

Endorsements

“This is an important book for all Christians interested in bringing their beliefs to bear upon the world around them. Abortion is one of the most critical issues of our day, and R. C. Sproul looks at it through the lenses of theology, philosophy, and reason. This book is refreshingly free of hyperbole, and yet does not compromise the truth.”

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Provost, The King’s College
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“When I read R. C. Sproul’s book on abortion twenty years ago, I was still a pastor. I recall how grateful I was that a respected theologian had spoken out so clearly on the critical issue of abortion. At the time, such voices were few and far between, with many evangelical theologians seemingly silent about the plight

of unborn children. Sproul's logic is sharp and penetrating, and his reliance on biblical authority is refreshing. The appendix, in which Dr. Jerome Lejeune offers courtroom testimony, is a great bonus. I'm happy to recommend the re-release of Dr. Sproul's book on this vital subject, and I pray God will use it to enlighten many new readers."

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Sandy, Oregon

Author of *ProLife Answers to ProChoice Arguments* and *Why Prolife?*

"R. C. Sproul's book on abortion is a classic text in the evangelical witness against the culture of death. I pray this Twentieth Anniversary Edition will awaken a new generation of Christians to the joyful duty of protecting the 'least of these,' our Lord Jesus' unborn brothers and sisters."

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Dean, School of Theology

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Louisville, Kentucky

"R. C. Sproul covers the issues candidly and objectively—without the emotion and demagoguery that so often pervade the abortion debate. You are the jury; you decide the verdict."

—JOHN MACARTHUR

Pastor-teacher, Grace Community Church

Sun Valley, California

“Staying silent on the issue of abortion is no longer an option. It is time for those who are respected and capable to speak out and say it straight. I know of no one who qualifies better than R. C. Sproul.”

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“Classic Sproul! Logical, clear, fair, attempting to understand the pro-choice views while all the time making a solid, biblical pro-life apologetic that seeks both to convince the opponents but also to bring about in practical ways the end of this North American holocaust. Add to that the foreword of George Grant and you have a winner.”

—PETER JONES

Executive director, truthXchange
Escondido, California

“I am delighted to see this Twentieth Anniversary Edition of *Abortion: A Rational Look at an Emotional Issue*. It was and continues to be an important contribution to the pro-life movement and to the defense of the sanctity of human life.”

—JOHN JEFFERSON DAVIS

Professor of systematic theology and Christian ethics
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
South Hamilton, Massachusetts

twentieth anniversary edition

abortion

// a rational look at an emotional issue

R.C. SPROUL



Reformation Trust

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to Andrea Krazeise

for her heroism in ministry to pregnant women in crisis

Contents

Foreword by Dr. George Grant	xi
Preface	xxi

PART I: ABORTION: THE ETHICAL DILEMMA OF OUR TIME

1 A Nation Divided	3
2 The Sanctity of Life	17
3 The Sanctity of Life and Natural Law	33
4 When Does Life Begin?	45
5 What If You Are Not Sure about Abortion?	63
6 The Role of Government in Abortion	75

PART II: AN ANALYSIS OF PRO-ABORTION AND PRO-CHOICE ARGUMENTS

7 A Woman's Right to Her Body	93
8 Three Frequent Assertions	103
9 The Pro-Choice Position.	111
10 The Problem of Unwanted Pregnancies.	121

PART III: A COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE AND STRATEGY

11 Is Abortion the Unpardonable Sin?	135
12 A Pro-Life Strategy	143
Appendix A: Testimony on the Beginning of Human Life	155
Appendix B: Pro-Life Resources	217
Notes	221
Bibliography	225
Index	227

Foreword

In the two decades since this landmark book was first published, four different presidents have occupied the White House, seven justices have come and gone on the Supreme Court, and eleven sessions of Congress have held sway in the Capitol.

