

Introduction to Christian Ethics Part 2
Course Developed by Ron Habinski in 2002/2003
for
An Adult Bible Class, at Greenbelt Baptist Church, Ottawa

Unit #2 – Marital and Sexual Issues

Abortion

Q: What is abortion?

A: Abortion used to be understood to be the deliberate destruction of a human foetus before it is capable of independent life.

- Now in many jurisdictions abortion is permitted later in a pregnancy when the developing child is entirely capable of independent life.
- Some translations of the Bible use the word, abortion, in 1 Cor 15:8 where Paul is speaking about himself.
- This translation is misleading, because what Paul is saying there is that he was born into God's family late, rather than too early or dead.
- Before 1969 abortions could only be performed in Canada when necessary to protect the life of the mother.
- That is no longer true, although the fiction continues to be preserved that all Canadian abortions are "therapeutic," meaning curative.
- Abortion used to be performed during the first 12 weeks of life.
- But now there is no cut off point beyond which an abortion cannot legally be performed in Canada.
- It can be performed at any time up to the completion of the birth process, when the baby has entirely emerged from the mother's body.
- Under the Criminal Code of Canada, the emerging child can legally be killed at any time before it is entirely out of the mother's body (partial birth abortion).
- This is because Section 223 indicates that it is not legally recognized as a human being until it has completely proceeded in a living state from the body of the mother, whether or not it has breathed, has an independent circulation or the umbilical cord is severed.
- Thus the child in the womb or only partially outside of the birth canal is not considered to be a person, as far as the law is concerned.
- It seems absurd to think that one second before birth is completed the foetus is not a child or a human being, but then one second later it is a child and a human being.
- But that is what the law says.
- We know that very premature babies often live to grow to adulthood, and great medical efforts are typically made to save them from the many perils of early birth.
- But our legal system is not interested in such considerations.
- Of course, what the Laws of Canada say on this subject is not the only thing that

matters.

- For Christians, God's perspective is of more consequence and of higher authority than human statutes.
- Human laws can be both stupid and immoral.
- For example, up until the famous "person" case of 1929, women were not considered to be persons under the British North America Act.
- This famous court case overruled the law of that day and gave women full legal recognition as persons.
- That does not mean that women were not, in fact, persons and human beings before the law was overturned.
- Between 1970 and 1998 a total of 2,165, 050 legal abortions were performed in Canada.
- In 1970, there were 3 abortions for every 100 live births in Canada.
- But this ratio has increased steadily every year since then.
- In 1998 a total of 110,331 abortions were carried out.
- That number represented 32.2 abortions for every 100 live births.
- During the entire second world war, there were 39,319 Canadian soldiers killed or missing in action.
- But in 1998 alone 110,331 unborn Canadian children were killed.
- In 1998:
 - 83% of the women having an abortion were unmarried at the time.
 - 37.4 % of the women having an abortion had had at least one previous abortion.
 - 48.9 % of the women having an abortion had previously had at least one live delivery.
- Some years ago Statistics Canada predicted that 1/3 of Canadian women would have an abortion.

- Abortion should not be confused with miscarriage, which usually refers to a premature birth, which is not brought about deliberately and which results in the death of the foetus.
- Often miscarriage seems to involve the spontaneous rejection of a non-viable fruit.
- The word, miscarriage, also refers to death by natural causes before the foetus emerges from the womb.
- Exodus 21:22f refers to a miscarriage that results from an accidental injury when a woman gets involved while two men are fighting.
- Hoseah 9:14 refers to a miscarriage which occurs as a result of divine judgement.
- The key distinguishing feature of abortion is that it is brought about by deliberate human choice and action.

Q: What sort of reasons or motives bring people to decide to have an abortion?

