



Engaging in the Abortion Debate: A Christian Perspective in a Secular World

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Introduction

Christians have opposed abortion since Christianity was established, and most Christian denominations still do. However, in modern secular society, where individual rights and autonomy are highly valued, the traditional Christian arguments against abortion are unpersuasive. This ongoing tension raises important questions about how Christians should participate in the abortion debate today, seeking common ground and employing reasoned, respectful dialogue to bridge the gap between religious convictions and secular perspectives.

The Christian view of abortion

The Christian church has a long history of opposing abortion and infanticide. Before Christianity was established, infanticide and exposure were very common in Roman society. Christians soon became known for rescuing babies abandoned at birth and for giving them proper burial if they were unable to be saved.

Early Christian writings were also clear in their condemnation of abortion. For example, the first-century Christian work, the *Didache* stated: 'You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill it after it is born' (2.2). The second-century *Epistle of Barnabas* says, 'you shall not slay the child by procuring abortion; neither shall you destroy it after it is born.' (19:5). In fact, the majority of Church Fathers in the first five centuries of Christianity explicitly condemned abortion.

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas regarded abortion as a violation of natural law, and in the 16th century, both John Calvin and Martin Luther strongly opposed abortion. The Catholic Church has always condemned abortion as a moral evil, and most Protestant denominations are opposed to abortion, although the Episcopal Church (USA) and the United Methodist Church are among the exceptions.

Biblical teaching on abortion

Surprisingly, there is no explicit reference to or condemnation of abortion to be found in Scripture, and it was never addressed by Jesus. Despite this, a case against abortion can still be constructed based on Biblical teachings.

First, we are told that having children is a blessing (Psalm 127:3-5), and there are numerous accounts of news of pregnancy being welcomed with joy (Genesis 21:6-7; Luke 1). Second, Psalm 139:13-16 tells us that God is intimately involved in forming life in the womb and that he knows us before we are born. Third, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is a challenge for us to be neighbours to the helpless. To exclude the unborn from being regarded as our neighbours is to make the same mistake the teacher of the law made: he was trying to define who were the people he was obligated to care for, and who was not. Jesus' response is to widen the scope of our obligations, not to narrow it by excluding an entire category of human beings.

It is commonly claimed that the reason why Christians are prohibited from taking human life is because human life is *sacred*. However, there is little Biblical support for such a view, and the term has only been in common use since the mid-twentieth century¹. Yes, the Bible does teach that we are made in the image of God and loved by God, and that implies we are valuable, but there is no reference to the sanctity of life in Scripture². God is portrayed as the only author of life, and only God may take human lives away, except in extraordinary circumstances (for example, in the Old Testament, capital punishment was one of these situations).

Churches must also be aware that opposition to abortion comes with certain responsibilities. Often, people resort to abortion when they are told that they will have a child with a disability, such as Down syndrome. To counsel members of our community not to have an abortion obliges us to be a community willing to support families who continue with such pregnancies. Our churches must be places where women in difficult situations are helped and supported, not condemned. They must be places where disabled children and their families are supported.

The Christian view is unpersuasive in the secular space

Unfortunately, Christian reasons for opposition to abortion are unpersuasive to those in the secular space. It is obvious why: for those who do not have a belief in God or who regard the Bible as merely a historical document like any other, all of the reasons I have listed will be rejected. Secular support for abortion rights is predicated on the importance of individual rights, such as the right to autonomy. Our worldviews are very different.

More broadly, the separation of church and state in secular societies entails that the church has no special authority to impose its views on anyone else. Although the church has been

¹ Jones, D. A. (2016). An Unholy Mess: Why 'The Sanctity of Life Principle' Should Be Jettisoned. *The New Bioethics*, 22(3), 185–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20502877.2016.1238649>

² Exodus 20:13

influential in past years, society is now contemptuous of religious authority, and often for good reason.

How Christians can debate in the secular space

It should be clear how we should *not* argue in the secular space: from Christian tradition, or by claiming that life is sacred because it is created by God, or by stating that only God should be permitted to take life. How, then, can Christians engage in the abortion debate that has only intensified recently, particularly in the United States, with the overturning of *Roe v Wade*?