These federal magistrates have faced economic booms and busts. They have weathered terror attacks and foreign wars. They have witnessed the end of the Cold War and the rise of the al Qaeda menace. They have wrangled over corporate bailouts and health-care reforms. They have endured Tea Party protests, campaign scandals, personal embarrassments, and policy failures. They have been plagued on every side by mounting demands, frustrated expectations, declining resources, and diminished prestige.

Through it all, the divisiveness of the abortion issue has remained constant. The many and varied political turns of events during the past twenty years have done nothing to ameliorate it—much less, to resolve it. If anything, the divide over abortion has become more pronounced, more acrimonious, and more entrenched. While political gridlock on nearly any and every other issue ultimately has been overcome, no rapprochement on the issue of abortion is anywhere in sight.

Of course, matters have not exactly been helped by the fact

that the politically protected international abortion business has grown into a multibillion-dollar industrial complex. Utilizing its considerable wealth, manpower, and influence, the abortion industry has proven itself adept at muscling its way into virtually every facet of modern life.¹ It now plays a strategic role in the health and social-services community.² It exerts a major influence on education, providing the majority of sex-education curricula and programs in both public and private schools.³ It carries considerable political clout through lobbying, campaigning, advocacy, and litigation.⁴ It is involved in publishing, broadcast media production, judicial activism, public relations, foreign aid, psychological research counseling, environmental policy-making, sociological planning, demographic investigation, pharmacological development, contraceptive distribution and sales, mass advertising, and public legal service provision.⁵

Planned Parenthood, the oldest, largest, and best-organized provider of abortion and birth-control services in the world, has become a tenured player in all the great social and political issues of our day.⁶ From its ignoble beginnings around the turn of the twentieth century, when the shoestring operation consisted of an illegal back-alley clinic in a shabby Brooklyn neighborhood, staffed by a shadowy clutch of firebrand activists and anarchists,⁷ it has expanded dramatically into a conglomerate with programs and activities in 134 nations and on every continent.⁸

In the United States alone, Planned Parenthood has mobilized more than twenty thousand personnel and volunteers along the front lines of the confrontational and vitriolic battle over

abortion. Today those minions man the organization's more than 150 affiliates and its nearly one thousand clinics in virtually every major metropolitan area, coast to coast.⁹ It boasts a national headquarters in New York, a legislative center in Washington, regional command posts in Atlanta, Chicago, Miami, and San Francisco, affiliate offices in 49 states and the District of Columbia, and international centers in London, Nairobi, Bangkok, and New Delhi. With an estimated combined annual budget—including all its regional, national, and international service affiliates—of more than a billion dollars, this leading light of the abortion industry may well be the largest and most profitable nonprofit organization in history.¹⁰

As if that were not enough, the current Democratic administration in Washington—aided and abetted by the Democrat-controlled Senate and House of Representatives—is the most ardently pro-abortion in American history.¹¹ With a bevy of executive orders, appointments, and administrative policy changes—to say nothing of its 2,407-page monolithic, partisan “health-care-reform” legislation, which removed the longstanding ban on federal funding of abortions in favor of a much more easily overturned executive order—the abortion industry has logged more gains during this administration's short tenure than in the rest of its history combined.¹²

Yet the great divide persists. Despite its obvious cultural clout, its cavernously deep corporate pockets, and its carefully crafted public-relations efforts, the abortion industry has yet to prevail in the battle for the hearts and minds of most Americans. Public-opinion polls conducted during the first year of the

Obama administration found that 51 percent of Americans now call themselves “pro-life” on the issue of abortion, while only 42 percent call themselves “pro-choice.”¹³ In addition, the number of Americans who favor making it more difficult to obtain an abortion is up six percentage points in just five years. In 2005, 59 percent of respondents agreed it would be good to reduce abortions. Today, 65 percent take this view. One poll also found that fewer Americans, and fewer pro-life activists, are willing to compromise on abortion by finding some “middle ground.” Indeed, support for finding a middle ground on the abortion issue is down twelve percentage points among conservatives and six points among all Americans.¹⁴ Yet another poll found that 58 percent of Americans say abortion is morally wrong most of the time. Just 25 percent disagree, and the rest have no opinion. The poll found women are more strongly pro-life than men, with 64 percent of women asserting that most abortions are morally wrong, a view shared by 51 percent of men. Meanwhile, still another survey found a majority of Americans, 52 percent, think it is too easy to get an abortion in America. That’s up seven percentage points from two years ago, when 45 percent thought it was too easy.¹⁵