A: [DISCUSS]

1. pregnancy before marriage, to prevent scandal, shame or personal inconvenience, or simply as a routine form of birth control to facilitate sexual promiscuity or sex outside of marriage.
 - This seems to be the most common reason for having an abortion.
2. Poverty, although often the very poor try to have as many children as they can in the hope that one of them will live to help or support its parents in their old age.
3. pregnancy after rape or incest
4. to avoid losing one's figure
5. to punish a lover or husband who wants the child to live (vengeance)
6. to please or keep a lover or husband who wants the pregnancy ended
7. to please parents, or to avoid hurting them
8. to avoid inconvenience when the pregnancy is thought to come too early or too late in life or "enough" children already or just don't want a child
9. to avoid bearing a child which may have a birth defect or a genetically transmitted disease
10. to end a threat to a mother's life or health (serious life threatening or terminal illnesses)
11. to obey a human law limiting the number of children a couple can have (China)

Q: Can you think of any other reasons someone may have having an abortion?

A: [DISCUSS]

- In our society adoptions are not easy to arrange.
- There are long waiting lists of couples wanting to adopt, because there are few babies available for adoption.
- So in most cases the main reason for going through with abortions seems to be the avoidance of the inconvenience, discomfort, embarrassment or shame of a live birth.
- Whatever the reasons for it, abortion is extremely common today, and it is generally considered morally acceptable among people who are not committed Christians.
- Abortion and the exposure of unwanted infants to die was very common in Greek and Roman society in New Testament times.

READ the following passage from Angus, The Environment of Early Christianity, pages 47f:

"It was not till the coming of Christianity that the foetus was regarded as a creature with rights. Abortion was widespread in all classes among the Greeks and Romans. Among the Jews child-murder and voluntary abortion were forbidden on pain of death. With the Greeks and Romans it was a matter of discretion. Means of

abortion, apparently harmless to the mother, were in everyday use. The motives for abortion were poverty in the lower classes, and in the higher sensuality, and the desire for indulgence or the avoidance of pain or fear of disfigurement. 'No law in Greece or in the Roman Republic, or during the greater part of the Empire, condemned it.' Plato and Aristotle recommended it. Abortion was practised even by parents who wished children, because they could easily secure foundlings."

"The general low esteem of children is further proved by the almost general practice of infanticide and exposition of newly-born children, and by the occasional sale of them by poor parents. In Greece, where legislators aimed at checking the growth of the population as at Rome they aimed at increasing it, the killing of children, or their exposure, was quite usual. The Greeks liked small families. All weakling and deformed children were killed, or exposed to death or to the mercies of the public. Aristotle recommended this as a means, along with abortion, of restricting the birthrate, and in Plato's Republic the children of old or wicked parents, as also illegitimate and deformed children, are to be exposed. In Rome an ancient law required fathers to bring up all males and the first daughter, but allowed the exposure or destruction of misshapen births. But this law was more honoured in the breach than in the observance, as we find exposition common especially among the poor, the upper classes having recourse to abortion."

- Fairly effective and safe methods of abortion were available in early Greek and Roman times as they are now.
- Of course, even under the best modern hospital conditions there can be complications leading to sterility or even death.
- And even when the physical health of the mother remains unharmed, many who have chosen to have an abortion are troubled by emotional pain, regret, and a tortured conscience.
- Some insist that every woman should have a right to abortion on demand without requiring anyone's permission or approval, because she has a right to control her own body.
- Others believe that all abortions are wicked and contrary to God's will.
- The early Christian Church faced this question just as we do today.

- Here is an interesting case study:
 - A medical doctor was once asked to perform an abortion for a married woman.
 - The married couple was poor, he had syphilis and she had tuberculosis.
 - Effective medical treatment for the parents was unavailable.
 - They had already had four children.
 - One was born blind, one was stillborn, one was born deaf and dumb and the fourth had tuberculosis.

- What should the doctor have done?
- He refused to perform the abortion.
- The woman gave birth to a boy and he was named Bethoven.

Q: Given that no verse of scripture specifically forbids abortion, why have Christians through the ages considered abortion morally wrong?

A: [DISCUSS]

- ❖ the sanctity of human life
- ❖ we are made in God's image
- ❖ belief that abortion is murder "*Thou shalt not kill.*"

- From a Christian perspective, there are two main ethical problems or questions involved in abortion.

- *The first question is whether a human foetus, whether capable of independent life yet or not, is, or has, a human spirit, and so bears God's image, in contrast to a piece of meat, an animal, or a vegetable.*

- If you think about it, this question forces one to consider exactly when a human egg becomes, or comes to have, a living spirit.

- This is not an easy thing to determine with precision.

