

ABORTION AND EUTHANASIA

PREFACE

This is the second in my series of papers for St Johns Hensingham, which looks at difficult topics in the light of the Bible. In my first - on divorce and remarriage - I explain the way in which I approach the subjects concerned. That paper can be found on the church website. If necessary it can be provided in paper format.

INTRODUCTION

Human life is not always a blessing to oneself or others. Children are not always welcomed by their parents. They may already have enough to cope with, they can be inconvenient to career plans, they may be disabled etc. Old age, disability and mental illness can be distressing to the person concerned and/or their relatives and carers.

In the ancient world some societies coped by exposing unwanted children shortly after birth. Some practiced abortion. This was never accepted as the norm by Jewish society. With the spread of Christianity infanticide and abortion usually became illegal, being considered murder. However, most modern societies do permit abortion, often with little or no restriction. This is generally on the grounds that (according to many secular philosophers and pro-choice campaigners) unborn infants are not fully human, the woman "owns" the foetus, and she has a right to decide what to do with her body. Western society is deeply divided about abortion and in practice it is usually left to the conscience and decision of the pregnant mother. Many women who have abortions later regret them and they may feel unexpectedly guilty. These are usually those who already have a conscience about the matter.

Development in the Womb Starting with a single cell, development is rapid. By the age of six to seven weeks brain function can be detected and at eight the limbs are apparent, including fingers and toes. Medical abortions (not including the morning after pill etc.) begin at about this age. By nine or ten weeks the foetus can grasp, swallow and suck. By the age of thirteen weeks the foetus is in effect a miniature baby. Abortions can legally continue until the foetus is 24 weeks old, which is about the youngest age from which a premature baby can survive. There are numerous abortion techniques, but there are two that are used for most abortions in UK. The most common is "vacuum aspiration", which involves sucking the foetus out of the womb in bits. The second most common technique is inducing premature delivery using the hormone prostoglandin. To avoid the foetus being a premature baby he/she may be killed first while still in the womb.

Abortion in UK The latest statistics are for 2004 (when there were 639,721 live births). In 1968 there were 23,641 abortions. Since then the number has increased steadily until in 2004 there were 194,179 abortions. By way of comparison Great Britain had an average of about 175,000 fatal casualties per year during World War 1! It is also about the same number as the inhabitants of Northampton, which claims to be the largest town in UK. It contrasts with the public outcry when even one child dies unnecessarily as the result of the negligence of Social Services or a school. Modern abortion is hidden killing on a massive scale.

In a similar way many societies both ancient and modern have decided that certain groups of people, young and old, can or should be killed even when they have committed no crime. Recent examples are Nazi Germany that killed a wide variety of people including Jews and mentally disabled people and Pol Pot's Cambodia that killed most of its educated higher classes. Most modern societies only permit the killing of enemies in times of war and serious criminals. However, the issue of euthanasia is now up for debate. Euthanasia is so called "mercy killing". Those who want it say that a "good death" is preferable to a bad life. Some societies past and present see suicide as an honourable way out of difficult circumstances. In the West at present the main debate concerns adults facing unpleasant illness who for a variety of reasons want help to end their lives. However, it can also apply to any person of any age where either the person concerned or other people on their behalf believe they would be better off dead. One argument for euthanasia in N America is that some terminally ill people cannot afford proper painkilling medication and society is unwilling to pay through taxation. Another argument is that those unable to give consent – the very old the young etc. – should have other people decide for them whether their lives are worth living. Once the principle is accepted I see no logical reason why it cannot be extended to virtually anyone, if those in power have some kind of logic behind their decision!

In traditional "Christian" societies it has been accepted that the command not to murder includes oneself, unborn children and the infirm elderly. This has come under question in many modern societies, which are strongly influenced by atheistic Humanism. Humanism can also lead to the idea that life in itself is not very important – instead it is the quality of life. In Holland, Belgium and Oregon a doctor has the right to end an elderly person's life if they so request. There are also reports that some Dutch doctors have ended the lives of very ill new born children illegally, but openly without prosecution.