So why does it seem that the abortion Goliath’s grassroots support is slipping at the very moment when its power and resources have reached their zenith? At least part of the reason may be the very nature of the abortion business itself—along with the inevitable fallout that accompanies it. Consider:

- Although heralded by the abortion lobby as both “safe and legal,” it is now apparent that abortion is merely “legal.” The

complications of this, the most commonly performed medical procedure in America today, are legion. They include sterility—occurring in as many as 25 percent of all women receiving mid-trimester abortions; hemorrhaging—nearly 10 percent of all cases require transfusions; viral hepatitis—occurring in 10 percent of all those transfused; embolism—occurring in as many as 4 percent of all cases; cervical laceration; pelvic inflammatory disease; genital tract infection; cardiorespiratory arrest; acute kidney failure; and amniotic fluid embolus.¹⁶

- As a result of these sundry complications, women in America have seen a massive increase in the cost of medical care. While the average cost of normal health maintenance for men has increased nearly 12 percent over the past fifteen years due to inflation, the average cost for women has skyrocketed a full 27 percent.¹⁷

- A spate of medical malpractice lawsuits from botched abortions has intensified the industry's already looming insurability crisis.¹⁸

- At the same time, the cultural and political stigmatization of abortion providers has dramatically reduced the number of qualified physicians willing to serve them. As a result, many clinics have been forced to rely on less adequately trained personnel—nurse practitioners and doctors who more often than not have failed in private or institutional practices.¹⁹

- Revelations about deliberately suppressed research data on various procedural risks—particularly concerning the established links between abortion and breast cancer—have raised new questions about the industry's medical objectivity and professional integrity.²⁰

- New clinical evidence exposing the grave hazards of several of the other forms of treatment championed by the industry—from the deleterious effects of the RU-486 abortion drug and the Norplant contraceptive surgery to the inherent risks and complications in the use of intrauterine devices—have raised the specter of “wholesale institutional quackery.”²¹

- The shadow over the industry’s iatrogenic carelessness has been further darkened by its enthusiastic defense of the horrifying second-trimester “dilation and extraction” surgical procedure—commonly known as D&X or “partial-birth” abortion.²²

- In addition, the industry has staked its tenuous reputation on the therapeutic usefulness of two very dangerous new chemical treatments—the Depo-Provera long-term contraceptive injection and the Methotrexate-Misoprostol abortifacient. Both drugs present grave hazards to women’s health, according to a battery of recent clinical tests.²³

- Horrifying new evidence of barbaric human-rights violations—including forced abortions, coercive sterilizations, and torturous disfigurement—associated with the Planned Parenthood-designed population program in Communist China has cast an ominous shadow over the industry’s innumerable other tax-funded international activities.²⁴

- Not surprisingly, the bridling of information about viable alternatives to the abortion industry’s clinical, educational, and surgical services has provoked the wrath of a variety of health-care consumer advocates.²⁵

- Parents, outraged at the promiscuity-promoting content of the abortion industry’s affiliated sex-education materials,

AIDS-awareness programs, and community-advocacy projects, have begun to organize grassroots efforts to bar organizations such as Planned Parenthood from schools, charitable networks, and civic coalitions in communities all across the United States.²⁶

- Several punitive lawsuits initiated by the abortion industry—filed in an effort to close down pro-life adoption agencies and abortion-alternative crisis pregnancy centers—have begun to reinforce a perception that the organization is more concerned with the ideological enforcement of its agenda than with the health and welfare of its clients.²⁷

- A series of negative public-relations campaigns launched by the well-heeled abortion lobby—against cultural conservatives in general and Christian conservatives in particular—has highlighted the industry’s immoderate aims and set the standard for the increasingly shrill rhetoric and hysterical extremism of the pro-abortion movement.²⁸

