



abortion

a christian response



The reason women abort

The question of when human life begins has been debated for many centuries. According to Paul Swope, the majority of people consider the fetus to be fully human. Yet abortion continues to be practised. It is not that the humanity of the fetus is insignificant for the many women who agonise about their decision to abort, but it does not appear to have the final say in their decision-making process.

Christian opposition to abortion is based on the view that in the Bible, human life starts at conception, and is always a precious new instance of the image of God. However, we'll say more about that opposition in the appendix to this booklet.

For now, we will attempt to unpack what makes so many women decide to terminate. In order for us to be able to respond well to women in a society where the option to abort is entrenched and widely accepted, Christians need to know more about what some women think and feel. It will not do simply to imagine that the only Christian response is to wind back abortion laws.

The practice of abortion is legal and regularly practiced in many countries around the world. In Australia alone, Medicare data indicates around 90,000 abortion procedures are carried out each year. This is equivalent to one abortion for every 2.8 live births. The profiles of women who seek abortions, and their reasons for it, vary widely.

While the common perception is that the majority of abortions are sought by unmarried teenagers, recent data shows that a growing number of women who are seeking abortions are in their thirties and forties, are already mothers, and have completed their family. There is no single, simple reason why women abort. The reasons they cite include: the difficult issue of raising a child who is diagnosed in utero with a significant health problem; the prospect of financial difficulty; a lack of adequate relational support; potential adverse consequences in career path; or a range of negative psychological outcomes that some women with an unplanned pregnancy fear.

But these stated reasons perhaps do not explain the underlying complexity of what is going on in the minds and hearts of women who find themselves with an unplanned pregnancy.



By their very nature, ‘unplanned’ pregnancies catch us by surprise, and we are a culture that prides itself on our capacity for careful planning and meticulous timing. Any woman who finds herself pregnant must reorient her thoughts about, and plans for, the future. But for the woman faced with an unplanned pregnancy, thoughts about the future are often devoid of those support structures which enable her to picture herself as being in control. She is therefore not really able to view the new life within her positively.

A study of ‘the psychological dynamics of how women feel about abortion’ by The Caring Foundation found:

Unplanned motherhood... represents a threat so great to modern women that it is perceived as equivalent to a ‘death of self’.... This is because many young women of today have developed a self-identity that simply does not include being a mother. It may include going through college, getting a degree, obtaining a job ...

In our modern way of thinking, autonomy and free choice have ultimate value. Many of the values that we encounter in Australian and Western culture are embedded in our capacity to choose. We tend to see ourselves as people whose identity and life course are a direct result of our choices.

In a society that views the autonomy of the individual as sacrosanct and defining, we view all unwelcome challenges to that autonomy as a threat.

The Complexity of Choice

The abundance of goods and services on offer to us can convey the impression that our choices are almost limitless. And yet despite that abundance, we all have financial constraints, time constraints, health-related constraints, and so on. Likewise, when it comes to discussions about abortion, a woman’s ‘choice’ is often much more constrained than we care to admit. She is acting within a system over which she has very little control.

When a woman discovers she is pregnant, there is a wide range of emotions and responses which are possible. If the child is longed-for, there is elation and joy. If the pregnancy is unexpected yet not opposed, there may be a reshuffling of future plans.

But where a woman encounters an unplanned pregnancy, and the conditions within which the woman must make her decisions are not immediately supportive of the pregnancy, the decision-making process immediately takes on new dimensions.



Currently in Australia, it appears of every four women who find themselves pregnant, one makes the decision to abort. The option to terminate an unplanned pregnancy is presented to her as a regrettable solution to avert a much more undesirable outcome. One of the oft-repeated catch-cries within the current Australian debate is that the decision to abort is a private one, made between a woman and her doctor.

Although abortion is indeed a decision made by a woman with her doctor, that view misses the way her decision is not made in isolation, without a context. It is made within a web of complex and often competing demands. The women at the centre, and the people around her, have not addressed whatever has made her pregnancy seem 'unwanted': competing demands drive many women toward accepting the only 'choice' that is held up as legitimate when in a vulnerable state in less than ideal circumstances—the 'choice' to abort.

Nor is she encouraged to consider the way this choice will also have unanticipated results. In *Giving Sorrow Words*, Melinda Tankard-Reist shares the testimony of many women who experienced bitter regret over their abortions. The point of such testimony is not to prove that all women will experience such regret, but to show that many do, and often without having been aware that deep regret is one of the many unanticipated results of the choice to abort.

Recent studies on attitudes to abortion

The US Caring Foundation investigated the way women, and the public in general, can be comfortable with the paradox of being personally against abortion, but in favour of keeping it legal. The research found that women do not see any 'good' resulting from an unplanned pregnancy. Instead, they feel that they are forced to choose between what they perceive as three 'evils' – single-motherhood, adoption and abortion. 'The sudden intrusion of motherhood is perceived as a complete loss of control over their present and future selves.'