First, we need to find common ground: some shared values that we do agree upon, such as the importance of human rights and the protection of the vulnerable. We should be willing to lobby for government policies that encourage vulnerable women not to abort, such as providing access to healthcare and sufficient support so that they do not *need* to have an abortion. We should also want policies that make it easier to be a mother, even if our political allegiances lean towards small government and limited social welfare.

Second, we must be well-informed regarding the scientific evidence on fertilisation, and embryo and fetal development. Arguments are easily discredited when they rely on scientific claims that are dubious or misleading. A classic example is the claim that ‘life begins at fertilisation’³. Clearly, if taken literally, life does not begin at fertilisation, as the parents’ gametes are alive prior to fertilisation. It is certainly true that *a new human being’s life* begins at fertilisation, but this is basic embryology and does not help to advance the pro-life position.

Third, we must become familiar with the most common pro-choice philosophical arguments. Misunderstanding the other side’s arguments will not lead to productive conversations. We must also be careful not to characterise those on the other side as monsters. If we understand their arguments properly, we should appreciate that there are thoughtful and compassionate people who support the right to abortion, for what they believe to be good reasons. No one likes to be treated as though their views are horrendous. We may well *think* that they are, but it’s important to understand that abortion is a complex philosophical topic, and for those who are not Christians, the pro-life position is not obviously correct. For most pro-choice advocates, there is an important tension between a pregnant woman’s right to control what happens in her body and the rights (if any) of the fetus. In their view, the adult human being deserves to have her rights preferred over those of a human being who has not yet been born, especially in cases where the pregnancy is a result of non-consensual sex. They see this as a compassionate position and are horrified that the pro-life position is to ‘force’ women to give birth. To get them to change their minds will involve careful and respectful discussion.

Fourth, we must become familiar with the best secular pro-life arguments so that we can defend the pro-life view in the secular space. Chief amongst these arguments is Judith Jarvis Thomson’s thought experiment⁴, which claims to show that a woman may withhold the life

³ Often, ‘life begins at conception’ is used instead of ‘life begins at fertilisation’. Fertilisation is when a sperm cell merges with an egg cell, resulting in the formation of a zygote. Conception is an ambiguous term, as it has been used both to mean fertilisation and also to mean the later implantation of the zygote into the uterine lining.

⁴ See the reference list for Thomson’s paper. Her argument is also explained in the other references.

support she is offering to her fetus at any time, even if the fetus possesses the same moral status as an adult human being. Numerous excellent resources are available in the reference list that will provide a thorough understanding of these arguments.

How Christians can advocate

Finally, there are many ways Christians can advocate for the unborn. Churches rarely discuss abortion, and so for pastors and church leaders, preaching and teaching about a Christian position on abortion is important. Churches can also be involved in founding or supporting pregnancy crisis centres, and in other ways that support pregnant women.

Individually, Christians can better inform themselves about abortion by reading some of the resources in the reference list. Those who develop a particular interest in defending the unborn could join one of the various anti-abortion lobby groups as a volunteer and participate in 'right to life' marches, which are helpful in demonstrating the depth of opposition to liberalising abortion laws. It is also helpful to send letters or emails to politicians, especially if legislation that touches on the rights of the unborn is in the legislative pipeline. Politicians do listen to their constituents. Of course, pregnancy crisis centres welcome volunteers as well.

Conclusion

In a world increasingly shaped by secular values, Christians interested in the abortion debate must carefully consider how they can best engage with society. Traditional theological arguments do not resonate with those outside the faith. Instead, Christians must find common ground, emphasising universal values such as human rights and the protection of the vulnerable, to create compelling and compassionate arguments against abortion. This approach requires a firm understanding of the scientific and ethical dimensions of the issue. By fostering respectful dialogue, demonstrating empathy, and advocating for supportive policies, Christians can contribute meaningfully to the public conversation on abortion. Churches can support them by ensuring that abortion is not an unmentionable topic and by considering how the church community can help pregnant women in practical ways.

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