



As you have perhaps noticed, on Sunday mornings I try to focus on biblical principles that have broad application and general agreement, and I sometimes “go further out on a limb” with my *Laptop* comments. There are at least two reasons for this.

In the first place, I want morning worship to feel “safe” so that you won’t feel hesitant about bringing friends—especially non-Christians—to worship. We all want the experience of our guests to be warm and

winsome. In the second place, I don’t want to take advantage of “the bully pulpit” to engage controversial subjects in a setting in which you don’t have much opportunity to respond.

In these columns, though, I try to reflect theologically on more controversial aspects of life and current events, sometimes whimsically, sometimes seriously. I don’t expect as high a level of agreement to such columns as this as to morning sermons, and I invite your conversation around the subject at hand. The point is not so much to agree as to learn from one another’s perspectives, with all of us doing our best to ground our thought and convictions in the clearer teachings of Scripture.

My topic this week is another facet of America’s current “Culture of Death.” After last week’s killings in Oregon, some calculate that we have had more people killed in “mass shootings” this year than there have been days in the year thus far (and this doesn’t even begin to count the “routine” shootings, which are increasing in many of our cities). We continue to vigorously debate the proper place of firearms in our society, and questions about the death penalty were in the news this week as well.

Just yesterday, California became the fifth state to sanction suicide under certain conditions, euphemistically calling it “euthanasia,” and there are apparently now twelve undercover videos chronicling the culture of death at Planned Parenthood.¹ While I condone neither the deception involved in securing those videos, nor the violence occasionally perpetrated against clinics and providers, we do need to continue thinking about these things together.

It doesn’t help that Scripture makes no reference to the matter of abortion. While child sacrifice is roundly and repeatedly condemned, abortion as such is not discussed either in the Old Testament or the New. The biblical grounding for our consideration is thus inferential at best.

Congress and several states have recently been debating bans on abortion after twenty weeks based on the conclusion that fetuses can feel pain at that point. That conclusion is contested by many who are better placed than I to have an opinion on the matter.

At the same time, Dr. Paul Simmons, a Baptist ethicist and one of my own teachers, while arguing against the twenty-week bills, noted that “The concern about ‘feeling pain’ implies sufficient sensory and intellectual development for the fetus to know *he or she is being*

¹ www.centerformedicalprogress.org/cmp/investigative-footage

mutilated or dismembered” (italics added).² It seems to me that to engage in medical procedures where such language can be used, even by its proponents, ought to give us pause.

Whether or not abortion constitutes the taking of human life obviously depends on when human life begins. Dr. Simmons points out that “the search for the time during gestation at which the fetus should be regarded as a person and thus have the full protection of the law has been an ongoing debate since the issue was raised in *Roe v. Wade*. The question has to do with the point at which there is sufficient neurological and physiological development for the fetus to be viable – that is, able to live outside the womb without extensive technological support.”³



A study published this summer in the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted that of 1,306 babies born at 20-25 weeks, most were afflicted with lifelong physical and neurological liabilities, some of which will prove lethal. The authors concluded that aggressive resuscitation of fetuses should be attempted at twenty-five weeks but not at twenty-two weeks. In other words, they concluded that more harm than good comes from rescue measures for most infants at 20-24 weeks’ gestation.⁴ According to this study, “heroic measures” to save fetuses/infants of this age tend to increase suffering rather than to decrease it.

The framers of the Constitution obviously had access to none of this information, and I think it is fair to say that they intended for women, not fetuses, to be the “persons” who have Constitutional protections related to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Where there are conflicts between the health and survival of the mother and the health and the survival of the child, it would seem appropriate to side with the mother’s actual personhood over against the potential personhood of the babe in the womb in virtually every case.

Even so, it has long seemed to me to be quite arbitrary to try to fix a time before which there is no human soul present in a fetus, no Image of God. Since all of our DNA is present from the very instant of conception, it seems clear that God *intends* to create a human person from those united cells.

Consequently, it seems to me that the safest place to stand is to conclude that once an egg has been fertilized, to destroy it at any point thereafter is to kill a human person, and the ground is thus shifted to the question of when such action might be morally warranted.

It seems to me that the matter of abortion is not so much a “women’s issue” as it is a “human issue” that affects women uniquely. Pro-Life women argue that “To be pro-woman is to be pro-life. The first U.S. feminists understood this instinctively. Elizabeth Cady Stanton,

² Paul Simmons, “Preventing Abortion: Will 20 Weeks Do It? *Christian Ethics Today* (Summer 2015), 19.

³ Simmons, 18.