This research seems to reveal that the way in which women perceive the choices that lie before them at this critical time come down to either 'my life is over' or 'the life of this new child is over'. 'Given this perspective, the choice of abortion becomes one of self-preservation.'

Adoption was cited as the least desirable outcome, since it is perceived as a 'double death'—firstly, a 'death of self', as the woman would have to accept motherhood by carrying the baby to term; and then secondly, the uncertainty of the child's future would plague the mother as a 'second death' – the 'death of the child through abandonment'. On top of these two 'deaths' the woman simply perceives herself as a 'bad mother', since she gave her child away.



Fear of these feelings is such a potent cocktail that for many women, adoption feels like the worst possible alternative.

Recent research conducted by the Southern Cross Bioethics Institute in Adelaide found that 62% of the community support abortion on demand, but 70% also think that abortion is a 'necessary evil'. The paradox is that though most Australians would prefer alternatives to abortion, they support legal abortion because they feel women need the option. They think the option should be available, but they don't see it as a good thing.

What does 'choice' look like for Christians?

For Christian ethicist Allen Verhey:

Moral life is not just about choosing and willing one's moral commitments. The moral life is also about responding to unexpected and unplanned events, about accepting (or not) things not of our choosing, about the experience of obligation within relationships in which one simply finds oneself. The moral life is not just a matter of contracts between autonomous individuals; it is also a matter of honouring moral obligations that arise simply because we are all embedded in relationships, some of which are not of our own choosing.

That is, within discussions about abortion, 'choice' is being overrated. Of course, the Bible knows that we must consider decisions ahead of us.

But whereas the rhetoric of choice in a consumer culture tells women that they must think of themselves and their desires above anything else, a Christian approach acknowledges that human beings are not just autonomous, choosing individuals.

We are created to be in relationship with one another and ultimately with God. We can be in communities who care for each other, and we can receive all the things that come to us, whether we have chosen them or not, and sometimes even with joy. This kind of Christian approach acknowledges that there is a way forward in all circumstances, a way that can honour the life of the child and the life of the mother. Whereas the rhetoric of autonomy is ultimately self-centred, the freedom expressed in the Bible is Christ-centred in a way that leaves us free to welcome and care for others—even a baby-to-be that we haven't expected or 'planned'.

Let us think for a moment about what 'choice' could look like. What would it be like to decide about an unexpected baby within caring support networks, with unbiased disclosure by health professionals, amidst financial and relational security, and under the hope that each pregnancy brings with it the potential for great joy and hope for both mother and baby? Such an environment may look like this: communities in which pregnancy support organisations and options are as well-known and accessible as baby goods stores; where workplace relations supported (rather than penalised) women who choose to have a baby (whether planned or unplanned);



where public transport and social services enable and support mothers who choose to work in paid employment; and where communities view motherhood as a most honourable choice – for the well-being of the woman, the baby and the society in which they live.

Of course, Christians have not always been at the forefront of suggesting how such a society might work, and more attention is needed here. Rather than just the traditional Christian impulse to tighten abortion law, Christians also need to outline policy proposals that make possible a society that is user-friendly to mothers and babies.

Christians have an enormous amount to offer at this point in a society that is deeply ambivalent about children. A recent government report recommending strategies for reducing crime in our community concluded that ‘there should be a greater societal commitment to supporting children and families and to creating a more child friendly environment.’ But obviously, such an environment will be difficult to create alongside the society’s current abortion practices.

At best, our society has a deep contradiction at its heart. At worst, abortion is a powerful expression of an adult-centred, adult-serving culture, which cannot welcome and nurture children for their own sake, but only insofar as they serve adult interests. Likewise, community attitudes to disability, and to disabled children, are clearly at fault when disability is offered as a straightforwardly ‘obvious’ ground for abortion.

Thoughtful Christian policy proposals could point the way out of this confusion.

But perhaps more to the point, many conservative Christian churches need total reform of their own attitudes to unplanned pregnancies among unmarried women. It is desperately tragic that some unmarried and pregnant women who attend churches with a conservative sexual ethic, choose abortion in preference to the shame they will feel in those churches. That situation is reprehensible and must stop. Although Christians do well to keep reserving sex for marriage, we must do better at signalling unreserved delight, acceptance and care for new life, whatever its origins. These single mums need our love and our wholehearted declaration of God’s willingness to deeply and totally forgive and care for them. Our churches must become oases for the unmarried and pregnant, not places of fear.

It follows that the same great Christian news of forgiveness is extended even to those who have aborted a child. Christianity will continue to gently and firmly state that abortion is a mistake, a tragic folly, and a sin. But the Christian gospel points even to three powerful males—Moses, King David, and the apostle Paul—who knowingly murdered adults, yet who experienced the awesome beauty of God’s unreserved forgiveness. This God we worship reaches out to all and every sinner, offering to ‘wash’ us free from all taint of sin through the work of his own dear Son.