- Conflict-of-interest accusations have begun to circulate in Washington concerning the cozy relationships between certain past and present federal officials and the industry’s voluble lobbyists on Capitol Hill.²⁹

- A backlash against the massively unpopular “health-care-reform” legislation passed in early 2010 not only has brought renewed support for pro-life organizations, crisis pregnancy centers, and principled politicians, it has brought renewed scrutiny to the grisly abortion trade. New calls to enforce existing laws and enact stricter new ones bode ill for the industry’s plans for growth and expansion.³⁰

In short, one scandal after another has hit the abortion industry, its medical personnel, its educators, its researchers, its lobbyists, and its administrators. As a result, its “Teflon” reputation is starting to wear a little thin and its “grand illusion” has begun to lose its luster.³¹

As a result, Dr. Sproul’s incisive analysis in this book is as relevant and necessary today as it was in the last decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, he points the way to the only possible resolution of this deeply emotional issue.

Once before in American history, a national pro-life consensus was forged, laws were changed, and life was protected. At the outset of the nineteenth century, abortion was actually legal—if only marginally—in every state in the Union. By the end of the century, the procedure had been universally criminalized.

Most of the legal changes came during a relatively short twenty-year period, from 1860 to 1880.³² In less than two decades, Christians were able to recruit hostile journalists, ambivalent physicians, reticent politicians, and even radical feminists to the cause of mothers with crisis pregnancies and their unborn children. They succeeded overwhelmingly despite the vast wealth, power, and political clout of the burgeoning abortion industry. At a time when the nation was riven with strife over the recalcitrance of chattel slavery, the proliferation of abortion, and the challenging of the most basic principles of American liberty, they demonstrated in word and deed that every human being is made in the image of God and is thus sacred.

The popular press made information about abortion available to the average man on the street. The medical associations made

physicians aware of the physical risks and the moral compromises inherently involved in the procedure. Lawyers, politicians, and judges enacted the legal constraints necessary to criminalize abortion profiteers. But it was the church that catalyzed and spearheaded the wildly successful pro-life efforts of the nineteenth century.³³

It is probably not surprising that pro-life stalwarts of nineteenth-century America did not simply say “no” to abortion; they said “yes” to women in crisis. They said “yes” to the poor and desperate. They said “yes” to the confused and afflicted. In short, they fulfilled their servanthood mandate simultaneously with their prophetic mandate.

Lives were saved, families restored, and the men and women who dedicated themselves to the cause of the sanctity of human life laid a remarkable foundation of liberty for future generations. America at last seemed poised to fulfill her promise—as the land of the free and the home of the brave.

May it be so yet again. And may God be pleased to use this book as a means to bring to pass this, the church’s great work of standing for truth, justice, and mercy in the midst of a poor, fallen world.

—*George Grant*
Franklin, Tennessee
January 2010

Preface

Abortion is an ethical issue, perhaps the central ethical issue of the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries. As a question of ethics, abortion is not morally neutral; it does not fall within the gray zone of things that are indifferent. There is widespread disagreement about whether abortion on demand is right or wrong, but it cannot be both.

In this book, I seek to examine the ethical implications of abortion. I look at the issue from the perspectives of biblical law, natural law, and positive judicial law.

Although in the pages that follow I will examine arguments from both sides of the debate, I am convinced that abortion on demand is evil. I will try to show that abortion is against the law of God, against the laws of nature, and against reason.

This is intended to be a brief case against abortion. The reader who wrestles with this issue will receive an overview so that he or she may respond to the issue objectively.

To assist the comprehension and use of the book's information, summaries and discussion questions appear at the end of each chapter. Also, the back matter includes a list of agencies offering more information on pro-life groups and adoption, as well as a bibliography and index.

