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1: Abortion

What right has a woman to abortion? The surprising fact is that the British Abortion Act 1967 does not deal directly with the pregnant woman, nor with the fetus: it deals with the operator. Moreover it does not spell out what he shall do. It enacts that if, under certain carefully laid down conditions, a registered medical practitioner performs an abortion, he shall not be liable to punishment. In other words it is merely permissive.

How then does it come about that there is so much talk of the woman's rights, and of abortion on demand? There are several lines of argument.

1. The most recent and respectable one is that of the Lane Commission in its report (vol. 1, Para. 398) to Parliament in April 1974. Here it is argued that as the NHS was set up in 1946 to "secure improvement in the physical and mental health of the people", and as the only lawful abortions under the Act are "for the purpose of saving the life of the woman, or of preserving her health or of that of her existing children", the NHS has a responsibility to provide for abortion. This opinion has no standing in law.

2. There is the argument which quite openly twists the wording of the Act to mean the opposite of its intention. The grounds for termination in the Bill were "that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve *risk* to the life of the pregnant woman. . . ." During debate it was decided that *risk* was too vague, and should be quantified as "greater than if the pregnancy were terminated."

With glee advocates of easy abortion have pounced on this rider. It is possible to produce statistics to prove that a perfectly normal delivery carries a higher risk of death than does an early abortion performed by skilled hands. Eureka! As for any woman abortion is less risky than continuance of pregnancy, any woman can have one!

3. The most popular approach, however, is to maintain that the fact a woman mentions abortion indicates that she is depressed, depression is injurious to mental health, injury to mental health is a statutory ground for abortion: no problem!

It is now time to admit that the third sleight of hand is used on occasion by the present writer. This confession leads us into the heart of the problem. Let us look carefully into just one typical situation seen not infrequently.

A widow, scraping to bring up her school-aged children, happy to be courted, grateful that her children once more have a 'father-figure' coming about the home, is then seduced and deserted. She feels conscience-stricken. She feels angry at having been betrayed. She is afraid for the close-knit family relationship she has had single-handed to build up and maintain and enrich. She is not only afraid for the children's relationship to herself when they discover, but for their suffering at school, and for the reactions of the neighbours.

In our abortion committee of gynaecologists and social workers we accept these fears as genuine. The woman is going to lose her job. The children are going to be taunted at school. They are going to lose their previous trust and affection for mum: and the scars of this on the children will be life-long. The elder will leave home earlier: the younger are likely to shun home and there is a real danger that they will become delinquents. The child itself, when born, will not have an easy life—all the evidence being that such a child will be kept by its mother and not given for adoption. It will have the stigma of illegitimacy, be without a father, be bandied from child-minder to day-nursery as mother works to keep a roof over their heads. As the mother ages over the next forty years the loving care her children should have provided is less likely to be forthcoming, merely the loneliness of geriatric accommodation.

Knowing all this, and aware that at a stroke he can prevent these sorrows and the misfortunes to the innocent children, the gynaecologist needs very strong grounds indeed to refuse to abort. The question we have, as Christians, to consider is this—do such strong grounds exist?

Murder is forbidden in the decalogue, but murder implies malice for the victim: abortion is not murder. Life, as the gift of God, is to be treated with reverence but is not sacrosanct. In Old Testament days it was forfeit not only for wickedness (Ex. 22: 18-20), but even for criminal carelessness (Ex. 21: 29). Were all the children of Achan involved in his conspiracy? Was every toddler before the deluge, or of Amalekite blood, depraved? It is clear that in God's eyes the preservation of life does not have absolute priority: some values—the purity of his people, and obedience for example—were more important. This is, of course, accepted, otherwise in war-time we would excommunicate all combatants from our fellowships. But is abortion even the taking of life? If we were agreed as to what we meant by 'life' the argument would be easier. Many hold that the fetus is ensouled at conception or perhaps at implantation: I have argued against this at length elsewhere (*Abortion: The Personal Dilemma*, The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1972). More important those who teach that a fetus has a soul are in a dilemma,

for if—as I think they must—they accept that abortion is sometimes justified, they cannot logically refuse the possibility of infanticide, and even for euthanasia.

Abortion then is not an impossible choice to the Christian, whether as gynaecologist or as patient, but it is still a terrible choice, never to be lightly accepted, but always to be considered with much serious thought and prayer.

Three further facets require consideration. In the case of an illegitimate pregnancy, such as that considered above, there is the factor of sin and its retribution. This is inevitable: one factor being the remorse not infrequently seen at the follow-up clinic. However am I commissioned to exact this? Who am I to cast the first stone? Do we not, each of us, daily have to come for the cleansing of the Blood? It is not irrelevant to notice that among some African believers, more guilt and remorse is felt after a bout of anger, than after fornication! And what of the innocent parties—the spouse betrayed perhaps, the trusting children whose home is to be shattered, the deprived child who may be born?

Then there is the forgotten factor of compassion—not the casual “we’ll get her off the hook” feeling, but the deep fruit of the Spirit, which shines so clearly in the gospels, and plays such an enormous part in our own testimony.

Pre-eminence, however, must in this, as in every facet of life, be given to the will of God. His we are. Our hands are His. Our reproductive capacities are His. In us the Holy Spirit lives His life and manifests Himself to the world. In His sovereign condescension He shares in the agonies of our decision making. With every thought brought into subjection to Him our decision making on abortion is among those “good deeds which He hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

P. S. FIRTH

2: Some underlying principles

The 1967 Law permitting therapeutic abortion is so vaguely expressed that it can be interpreted in any way from termination in all cases, to termination under no circumstances.

The following are some of the Christian principles that are involved in any request for termination of pregnancy:-

1) The Sanctity of Human Life

a) *Man is made in God's image.* God is a spirit and inhabits eternity, not the earth Is. 57: 15. Man is like God and differs from