This paper looks at some of the arguments for and against. However, my main concern is to examine the Biblical foundations which apply to these issues. We shall also attempt apply these to some hard cases.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. What is a Human Being?

Our society is dominated by scientific Humanism, which often regards humans as no more than highly evolved animals. Some would say that animals are no more than a collection of chemicals, which have managed to organise themselves into a body that seeks to keep itself alive and propagate more bodies. There is no universally accepted definition of what a human being is. For example: some talk in terms of a certain level of intelligence and ability. This could imply that foetuses, babies, people with severe learning disabilities, old people with dementia etc are no different to animals, are not fully "human", and can morally be killed in the same way as an old pet or injured horse.

The Bible describes a human being as a being who is physically descended from Adam and Eve. In this life they have not only a body, but also an immaterial soul/spirit. E.g:

As the body without the spirit is dead... Jas 2 v 26

They laughed at him knowing she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, "My child get up!" Her spirit returned and at once she stood up. Luk 8 vv 53-55

From this it is easy to see that according to the Bible a human being remains such until they die and their spirit departs. Somebody suffering from the terminal stages of dementia remains human even though they can neither care for themselves nor recognise their family members. However, it is not so clear when human life begins.

Biologically a new life begins when the father's sperm unites with the mother's egg forming a new cell. Genetically this cell is different to both parents and given the right conditions will develop into a baby. This is usually in the mother's womb, but it could be transplanted to another woman's womb. The new cell could split off into two or even more to form identical twins etc. I think all would agree that the fertilised cell is "human" just as your finger is human, but is it a full "human being" or just a human cell on the way to becoming a human being? If it is not fully human at what stage does it become human? Until it becomes a full human being it might legitimately be killed under certain circumstances, just as your finger might be amputated. Societies and people vary. Some say:

- the fertilised cell is a full human being.
- full humanity only starts when the embryo turns into a foetus.
- it starts when there is the first stage of a nervous system or a circulation.
- it starts when the foetus is capable of remaining alive outside the mother's womb.
- at birth
- at birth, but only if the baby is not disabled.

○ at some stage during childhood. (This allows for infanticide.)
In most modern societies the unborn child does not have full human rights and only obtains them at birth.

Biblically one might say that full human life starts when the unborn child has a spirit. However, the Bible is not explicit on this point. Most Bible believing Christians believe this point is at conception. They base this on passages that imply that fetuses are persons. However, some have argued that there is only a spirit once there is blood in the foetus. Others argue that there is only a spirit when the baby takes his/her first breath.

The Mainstream Christian View: There are various Bible passages that indicate that unborn babies are persons in their own right even in the womb, e.g. Luke 1 vv 41-44

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "... As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy... "

Since there are no clear cut-off points between one stage of development and the next a common argument is that the foetus must have been fully human from conception. However, most such Bible passages do not explicitly state this.

For one indication that full humanity starts at conception there is Psalm 51 v 5:

*Surely I have been a sinner from birth,
Sinful **from the time my mother conceived me.***

David regarded his fertilised egg as being both "I", "me" and "sinful", which implies it was as much "David" as his adult self.

Other Christian Views Based on the Bible;

The view that the spirit is present only from the time there is **blood** in the foetus is based on various passages linking the soul to blood, e.g.

*And God said, What have you done? The voice of the blood of your brother cries to Me from the ground. Gen: 4 v 10
For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar, to atone for your souls; for it is the blood which makes atonement for the soul. Lev: 17 v 11*

In my opinion this argument is by no means conclusive, being primarily an "argument from silence".* Such passages do not state whether there is any soul apart from blood. If one follows this logic somebody who has a massive blood transfusion involving a total change of blood could be in danger of losing their soul! When somebody dies their soul must become separated from their

blood at the latest when their blood decomposes (and in reality much before) so the link cannot be absolute.