At times, I have used generic terms for human beings, such as *humanity* or *mankind*, for stylistic brevity and to avoid the repetition of “he” and “she.” In doing this, it is not my desire to offend any who may be sensitive to the issue of gender in speech. This is especially critical when discussing issues that have been linked so strongly to the broader ethical concerns of the feminist movement. I think it is imperative to distinguish the abortion issue from the feminist issue. However, because concern for women is closely related to the abortion debate, feminism and abortion cannot be totally separated. For clarity’s sake, though, they must be distinguished.

My thanks for help in this book go to Maureen Buchman, Gwen Weber, my wife, Vesta, and my son, R.C. I am also grateful to George Grant for his exceptionally helpful foreword for this edition and for helping update the book in light of changes over the past twenty years.

Part I

**ABORTION:
THE ETHICAL DILEMMA
OF OUR TIME**

A Nation Divided

Never, never will we desist till we . . . extinguish every trace of this bloody traffic [slavery], of which our posterity, looking back to the history of those enlightened times, will scarce believe that it has been suffered to exist so long a disgrace and dishonor to this country.

—William Wilberforce,
1791 speech, House of Commons

A single issue rarely divides the American people. The few that have include slavery, the civil-rights movement, and the war in Vietnam. Yet another such issue is roiling in the present, an issue of such magnitude that our national solidarity is threatened. To many citizens, it is a matter of life and death, and may be the most serious ethical dilemma ever faced by the United States. The issue is abortion.

Why should abortion—a matter that many believe should concern only a woman and her physician—have the potential to rip apart the social fabric of one of history’s most successful nations?

Abortion provokes volatile feelings in combatants on both sides of the debate, which is carried on with heated emotion and militancy. Activists for and against abortion have indulged in strident and inflammatory rhetoric, threatening protests, and even, on occasion, violence, from vandalism to arson and murder. Politicians feel the heat. The abortion issue has become so critical that no candidate for public office can remain silent on his or her views. The politician who tentatively puts his finger to the wind, hoping to gauge the direction of public opinion on abortion, is frustrated by the ever-changing currents. Both sides keep an anxious eye on the health of the current justices of the United States Supreme Court, as the balance of power there is fragile. The addition of one anti-abortion justice to the nation's highest court could precipitate a reversal of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, the 1973 case that made abortion on demand a reality in the United States.

The abortion issue is not only volatile but complex, for it is directly connected to other issues and related popular movements. One example is the feminist movement. Women, who have struggled for decades to secure equal rights under the law and equitable treatment in the business world, fear that a reversal of the abortion laws would signal a serious loss of the gains they have achieved.

Abortion also has been linked to the sexual revolution that swept the country during the 1960s. People who believe that mutually consenting adults have the right to freedom of sexual expression are threatened by the possibility of laws that would invade the "privacy of the bedroom."

The issue of the separation of church and state also looms in the abortion conflict. People on both sides of the debate fear a loss of constitutional rights as a consequence of abortion law. The same constitutional amendment that prohibits the establishment of religion by the state also guarantees the free exercise of religion. There is no question that many, if not the majority, of those who oppose abortion are driven by religious convictions. Religious institutions—including the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant churches—have taken and continue to take strong stands in opposition to abortion. Those people without church affiliation and those who are affiliated with churches that do not record an anti-abortion stance fear an intrusion into the social and political milieu by the church. They fear a tyranny of religion.

Still others see connections between abortion and a bevy of other issues: education, health-care reform, climate change, social welfare, economic development, government regulation, and foreign aid. Some would even link the abortion issue to the fundamental constitutional right to life, which transcends religious, political, or social considerations. Do the unborn have basic rights that should be protected by constitutional law?

A further issue complicates the matter—the right to freedom of choice, which many Americans consider the most fundamental democratic right of all. Perhaps the most frequently stated sentiment of those caught in the middle of the abortion debate is this: “I would not choose to have an abortion myself, but I would not force my view on someone else.” The right to one’s opinion is a sacred belief in United States tradition.

