women she had spoken to had talked about ‘killing their babies.’* In her view, the women were much more honest than the doctors about the emotional implications of medical abortion.”³

Likewise, in the forward to their book **SLIDE11** *A Silent Sorrow: Pregnancy Loss-Guidance and Support for You and Your Family*, bereavement counsellors Ingrid Kohn and Perry-Lynn Moffit, writing from an entirely secular perspective, discuss the language they chose to use: **SLIDE12**

We considered using terms such as “fetus” and “embryo” when discussing abnormal pregnancies and abortions, realising this language was more in keeping with a pro-choice stance. In the end, we continued to refer to the “unborn baby”. We felt compelled to acknowledge this common grief: *no matter what the cause of their loss, bereaved parents mourn for someone who was dear to them, someone who was supposed to be their “baby”*.⁴

Remember, the pro-choice doctrine is that a fetus only becomes a person when I choose to keep “it”, at which point the “it” stops being an it and becomes a he or she. Syndicated columnist Jonah Goldberg noted that while “*This emotional parsing is understandable...emotion isn’t the best foundation for law. In the past, emotion led lots of [people] to think blacks weren’t persons, either. Logic, science,*

³ John Wyatt, Matters of Life & Death (2009 Revised Edition), p. 172.

⁴ Quoted by John Wyatt, p. 172 (*his emphasis*).

and, finally, moral reasoning said otherwise. If over here an unborn child is a person but over there it isn't, and the only thing distinguishing the two is someone's feelings, we've got a problem. And it's not just a problem of language."⁵

SLIDE13 While Western society gives much attention to human rights, it is in effect promoting a *hierarchy of rights*. And sadly, the unborn find themselves on the lowest rung of the rights ladder in large part because they are powerless and voiceless—defenseless victims of the dominant ideology and values of our current culture. “When push comes to shove, pragmatic considerations will often sideline ethical and moral sensibilities, even concerning human life.”⁶

The paradoxical effect of the emphasis on the woman's autonomy is the disempowerment and disengagement of men from the entire issue of abortion....When a woman chooses to have an abortion because her partner has said, ‘I'll leave unless you get rid of the baby’, when the company says, ‘Promotion is only available to those who work full time’, when social services says, ‘Sorry, we can't support single mothers’, when society has discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes to disabled people, is it really a triumph of reproductive autonomy? The context of the decision about abortion is not neutral—it is predetermined by society, and in particular by the dominant male interests and power relations within that society.^{Wyatt, 146}

- The prominent feminist lawyer Professor Catharine MacKinnon agrees that liberal abortion rules allow men to use women sexually with no fear of any consequences of paternity.⁷

C) Some Biblical Perspectives **SLIDE14** (Gen 1²⁶⁻²⁷; Ps. 139¹³; 8⁴⁻⁵; Jn. 1¹⁴)

The most fundamental affirmation of the precious value of human life is found in **Genesis 1²⁷**: “So God created mankind *in his own image, in the image of God* he created them; male and female he created them.” The biblical doctrine of creation proclaims the innate worth and dignity of *all* human beings conferred on us by our maker at whatever stage of our development and

⁵ <http://www.aei.org/publication/on-abortion-tv-shows-its-conservative-side/>

⁶ Pierre Gilbert, “Life Before Birth” <https://www.mennonitebrethren.ca/bfl-resources/life-before-birth/>

⁷ Quoted by Wyatt, p. 147. In the brutal language of another feminist, a liberal abortion policy allows men ‘to fill women up, vacuum them out, and fill them up again.’ Ibid.

whatever our level of ability or disability. By contrast secular humanism decides which lives are worthy of being welcomed into the human race and which are deemed unworthy by some “utilitarian calculus”.⁸ **BLANK16**

Just how wrong these human calculations of what makes a life worthy or not was first brought home to me years ago by my friend Mike. For years Mike worked as an occupational therapist, a healthcare professional whose job is to assess and address physical problems that hinder one’s ability to function as needed in daily life. What my friend Mike learned from the people he worked with was that, as he put it, “in things like their attitude and approach to life they often possess far more ability than we do.” (*cf.* Dorian Belanger funeral)

Scriptures like Psalm 8 and Psalm 139 echo the divine worth and dignity of all human beings. **SLIDE** “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”^{139:13} The worth and dignity we have is not on the basis of our physical or intellectual abilities or our financial net worth but by virtue of the simple fact that we are made in the image of God (unique ability to relate to him, to know him and be known by him). In the words of Psalm 8: **SLIDE18**

⁴what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?^[c]

⁵You have made them^[d] a little lower than the angels^[e]
and crowned them^[f] with glory and honor.