⁴ “The Limit of Viability: Neonatal Outcomes of Infants born at 22-25 Weeks’ Gestation,” *NEJM* online, June 4, 2015, cited in Simmons, 19.

Susan B. Anthony, and others understood that partners and doctors often coerce women into abortions; that abortion can compound women's shame over an unplanned pregnancy; and that it often entails a grief as deep and scarring as a child's death outside the body. When pro-choice advocates ignore these realities, they fail women and undermine their well-being.”⁵



And, as the current Planned Parenthood videos illustrate, “Abortion always involves the death of an unborn person whose body parts can be extracted and exchanged for money.”⁶ In the now-famous words of Dr. Deborah Nucatola, Planned Parenthood's Director of Medical Services in the first undercover video, “We've become very good at getting heart, lung, liver, because we know that, so I'm not gonna crush that part, I'm not gonna crush below, I'm gonna crush above, and I'm gonna see if I can get it all intact.”⁷

As ugly as that is, I fear that the reality of our situation is uglier still. Current statistics indicate that one in five pregnancies in this country ends in abortion, and that 86% of those abortions are completed by women who are not married.⁸ A poll of 36,000 obstetricians several years ago indicated that perhaps as many as **95% of abortions in this country have no medical or moral justification other than birth control**.⁹

This means that nearly all of our abortions are intended to end unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. My friend, ethicist David Gushee, recently pointed out that **we as a society have become utterly dependent on abortion as the convenient solution for our own sexual misbehavior**, and the sad place to which we have come cannot rightly be blamed either on Planned Parenthood or on the Supreme Court. The location of the real responsibility is to be seen in our own mirrors.¹⁰

How did we ever come to such a place? Jonathan Grant has chronicled our path in five phases: (1) the separation of sex from procreation (through contraception); (2) the separation of sex from marriage (through cohabitation); (3) the separation of sex from partnership (as sex becomes temporary and recreational); (4) the separation of sex from another person (through the explosion of online pornography); and (5) the separation of sex from our own bodies (through our continual blurring of the line between “male” and “female”).¹¹

I would argue that this dismal, descending trajectory has been fueled by our modern-day “Idolatry of Intercourse.” We have come to regard the experience of sexual intercourse as

⁵ Katelyn Beaty, “The Power of Pro-Life Women,” *Christianity Today*, September 2015, 26.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ One author has argued that “Planned Parenthood is the NRA of the Left.” Aaron Weaver, “Planned Parenthood and El Roi (The God Who Sees),” *Christian Ethics Today* (Summer 2015), 22-23.

⁸ 21% www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

85.5% unmarried <http://dailycaller.com/2014/11/28/cdc-18-percent-of-all-pregnancies-now-end-in-abortion/>

⁹ *Physician*, March, 1995.

¹⁰ <http://davidgushee.religionnews.com/2015/07/17/dont-blame-planned-parenthood-for-our-abortion-culture/>

¹¹ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Brazos Press, 2015).

a fundamental—and indeed, an *essential*—human right, functionally elevating it above nearly every other value in our culture. Nothing could be farther from the biblical plan, as even the secular magazine, *The Week*, noted a year ago:

“Want to help America’s economy and yourself at the same time? Then get married. The advantages of raising kids in a stable household are well documented: ‘Children of married parents are more likely to graduate high school, less likely to go to jail, and more likely to delay sexual activity.’ . . . [Kids from single parent homes] are ‘five times as likely to live in poverty.’ Men who marry, research has shown, are more productive at work, are paid better, and are more likely to be employed than their unmarried counterparts. Economist Stephen Moore has pointed out that marriage is a ‘far better social program than food stamps, Medicaid, public housing, or even all of them combined.’”

“Yet, despite the advantages of connubial life, ‘single-parent families have exploded.’ Today, more than 40 percent of American children are born out of wedlock. To restore the vigorous economic growth that built America’s middle class, we first need to restore the ‘pro-growth’ institution of marriage.” And that didn’t come from a faith-based perspective.¹²

For the most part, the solution to abortion is obedience to the biblical principles of celibacy before marriage and faithfulness in marriage. Where problems still arise—and they do—the ethical principles of “Just Cause,” “Right Intention,” and “Last Resort” can offer guidance in the difficult decisions surrounding abortion.

And we would do well to remember that there’s probably no such thing as an “unwanted child.” The child’s parents may not want her or him, but in most cases there are waiting lines of empty arms yearning for children to adopt.

May God help us all.

Dave



¹² *The Week*, “Best Columns: The U.S.” (11.28.14).