Thus, abortion is not a single issue with one solitary facet. It is a multifaceted, complex matter that involves a conflict of perceived rights. No matter how the issue of abortion is resolved, someone's rights—or at least perceived rights—will be in jeopardy. Can such a web of interwoven and conflicting issues be untangled?

The core issue

At the heart of the abortion issue rests one overarching question: Is abortion a form of murder? In other words, does abortion involve the willful destruction of a living human person?

Before discussing this question, certain points must be stated firmly and clearly. First, the vast majority of those advocating the pro-abortion and pro-choice positions are not arguing that women's rights or individual freedom of choice carry with them the right to murder. I am convinced that if the most ardent feminists thought that abortion was in fact a type of murder, they would be as ardently opposed to abortion as they are in favor of equal rights for women.

Though there are many who believe an abortion is justified on the grounds that the developing baby is "unwanted," very few of these people would be in favor of destroying the child after it is born. There are far fewer advocates of infanticide than there are of abortion. The reason for this is clear. In the minds of pro-abortion activists, an unborn baby is not a living human person. Once birth occurs, however, a different set of rules applies. Even in the case of the late-term "partial-birth" abortion procedure, or D&X, all but the most hardened pro-abortion activists argue

that the child remains nonviable and nonhuman—and therefore the procedure, however grisly, does not rise to the level of murder.

I labor these points to underscore the reality that pro-abortion and pro-choice activists do not ground their position on some kind of claim for an inalienable right to murder. I am convinced that if somehow it could be proven conclusively that the destruction of unborn babies is in fact the willful destruction of living human beings, the debate on abortion would be all but over, and the law of the land would as clearly prohibit abortion as it does all forms of homicide. The abortion debate is not over whether or not murder should be legalized; it is a debate over whether or not abortion is a kind of murder.

Of course, on the other side of the debate stand the pro-life activists. Those who are pro-life are quite logically also anti-abortion. This group is convinced that abortion is actually a form of murder. Most of them recognize that the intent of abortionists is probably not murder, but they adamantly claim that the act of abortion nevertheless takes the life of a human being.

There is something wrong, however, with even using the word *murder* in this discussion. The word itself is highly charged. At times it is used as a virtual synonym for *homicide*. The law, however, distinguishes between types of homicide. There is a difference between voluntary and involuntary homicide. A further category is manslaughter, both voluntary and involuntary. A clear delineation in the levels of the severity of these crimes exists under the law. Punitive measures for “murder one” (or first-degree murder) are greater than for “murder two” (or second-degree

murder) and considerably more severe than for cases of involuntary manslaughter. All three of these terms—*murder*, *homicide*, and *manslaughter*—are used for the killing of human beings. All are deemed to be serious offenses and crimes against humanity, but their gradations indicate that they are not considered to be crimes of equal severity. We rarely use the word *murderer* for someone who has been convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

The emotional connotation accompanying the word *murder* associates the act of killing with what the law refers to as murder one. Murder one incorporates within its definition the idea of premeditation. It involves malice aforethought. Thus, not only the act of killing a human person is in view, but the motive and intent are also important considerations.

Given this understanding of our use of the term *murder*, we must be careful to insist that pro-abortion and pro-choice activists are not necessarily advocating murder. They are not endorsing the premeditated, willful destruction of human beings with malice aforethought. Almost universally, the proponents of abortion act on the conviction that what is being aborted is less than a human being.

Is a fetus a human being?

To state that abortion is not murder in the first degree because the premeditated intent is absent is not to say that it is legitimate. We already have seen that lesser forms of the killing of human beings are grave and serious evils. Why is abortion not included in the same category?

What is a fetus? The question is objective, not subjective. To determine the status of a fetus is not a matter of personal, arbitrary caprice. The fetus is either alive or not alive. The fetus is either human or not human. The fetus is either a person or not a person. What I *think* the fetus is does not determine which of these it actually is. If a fetus is a living person but I do not believe or think that it is a living person, my thoughts have no bearing on what the fetus *actually* is. By merely thinking or believing, I cannot change what is a person into a nonperson, what is living into unliving, or what is human into nonhuman. By the same token, if the fetus is not a living person, then whatever I believe or think cannot change it into a living person.