The view that the spirit only enters at the baby's first **breath** is based on scriptures that link spirit with breath, especially

And Jehovah God formed the man out of dust from the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. Gen 2:7

In my opinion this is another weak argument. Adam's creation was a special case and one cannot generalise from this to the procreation of his descendants. Babies do not come into being the same way Adam did and this passage tells us nothing about whether or not fetuses have spirits. Similarly, although there is a clear Biblical connection between breathing and spirits, it is another argument from silence to assume that a creature with no air in its lungs has no spirit. One can imagine a drowning man who for a few seconds has his lungs full of water before being rescued. Does this mean he briefly lost his spirit, died and came back to life?

2. Do people have absolute rights over their own bodies?

One of the arguments of the pro-abortion lobby, including some Christians, is that a woman has a right to decide what happens to her own body. They imply that even if it is accepted that the creature inside a pregnant woman is human it is there only by her consent. They believe that control over one's own body is a basic human right that overrides any right to life of the unborn child. Even those who do not take this argument to its full extent may say that the foetus's right to life has to be balanced against the woman's rights over her body. They may say that embryos and younger fetuses have little right to life. They may say that mothers who may be harmed physically or psychologically by carrying the child have an overriding right to a termination.

The main argument of the pro-voluntary euthanasia lobby is that adults have the right to decide what to do with their own bodies including killing it if they wish. Some disabled people, who are physically unable to kill themselves, argue that they should be able to ask somebody else to kill them without it being a crime.

Modern medicine can often keep people alive by artificial means long after they would normally have died. Sometimes this is in situations where there seems no prospect of recovery and no purpose in prolonging the life concerned. Sometimes it is unclear whether the person concerned would wish to remain alive or be allowed to die. At what stage should the life support machinery be turned off? Should relatives decide, or the doctor, or should the person concerned write a "living will" indicating their wish in these circumstances?

The Bible In Genesis we learn that God created human beings and it is taken for granted that He has authority over them. He tells them what to do and punishes them when they disobey. In Exodus 19 v 5 God says, "...the whole earth is mine..." In Colossians 2 v 16 we learn that second person of the Trinity, Jesus, was intimately involved:

...all things were created by him and for him.

This again implies ownership and authority.

For Christians there are other verses, which show that a Christian does not have full authority to decide what happens to his body, especially Rom 12 v 1:

Therefore, brothers, I call on you through the compassions of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service.

This shows us that we have to look elsewhere in the Bible to help us decide what we can and cannot do with our bodies.

3. God's Command Not to Kill

In Genesis 9v5 God gives all mankind who have survived Noah's flood the command not to kill:

And surely the blood of your lives I will demand. At the hand of every animal I will demand it, and at the hand of man. I will demand the life of man at the hand of every man's brother.

9:6 Whoever sheds man's blood, his blood shall be shed by man. For He made man in the image of God.

This command includes all human life including one's own life. It is confirmed in various places throughout the Bible up to the end of Revelation. It clearly applies today. However, there are exceptions as follows:

- (i) Lawful warfare. E.g. in Luke 3v14 John the Baptist allows soldiers to continue in their occupation:

Soldiers also asked him, saying, "What about us? What must we do?" He said to them, "Extort from no one by violence, neither accuse anyone wrongfully. Be content with your wages."

- (ii) To protect and preserve another life, e.g. by self-defence. In Luke 22 v 38 two of Jesus' disciples carried swords for self defence with Jesus' knowledge.

They said, "Lord, behold, here are two swords." He said to them, "That is enough."

(iii) Judicial execution of serious criminals. E.g. Romans 13 v 3,4

For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. Do you desire to have no fear of the authority? Do that which is good, and you will have praise from the same, for he is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid, for he doesn't bear the sword in vain; for he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him who does evil.

There is then the question as to whether abortion or euthanasia can ever be justified as exceptions to the general rule not to kill. This could be either because an unborn child, terminally ill person, etc does not have the same status as everyone else or else because killing them fits into one of the three categories above.