Q: Does this happen as soon as the egg is fertilized by a sperm, or when it becomes implanted in the womb or develops a heartbeat or detectable brain waves, or when it becomes capable of independent life with the help of whatever medical assistance may be available, or at the moment of birth, or when the baby begins to breathe?

- It seems natural to think that the more developed a human foetus is, the greater is its claim to recognition as a human being.

- But if we believe that every fertilized human egg is the bearer or container of an immortal spirit, does that mean that every miscarried or aborted fertilized egg or foetus will live for ever, and presumably will be permitted, somehow and somewhere, to develop to maturity?

- I had a sister who died several hours after her birth, and I would like to know.

- If we conclude that every fertilized human egg is truly a human being, then the use of the "morning after" pill is abortion and murder, because it expels a fertilized egg from the woman's womb, preventing it from being implanted, thus ending the life of a human being.

- There are Scripture passages, which seem to imply that our spiritual nature begins at the moment of conception.

[READ Ps 51:5]

- David is commenting on his own moral nature here, not on that of his mother or on the morality of the process of conception.

- Only a living spirit made in God's image can have a moral taint or defect, and David

believed he had one from the moment of conception, or so his words seem to indicate.

- But possibly all these words mean is that a natural tendency toward sin is a part of our nature from its earliest beginnings.
- We must beware of squeezing more out of a verse than the author meant to say.
- Incidentally, **Romans 5:12** seems to indicate that the judgement of death passes upon all *because all have sinned*, rather than because of what our first parents have done.
- Sinners will not be judged for having a sinful nature, but for sinning (Cf. Rom 1:18f; 2:1).
- In **Galatians 1:15**, Paul says that God set him apart for His service from the time he was in his mother's womb.
- Some understand this as meaning that Paul was already a spiritually alive being while he was still in his mother's womb.
- Similar language is used in **Isaiah 49:1, 5**.

[READ Ps 139:13-16]

- This passage is sometimes quoted as proving that the Psalmist was a spiritually alive being *before his birth*.
- The problem with this interpretation is that this passage seems to go back to a time *even before conception*, when the Psalmist's substance was still unformed and his days had not yet begun.
- The same seems is even more clearly true of the words recorded in Jeremiah 1:5.

[READ Jer 1:5]

- I think that most people would say that this verse a reference to how God decided to love the child who would be conceived and born, *even before his conception*.
- Similarly, **Rev 17:8** seems to indicate that some names have been written in the book of life *from the foundations of the earth*.
- *Surely, this does not prove that the spirits of babies exist even before the moment of their physical conception!*
- What I am trying to point out is *that it may be misleading to understand verses such as the ones we have been examining as pinpointing exactly when the life of the human spirit begins*.

[READ Gen 2:7]

- Some argue from this passage that Adam did not become a *living being* <nephesh khayyim> until the breath of life was breathed into his nostrils, or in other words, until he began to breathe.
- The Hebrew word <nephesh> means soul, life, person, living being.
- Let's look at a few Biblical passages that illustrate the meaning of this key word.
- Let's turn to: **Gen 35:18** "*when her nephesh was going forth, for she died*"
1 Ki 17:21 "*Lord, return this boy's nephesh to his body.*"
Jeremiah 15:9 "*She breathed out her nephesh*"

Job 11:20 *“Their hope will become a breathing out of nephesh”*
i.e. *“a last breath”*

- It seems clear from these examples of the use of the word, **“nephesh”** that what was added to Adam’s lifeless body was the living essence, being or soul of a human being.
- Some also find special significance in the fact that the Hebrew word for **spirit** <ruach> also means **breath**, and they argue that this fact implies that ***we only gain our spirits when we begin to breathe.***
- The trouble with this argument is that the Biblical account seems to indicate that Adam was created as a fully formed man ***who was not yet alive.***
- Then, as a separate action of God, ***he was given life.***
- ***From what we know, this does not seem to be true of the human foetus before it is born.***
- It is truly alive before its birth, and long before its normal time of birth it becomes capable of living outside the mother’s body.
- Thus Adam’s case is a special one, and so it proves nothing about when the developing human foetus becomes a complete, spiritually alive being.

