

GOD'S CARE FOR THE UNBORN

1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

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"For it is you who form my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Psalm 139:13-14

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

No topic is more likely to produce anger than abortion. When I think of the abortion controversy I see an angry man with a sign in his hand reading *Abortion is Murder* walking in front of an abortion clinic. I also see an angry woman pacing up and down in front of him holding a sign showing the drawing of a bloody coat hanger over the caption, *Never Again*. Their faces are taut with rage. Nothing is more likely to produce angry division than the issue of abortion.

The pro-life advocate is likely to quote Psalm 139 in defense of his or her beliefs.

*You, Lord, formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

One commentator writes that this Psalm is a powerful reminder of the value God sets on us, even as embryos, and of God's planning our end from the beginning. But the devout Christian pro-choice advocate also believes that God cares deeply for the unborn as well as the woman who carries an unwanted pregnancy. *What will become of that unborn child if born into a home where he or she is unwanted or abused.* How's it possible for two groups of people to come to such different conclusions about abortion?

I want to talk about abortion. I'm going to speak for only about 18 minutes so don't expect anything definitive. I believe the issue is important. I believe abortion should be addressed from the pulpit. Some of you may have had an abortion. You will not hear me condemn or lay guilt on you. Some may be faced with the decision in the future. I hope the church can give some guidance.

First of all, there aren't simply two points of view: pro-life and pro-choice. There's a whole spectrum of beliefs with regard to abortion. Just as biologists have a hard time telling if

some things are plants or animals, some people simply can't be categorized as either pro-life or pro-choice. On the far right are people who not only believe that all abortion is murder, but who advocate the murder of abortion doctors. On the far left are people, like ethicist Peter Singer who not only supports abortion on demand at any time, for any reason, he claims that *infants* have no moral right to live and may be killed. He represents the extreme left wing.

Most of us, however, find ourselves somewhere in between. There's a spectrum of beliefs on the pro-life side. Most pro-life advocates abhor killing abortion doctors. Others allow for abortion to save the life of the mother or in the case of incest or rape. Some pro-life people would also make allowances for a twelve or thirteen year old girl with an unwanted pregnancy. All these claim to be pro-life even though only a few oppose all abortions. There's a spectrum of beliefs on the pro-choice side as well. A few advocate abortion on demand at any time for any reasons, including partial birth abortion. Others are pro-choice up to the time the fetus is viable (about 24 weeks or earlier). After that time, they're pro-life. Still others are pro-choice but draw the line at abortions for gender selection or mere convenience. There aren't simply two positions on the issue of abortion. There's a whole spectrum of positions. Where are you on that spectrum? *How have you moved?*

Where does the Presbyterian Church fit on this spectrum? Jack Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who supports the official teaching of the church, explains our position as follows: *The Presbyterian Church USA believes that the sacredness of life is the norm. Birth is preferable to abortion. But many circumstances demand exceptions to that norm. These need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, with pregnant women making the final choice in consultation with their doctors and their religious community.* To quote one portion of the official 1992 position paper, *The strong Christian presumption is that since all life is precious to God, we are to preserve and protect it. Abortion ought to be an option of last resort.*

So that makes the Presbyterian Church pro-choice but certainly not pro-abortion. The position of the church on abortion is like its position on war. The Presbyterian Church takes a pro-choice stand on war. Good Presbyterians serve in the military or they may be pacifists. It's your choice. Most Presbyterians believe that war can be the lesser of two evils. Presbyterians

have participated in every war the United States has fought. Presbyterians have killed people in the process of participating in wars. Sometimes innocent people have been killed by Presbyterian soldiers. In fact, in every war non-combatants have been the greatest victims. God certainly cares for these innocent victims and hates war. Nevertheless, the Presbyterian Church leaves the choice of participation in war up to the individual.

But the Presbyterian church is certainly not pro-war. We don't commend war. We don't believe war is a good thing. We work tirelessly to reduce the threat of war and to end wars. Yet, we believe Christians may participate in some war. President Andrew Jackson was a Presbyterian war hero. President Woodrow Wilson was a good Presbyterian. He worked tirelessly for peace but finally led our nation into World War I. President Eisenhower attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian church, yet he was the allied commander in World War II. None of these men believed that war was a good thing. Some frankly admitted that "war is hell." And yet they believed that, sometimes, war is the lesser of two evils.

In the same way, our church is pro-choice with respect to abortion. We are not pro-abortion. Quoting from the official teaching of the church, *The considered decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy can be a morally acceptable, though certainly not the only or required, decision. Possible justifying circumstances would include medical indications of severe physical or mental deformity, conception as a result of rape or incest, or conditions under which the physical or mental health of either woman or child would be gravely threatened.*

Several years ago I was asked by someone to write up what I believe about the issue of abortion. Listen carefully to what I wrote: *I have advocated for the rights and equality of women and I have upheld the sacred value of human life. I have counseled women with problem pregnancies and can only begin to feel the agony of their choice. Poverty, homelessness, abandonment and fear leave some women feeling they have no choice other than abortion. The nation, church and community do not yet have the will or desire to provide long term health care and support for single mothers. Therefore I believe that abortion should be legal, safe and rare. Criminalizing desperate options is not a good answer. At present, abortion is legal and safe but far, far too common. I agree with General Assembly statements that abortions for the purpose of*

convenience, birth control, gender selection, or to avoid embarrassment are not God's will. I believe that pro-life and pro-choice advocates can unite in finding ways to reduce the number of abortions.

Within our congregation we have both pro-life and pro-choice advocates. The great majority of us are somewhere in between. There's a silent group that's confused, but doesn't want to discuss the issue for fear of being crucified. I think it would help if people on both sides were more willing to admit their doubts about their own positions. An awful lot of people who say one thing in public will frequently admit in private that they have a lot more ambivalence and hesitation. *One pro-life advocate suddenly changed + became pro-choice ...*

Let me leave you with a few guidelines: (1) Respect the point of view of your opponent. Avoid name calling. Do not call pro-choice advocates *baby killers* or pro-life advocates *anti-choice*. (2) Offer support to women who have had abortions. Do not seek to condemn, ostracize or heap guilt on them. (3) The church should provide generous financial and emotional support to women, especially single women, who choose the costly decision of having a baby. (4) Reject the use of violence in support of your position. (5) Both pro-life and pro-choice advocates can join forces to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. (6) The church ought to be able to maintain within its fellowship those who come to different conclusions with regard to abortion. (7) The church needs to address the circumstances that sometimes bring a woman to consider abortion; namely, poverty, abuse, and abandonment.

Every week we pray, *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven*. Those words express a desire for God's peaceful kingdom where there'll be no more wars. They also express a desire for a world where there'll be no abortions because every pregnancy will be desired, all children will be healthy, none will be abused, and God's gift of sexuality will be expressed responsibly. Both pro-life and pro-choice Christians share this dream. All of us are responsible for wise, costly decisions, between equally unwelcome options.

Let us pray: O Lord, you have searched us and known us. You know when we sit down and when we rise up; you discern our thoughts from far away. You search out our paths and our lying down, and are acquainted with all our ways. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.