I am only aware of one Bible passage that may address this issue: Exodus 21:22

And when men fight, and they strike a pregnant woman, and her child goes forth, and there is no injury, being fined he shall be fined.

This might imply that the foetus's life is "worth" only a fine rather than capital punishment, which was the standard punishment for murder. Unfortunately the meaning of this is far from conclusive as it is unclear whether the "injury" is to the woman only - with the child merely being premature - or whether it is to both woman and unborn child. Presumably when it was written the meaning was obvious, but several thousand years later we cannot be sure. Ancient Jewish authorities who should have been in a better position to know come down on both sides.

DIFFICULT CASES

1. Abortion

The strongest case for an abortion concerns the situation where the foetus is threatening the mother's life - in essence the self defence justification. Both Jewish and Christian tradition accepts this. The Jewish Mishna explicitly stated that the mother's life took precedence over the unborn child's. (See my first paper on Divorce & Remarriage for the significance of the Mishna.) If her life was in danger then the child should die rather than the mother and abortion was necessary. Jesus regularly challenged the Mishna when he disagreed with it. The fact that the gospels do not directly address the issue of abortion suggests that Jesus did agree with the usual Jewish thought about the issue. (However, this is another argument from silence, so it is not decisive.) In my opinion this is the only situation justifying abortion.

Abortion can be a relatively "easy" answer to genuine problems such as incest, teenage pregnancy, and pregnancy after rape. Although the command not to murder unborn children seems straightforward, Christians can be divided about what to do in such extreme situations. My understanding is that, hard as it can be to accept this, abortion including the "morning after pill" is murder and is not a moral option. On a practical note unwanted babies can be adopted, although in practice many mothers may find that they can love their babies after all - even after rape.

2. Euthanasia

Most Christians would agree that being tired of life is not a good reason to die. However, we may feel more sympathy for those who are suffering a painful and lingering death. There is no warrant in scripture for euthanasia in such circumstances. However, there is plenty of warrant for palliative care including that which renders the patient insensible. Pro 31:6 reads:

Give fermented drink to one perishing, and wine to the bitter of soul.

Presumably such drink may shorten the patient's life, but as long as the reason for drinking it is to kill the pain rather than the patient this does not matter. Today we tend to use morphine rather than alcohol, but I believe the same principles apply.

A different extreme case is where somebody is dying quickly and painfully e.g. in a fire or from a wound. This is typically during warfare in which there may be circumstances where the only practical alternatives available to the observer are to watch them die or "put them out of their misery". My opinion is that God has not given us the right to take life in these circumstances.

A common problem for many is when to turn off the life support machinery for people who are suffering from a terminal illness and who would die as a result. A similar problem affects those who have to decide whether to let a life-threatening disease take its course or undergo distressing treatment in an attempt to delay death. This is not death by somebody doing something, but rather by not doing something and is therefore not murder. It is the disease or injury that kills the person, not the person who turns off the life support. However, it may or may not be moral and each case has to be decided on its merits.

SUMMARY

In this paper I have looked at some of the arguments for and against abortion and euthanasia with particular reference to the Biblical foundations for a Christian perspective. It is a difficult subject and Christians are divided. However, I think it is clear that pro choice positions are driven mainly by Humanist/atheist assumptions. Those who take the Bible literally are usually, but not always, driven to pro life positions, with abortion only justified if at all in a tiny number of extreme situations. As Western society is in practice dominated by Humanism (which is largely pro choice) it is no surprise that abortion occurs on such a massive scale. If I am right in supporting a pro life position it implies that this country and others are perpetrating mass murder. May God forgive us.

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<http://www.christian.org.uk/home.htm> The Christian Institute's website.

***"Argument from Silence"** The argument that if something is not mentioned it did not exist, did not happen, there are no exceptions, etc. This is a very weak argument by itself, as there may be many reasons why something is not mentioned. It is a common source of faulty doctrine which misrepresents the Bible. See 1 Cor 5:9.10 for a misunderstanding of this kind.