Before we can determine whether a fetus is a living human person, we must answer this question: When does life begin? At what point in the continuum of human development do we have a living human person? Does life begin at conception? Does it begin at birth? Or does it begin at some point between these poles of progress, such as at quickening or viability? The answer a person chooses to this question often determines his or her position on the abortion issue.

Because the question of the point of origin of human life is so crucial to the abortion debate, I will devote chapter 4 to the subject. However, some foundational questions must be faced at this point.

It is obvious from the abortion controversy that there is widespread disagreement about when life begins. Pro-abortion activists come to radically different conclusions than those of pro-life activists. The two sides tend to use different methods for

finding answers on the question of the origin of life.

Many in the anti-abortion camp base their convictions on inferences drawn from the Bible or from decrees pronounced by their churches. This raises an obvious problem. If one group determines its position exclusively from the Bible or church teaching, what is the effect for people who do not embrace the authority of the Bible or of the church? At this point, the issue of religious tyranny, or the illegitimate intrusion of the church into the realm of the state, rises immediately. In other words, who has the right to say what's right and on what grounds?

The national crisis in ethics

Beneath the division in society over abortion is a more foundational problem: How does one determine what is right? The irony of the United States debate on abortion is that it is a battle over "rights" in a nation that is sharply divided over how to determine what is right about anything. Allan Bloom, in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, chronicled the epidemic rise of moral relativism that reduces ethics to personal preferences rather than to objective norms for what is right and wrong.

A slogan emerged in the 1960s that crystallized the perspective of moral relativism: "Everyone has the right to do his own thing." This slogan is as crass as it is silly. If it were followed by everyone resolutely, society itself would be an impossibility. No one would have any true rights protected, because at any given moment my rights could trample your rights.

In the late 1960s, I experienced firsthand the ethical insanity of everyone doing his or her own thing. I was working as a pastor in a church. A distressed mother came to me, weeping as Monica wept for her wayward son, who became the great theologian Augustine. The woman related to me that her college-age son had renounced the Christian faith and had moved into a college “pad” adorned with psychedelic posters and black lights. The son wanted to do his “thing,” namely, drugs and the pleasure of uninhibited sexual liaisons. The mother pleaded with me to talk to her son about the error of his ways.

I told the woman that I would talk to her son if he was willing to speak with me, but I gave her little encouragement. How open would he be to the counsel of a clergyman forced on him by a parent? To my surprise, the boy came to see me. He was overtly hostile. I asked him why he was so angry. He replied, “Because my mother keeps trying to cram religion down my throat.” I nodded in sympathy for his obvious frustration with an overbearing mother.

“What’s your alternative ethical system to Christianity?” I asked.

“I believe that everyone has the right to do his own thing,” he replied.

“Then what’s wrong with your mother’s cramming religion down your throat?” I asked.

He did not immediately grasp the point of my question. Instead he launched into a lengthy diatribe against the myriad ways his mother was violating his right to do his own thing. Finally, I said: “But what if your mother’s thing is to cram religion

down people's throats? Just because it's your throat that religion is being crammed down shouldn't bother you. You should rejoice that your mother is enjoying her freedom to do her own thing."

I then explained to him that if he had come to me with a protest based on biblical ethics, I could have supported his point of view, at least in part. Biblical law has something to say against insensitive parents provoking their children.

The young man had not thought through the implications of his ethic. He had no recourse when his thing came into conflict with someone else's thing. This is why laws are established to govern society. We seek laws that are inherently just, laws that are based on objective norms. Otherwise, we become victims of the unprincipled preferences of others.

One of the chief functions of law is to protect the rights of individuals. To be sure, every law restricts someone's freedom in order to protect someone else's rights. Laws against theft restrict the freedom of thieves while protecting the private-property rights of their intended victims. Laws against murder restrict the liberty of murderers to do their own thing.