Grief and sadness may remain after an abortion, but a woman at least need not fear that God is against her. If that assurance is hard to believe, she might do well to watch the Lord Jesus with another woman, whose community also wanted to shame her. To them he declares 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her'; and to her he says, 'neither do I condemn you', going on gently to command and release her from her patterns of sin (John 8:1-11). In Christ, God offers himself to be a woman's greatest, most loving, most forgiving and most committed ally, Saviour and friend.

Conclusion

Christian ethics is best understood as a response to the way God's kindness bubbles over into every area of life, and as such is simply an extension of the gospel. Christians may therefore talk about life, and then even live it, in so mesmerisingly beautiful a way that those who see and hear cannot help but want to know of Christ.

The Bible summarises this new way of living under that gigantic word, 'love'. God's 'steadfast love' is the strong foundation upon which our relationship with him is built; God also understands that the way to blessing for us is the way of the two great commandments, to love him and to love each other; and when we find more about the way of the Father, Son and Spirit we find that they are people who dwell in relationships of steadfast love.

Such people are then able to welcome new life and faithfully support those mothers who make it happen.

As Allen Verhey so insightfully puts it,

Attention to God might make us attentive as well to the [fetus] and to the woman and to the communities in which we live as related to God. When we attend to God in Christian community, of course, we attend to the God made known in Scripture. Such attention to God may not resolve the issue of the status of the [fetus], but it might nevertheless make us attentive to the [fetus] as a gift of God, to women as equal partners, and to the community as the context for discourse, deliberation and discernment about abortion. It may not tell us exactly what we ought to do, but it might help to form characters ready to be hospitable to children and attentive to the needs and aspirations of women. It may not tell us exactly what we ought to do, but it might help form communities that share the burdens of pregnancy and childbirth, that help members bear the burdens of decision, both the burdens of making faithful decisions and the burdens of the costs of faithful decisions. It may not tell us exactly what we ought to do, but it might help to nurture a conversation that is less full of self-righteousness and 'bad faith', one ready to acknowledge ambiguity in a world not yet the good future of God, but eager to signal that our hope is in God in a world still under the sign of the curse.



Further reading:

Allen Verhey – *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine*, Eerdmans; Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003. Ch 6.

Michael Hill – *The How and Why of Love: An introduction to evangelical ethics*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2002. Ch 12

Melinda Tankard Reist – *Giving Sorrow Words: women's stories of grief after abortion*, Duffy and Snelgrove, Sydney, 2000.



References:

Australian Federal Senate Hansard, 10 May 2005, online: <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/dailys/ds100505.pdf>.

Agee, Mary Cunningham, When Being Right is Not Enough, online: <http://www.nurturingnetwork.org/CallToEffectiveAction.htm>.

Bradley, Michael, Economics as reason for abortion, Sydney Morning Herald, 06/08/2004, online: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/05/1091557996755.html>.

Southern Cross Bioethics Institute, Give Women Choice: Australia Speaks on Abortion, online: www.bioethics.org.au.

Swope, Paul, Abortion: A failure to communicate, *First Things*, April 1998, 82.

Verhey, Allen. *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine*. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003.

National Crime Prevention, Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia. *National Crime Prevention, Attorney-General's Department: Canberra, 1999.*

Appendix

Here are the reasons why Christians conclude that embryos and fetuses are precious to God. Human life is an unbroken thread from conception to death. Under normal circumstances the embryo will develop, be born, grow to maturity, age and then die. Each progression brings with it different needs but it is the same life throughout. Regardless of a persons' stage of development, each person has immense value.

1. The Bible says that every life is the product of God's handiwork (Psalms 19; 95). People, being made in the Creator's image, have special significance (Genesis 1:26-27). Indeed, there are strong warnings against taking human life (Genesis 9:6).
2. However, our value as human beings is not based on beauty, intelligence, personal achievement or particular function. God's interest in us begins long before our first conscious thoughts. Psalm 139:13 says: 'You created every part of me; you put me together in my mother's womb.' It is God's loving commitment that compels us to value all people.
3. Part of our created nature is to live in community (Genesis 2:18). True humanity is expressed in right relationships with God and each other (Micah 6:8; Mark 12:28-34). In such relationships we are not free to do whatever we please. Nor can we remain indifferent to the plight of those around us (Isaiah 58:6-7; James 1:27). By sending his son Jesus to live and die for us God revealed a model for relationships characterised by love, forgiveness and other-centredness (Romans 5:8).
4. Therefore, we need continually to ask ourselves how we might contribute to the lives of others so that they reflect the dignity and value of being made in the image of God. This will necessarily lead us to show special concern for society's weakest members. Just as Jesus reached out to the poor and outcast, so too we are called to do likewise (Matthew 25:31-40).
5. For these reasons it is right for God's people to seek the protection of the unborn. Such concern reflects God's love for humankind and particular consideration for the vulnerable. It is not a concern that stops with the fetus, however, and should be expressed equally for children, their mothers, the frail aged, disabled, oppressed, refugees, famine victims, etc. Those opposed to abortion should be sure that they hold a consistent ethic of life, and a commitment to uphold the preciousness of people everywhere.