As OT scholar Pierre Gilbert notes, “This text, written centuries before the rise of modern science, speaks more truthfully about our humanity than the average biology textbook.”⁹ It assigns us the highest position in creation, next only to God himself. And it distinguishes us from the rest of nature, as stewards of it. Though we are from the earth, God has breathed his life into each of us.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ represents perhaps most critical factor to consider. As **John 1¹⁴** says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” By becoming one of us, Christ not only displayed his great humility.

⁸ As John Wyatt notes, “Those who lack the capacity for conscious choice – the fetus, the newborn, the brain-injured, the demented and the psychotic – are relegated to an inferior moral status.” p. 267.

⁹ Pierre Gilbert, “Life before Birth” <https://www.mennonitebrethren.ca/bfl-resources/life-before-birth/>

He also exalted our humanity. In the giving of his son to die for us, God displayed the full extent of the value and worth he places on us and the lengths he was and is willing to go to save us from certain death. While many reasons for abortion express self-preservation, it is self-sacrifice that moves our hearts most deeply when we see and hear it lived.

Elaine Storkey, in her meditation on the experience of Mary, the mother of Jesus, expresses the intuitive sense of wonder and the emotional demands of pregnancy from the mother's perspective: **SLIDE20**

Pregnancy is itself a symbol of deep hospitality. It is the giving of one's body to the life of another. It is a sharing of all that we have...It is saying 'welcome' with every breath, and every heartbeat. This is one of the reasons why the decision for abortion is such a painful and heavy one...for many women. In spite of all the reasons which directed them to take this step some feel guilty of a deep betrayal of trust. They could not find within themselves the hospitality that was needed to sustain this life.¹⁰

SLIDE21 It is worth noting that the gospel writer Luke uses the same Greek word, *brephos*, for the unborn John, as he does for the newborn baby Jesus (Lk. 2¹²), and for the little children who were brought to Jesus for his blessing (Lk. 18¹⁵). The consistent witness of the biblical writers is that the fetus is part of the human drama, a hidden actor on the human stage; one whom God is creating in secret, calling into existence and into relationship with himself.

D) Some Historical Perspectives **SLIDE22**

- As early Christianity spread and grew across Graeco-Roman society, a peculiarity of these Christians was that they cared for the very ones the world was literally discarding. They went around the rubbish bins, rescuing abandoned babies & later they set up orphanages & hospitals for the dying.
- Asian Christian Vinoth Ramachandra has written of the remarkable "missionary contribution to medical health in Asia and Africa...from the treatment of leprosy and pioneering discoveries in epidemiology (= study of diseases...causes & cures), to the development of national health-care systems, the training of primary health-care workers, and the setting up of educational institutions for women doctors and nurses."¹¹ Ultimately all this can be traced back to the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰ Elaine Storkey, quoted by John Wyatt in Matters of Life & Death, p. 172-173.

¹¹ V. Ramachandra, Gods that Fail, p. 216. Quoted in John Wyatt, Matters of Life & Death, p. 250

E) Some Implications & Applications - What would Jesus do? **SLIDE23**

1. Care Like Christ Did & Does

- “At the heart of Christian caring is Christ. We are called to see Christ in those we care for. We are called to *be* Christ to those we care for....Authentic Christian caring is *cruciform*.”Wyatt,260.
- Care for the unborn, the life of the born, for the mothers who feel they have no other choice...Create & promote & model more positive alternatives and support ministries that do (e.g. Pregnancy Concerns).

2. Challenge the Dominant Pop Cultural Perspective

- From within the culture (my examples, other examples¹²)
- With stories like “Unplanned”...
- By sharing stories—our own if we have them, others we know/learn of:
 - E.g. Abby Johnson (former Planned Parenthood clinic manger...”Unplanned”)
 - E.g. Dr. Anthony Levatino (former abortion provider...over 1200 abortions in four years...testimony before a house judiciary committee in the US¹³)
 - E.g. SLIDE of mother & daughter

Q & A -



¹² See “Inside Pregnancy: 1-9 Weeks” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4l9GE_eaMSs Imaging technology reveals that what is in the womb is anything but a clump of cells. From the moment of conception, the few cells that have been miraculously infused with life contain the information needed to produce a fully developed baby. What many people punctiliously call a fetus is infinitely more than a lump of flesh. Those who insist otherwise do so for reasons other than a lack of information.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0tQZhEisaE>