The relevance of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights rests on the political theory that the nation is a republic and not a pure democracy. The difference between the two is crucial. It frequently has been summed up as the difference between rule by law and rule by men. In a pure democracy, the majority rules with complete authority. In a republic, the power and the freedom of the majority are restricted by law. The edicts of the Constitution are designed to protect the rights of every person from the power of the majority. For example, if

the majority is of one race and decides to enact legislation that discriminates against a minority race, the minority can have the legislation overturned in court. In a republic, no one has the right to do his or her own thing if it violates the law.

For a republic to work, its foundational laws must be just. We can have tyranny by law as well as tyranny by men. That is why the founding fathers of the United States were acutely concerned about establishing just laws. But how do we know which laws are just and which laws are unjust—for example, in the case of abortion?

The issue of just and unjust laws is tied to ethics. Just laws reflect what is right. The very question of rights is rooted in the realm of ethics. We must be careful to distinguish between what we call moral rights and legal rights. In human societies, unjust laws may be passed. People may be given the legal right to do what is morally wrong or may be legally prohibited from doing what is either morally permissible or morally required. Thus, moral rights may be made illegal and immoral activities may become legal.

Who decides what is right?

To determine what is right about abortion, or about anything else, we must look beyond the laws of governments. Though legal opinions may be helpful and insightful, they do not constitute the highest court of appeals for determining what is ethically right.

The framers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution clearly appealed to norms beyond human legislation or

judicial opinions in defining our most basic rights. Natural law was a chief consideration and served as a convenient middle ground to satisfy religious as well as nonreligious people. The religious person assumed that what God revealed in nature was compatible with and consistent with what He revealed in the Bible. The non-religious person was content to live by natural law as long as the canon law of the church was not made binding by the state.

Thus, the founders came to agreement on the common ground by which church and state could function together smoothly. That agreement, however, has radically disintegrated. Now, not only is biblical law under attack, but natural law has all but been eliminated as a foundation for societal law. The abortion issue is one manifestation of this ethical crisis.

To reach a national consensus on abortion will be a difficult if not impossible task. A large segment of the population will not look to the Bible for ethical norms, and many people believe that natural law is too vague to guide us on an ethical basis. A growing cynicism toward government indicates a reluctance to look there for ethical guidance. We are left with a kind of ethical free-for-all where deciding what is right is based on power alone, either by physical or electoral might.

Though the crisis of ethical relativism is real, its encroachment into society has not yet destroyed all hope of establishing justice on the objective norm of what is ethically right. We still have a Constitution in place. Though its credibility as an objective norm is being eroded by relativism, the Constitution still functions as an objective basis for law.

Whatever happens in the United States, however, will not change the nature of truth. Although the perception of reality may change from generation to generation, that does not change reality itself. Former generations perceived and believed that the earth was the center of the solar system; however, that did not have the slightest influence on either the sun or the earth. Neither did Copernicus alter the actual situation of the sun and the earth by the power of his theories.

Whatever happens to the Constitution or to American ethics will not determine when human life begins. That is an objective question, for better or for worse. But before we seek answers on the origin of life itself, an even broader issue—the sanctity of life—must be considered.

Summary

- The abortion issue is divisive and intertwined with other important cultural phenomena, including the women's movement and the sexual revolution.
- This is the core question of the abortion issue: Is abortion a form of murder?
- Many pro-abortion and pro-choice activists do not believe abortion is murder because they do not consider an unborn baby to be a living human person.
- Is a fetus a living person? When does life begin? These questions are foundational to any opinion about abortion.

- It is difficult for contemporary Americans to agree on what is right because the nation's laws increasingly have a relativistic base.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is abortion such a divisive issue?
2. How do people, whether anti-abortion, pro-choice, or pro-abortion, reach their positions? What kinds of criteria do they use?
3. What is attractive about "sitting on the fence" or taking a pro-choice position?
4. Would pure democracy be bad if we had a Christian majority? Why or why not?
5. What is the difference between a moral right and a legal right?
6. What role should the church take in relation to public policy?