- **My own personal conclusion from the Biblical passages we have examined is that the Scriptures do not clearly indicate the moment when our spiritual life begins.**

- It ***may*** begin at fertilization, at implantation or at any later time up until the time when the newborn baby begins to breathe.
- **But the Scriptures do not clearly indicate just when that event occurs.**
- **If you agree with this conclusion, where does it lead us?**
- ***In my view the answer is that because spiritual life may begin at the moment of conception, any deliberate effort to terminate life at any point after the time of conception may be murder in God’s sight.***

Q: Where does this conclusion lead us if we accept it as true?

A: I believe that the principle stated in **Romans 14:23** applies in cases of doubt, such as this one.

- It says, ***“everything that does not come from faith is “sin.”***
- ***In other words, if we are not sure that doing something is morally permissible, it is sinful to do it.***
- **If abortion at any time may be murder, then a Christian is required to regard it as constituting murder.**

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

- ***The second ethical question we must consider is whether abortion is ever a permissible kind of killing, as is self defence or killing to protect your family or to carry out the judicial sentence of a judge (Rom 13:3f).***

- Some would say that abortion to prevent a woman's death is permissible, because it constitutes a sort of self-defence, based on her right to protect her own life.
- **Ephesians 5:25** says that a husband ought to lay down his life for his wife.
- This suggests that her life is worth protecting, *even at the cost of the life of an adult human being*.
- Consequently, I see no ethical objection to preserving the mother's life and health at the cost of the life of an unborn child.
- Of course, most abortions are justified in law as done to protect the mother's health, by which is meant her mental health, happiness or peace of mind.
- It is hard to accept that situations such as these truly place a woman's life or health at risk.
- In fact, the guilt feelings that are frequently felt by women who have had an abortion seem to indicate that *the woman's mental health is a good reason for avoiding abortion*.
- But a genuine risk to a mother's life or health would, in my view, justify terminating a pregnancy.
- Some Christians would disagree.
- I have a newspaper clipping about a pregnant mother who faced exactly this sort of situation.
- She refused to have the abortion that doctors advised was necessary to save her life.
- Both she and the baby survived, although it was a very close thing.
- Roman Catholic traditional teaching placed the baby's right to life ahead of the mother's right to continued health or life.
- For this reason some women used to avoid delivering their baby in a Roman Catholic hospital, in case a decision should have to be made at that hospital about which life to save.

Q: Can you think of any other circumstances in which abortion may be a justifiable form of killing?

A: [DISCUSS]

- Some people think that rape victims should not be forced to carry the egg fertilized by a rapist.
- Others think that the new life should be allowed to continue, in spite of the injury done to the woman by the rapist, and the imposition represented by the pregnancy.
- This is a personal decision, and personally I would have difficulty condemning a decision to abort in such a situation.
- But, on the other hand, it would be hard not to respect and commend a woman who determined to carry such a new life to term.

Q: What should be the Christian approach to the whole subject of abortion?

A: Here are a few answers to this question.

1. Accept that in a pagan society such as ours, man-made laws are unlikely to uphold all Christian values.
 - We can testify to the superiority of God's ethical standards, and encourage others to accept Jesus as their saviour and ethical authority.
 - Those who would like laws passed forbidding abortion or making it more difficult to obtain should remember that Jesus' approach was not to campaign for better laws, or to impose ethical standards on people against their will.
 - Instead, He worked to draw individuals to a right relationship with God through His example, His teaching and His cross.
2. Believing that abortion at any point in a pregnancy *may* involve killing a person that carries the image of God, we should avoid seeking it, except perhaps in very exceptional circumstances.
3. We should, testify to any who will listen that abortion is wrong, and attempt to persuade any who are considering it to avoid it and choose an honourable alternatives such as adoption or keeping the child.
4. We should avoid developing a bitter spirit toward those who provide or use abortion services.
5. We should help to support single moms and dads struggling with the responsibilities of parenthood.
6. We should try to help those soiled by any kind of sin to receive God's forgiveness and cleansing.
 - Our task is not to make sinners good in their own strength, but to help them find God's redemption.
7. We should not hold the past against people cleansed by our Lord.

Q: Can you think of any other points that should be included in our approach to abortion?

A: [DISCUSS]