

*Abortion is not mentioned in the Bible. However, the following passages, the first two of which were suggested by "The Moral Vision of the New Testament," by Richard Hays, offer a starting place for our discussion.*

*In the Old Testament Law, different values are given to different lives. That is, a slave was not worth as much as a free person, and in this selection, an unborn child is not worth as much as someone already born. However, the unborn child still had value and were it to die as the result of a fight, then compensation must be given. . . just not to the full extent of the "eye for an eye" system of justice. We must also remember that the Old Testament Law is not binding on Christians, but rather serves as one foundation from which our Christian Faith is built. However, it does show how ancient society wrestled with the relationship between people already born and those not yet born.*

Exodus 21:22 When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. 23 If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

*Psalm 139:13-16 serves as a magnificent hymn to God's presence in the activity of creating a child. It testifies that God has dreams for our days on earth, even before we are born into those days. In a similar way, Jeremiah 1:5 has God telling Jeremiah that even before Jeremiah was born, God knew Jeremiah.*

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.

*We are not complete masters over our bodies. . . They are a gift from God; we are responsible to God for how we treat our bodies.*

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Choice, Life, and Living in Christ

*Exodus 21:22-25, Psalm 139:13-16, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20*

Last Sunday, a doctor who performs late-term abortions went to church. And was gunned down in cold blood.

What is the proper Christian response to all this?

Late-term abortions are especially problematic, because in many cases the unborn child is already able to live outside the womb. Even in the Roe v. Wade legal landscape, such procedures are facing legislative, legal, as well as moral, scrutiny.

What should the Christian view be on abortion? What steps should we take to stop abortions? What about the shooting? Is there any theory that would condone such a thing?

The issue of abortion is more complicated than it might seem. Because the Bible never speaks directly to this issue. We would wish it does, but it simply does not. This might be one reason the debate rages, even within the Christian community.

For instance: we can say that to God there is no difference between a pre-born child and one already born. OK, but Exodus 21:22-25, does make precisely this distinction as Reverend Richard Hays, he himself no avid proponent of abortion points out. Back in the days of “an eye for an eye,” if one causes the miscarriage of an unborn child, there is no eye for an eye punishment, but rather, monetary compensation instead. Now if the mother is hurt, then there is eye for an eye. . . but not for the child not yet born.

On the other hand, the unborn child does indeed have value, a proposition with which many

proponents of abortion on demand would disagree.

Or, “thou shalt not murder.” But the extent to which abortion is murder or not is precisely what much of the debate is about.

But then there are plenty of non-Scriptural slogans on both sides. May I suggest we need to be careful about sloganeering. We must be careful about taking a verse or two of Scripture and using such verses as clubs with which to bludgeon our opponents. My use of club and bludgeon in a Christian context is deliberately ironic, by the way.

“No unwanted child should have to be born.” But wait a minute! Is there such a thing as an unwanted child? One would hope the community of faith, the church, would want and welcome every child. One expects that God welcomes new born babies.

Or: “a mother has complete control over her body.” Well, no. Our bodies belong not to ourselves, but to God. And so for the Christian any decision we make about our bodies involves this question: to what extent does my action bear witness to the Holy Spirit, of which my body is a sanctuary?

And by the way, this argument cuts the other way as well: by what spiritual authority could the church insist that a woman be compelled to carry a pregnancy if the pregnancy is the result of force? If a woman’s body is not her own, but God’s, then neither does it belong to the one who forced such a pregnancy.

If a woman chooses to go through with such a pregnancy, then we might applaud her and affirm her. But to declare that such a new life is ordained and demanded by God is a breathtaking leap of logic, to say the least. God’s not in the business of blessing sexual assault.

Nor is it up to the church or society to demand that a woman risk death in order to carry a pregnancy. If it is indeed a tragic circumstance where life conflicts with life, then what outsider has the moral standing to force such a choice upon a woman? Does a woman give up life-saving chemotherapy for the sake of her unborn child? If either she is going to die or the unborn child is going to die, who has the right to decide?

So where does all this leave us? May I suggest that in the absence of direct Scriptural command, that we seek the counsel of the ages and of the best we believe about what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ.

May I suggest, and my thought is not original here, that the Christian faith exalts life as something Godly. Although Scripture does not talk about abortion specifically, it does say something about the meaning and value of life. Life itself is a blessing, a gift, God-given. Our psalm offers this exhilarating image of God's even knowing us before the world is created.

It follows, then, that our Christian attitude should be one that affirms life in every possible instance. We are given the gift of life to dream, to reach potential, to live as a blessing for God. And that's why anything that denies the full humanity of another is counter to God. That's why slavery and racism and crime are abominations to God. That's why abortion is acceptable, in a Christian context, only within rather narrow parameters. . . and of course people of good will debate what those are exactly.

The UMC's official position says abortion cannot be supported when it is forced, as in China, when it is used for gender selection, when it is for convenience. It can be affirmed only in those situations when life conflicts with life.

And I would suggest that as Christians we examine all our attitudes concerning issues of life and

its meaning. Let us struggle to be consistent in standing on positions that celebrate life. Because sometimes Christians sometimes have positions which don't seem very consistent.

For instance, how is it that so many Christians who are at the vanguard of peace movements and ecological movements, who fight racism valiantly, are also often counted in the pro-choice camp? Is there a disconnect between wanting to save a fern or a fawn, but discounting the value of a fetus? Is there a disconnect between disavowing war, yet accepting violence against a not yet born baby? Is there a disconnect between being against capital punishment and in favor of unfettered abortion rights?

And the other side as well. . . How is it that many pro-life people are so vociferously pro-war? Many folks who say it is our Christian duty to stand up for the unborn also regard it as our Christian duty to support our nation, no matter what war it finds itself fighting. One could argue that to give peace a chance is not inconsistent with being a Christian. How can we embrace abortion as being against God's will and embrace war as being fully in God's will, rather than seeing war as a sometimes tragic necessity?

And of course, is there a disconnect between being against all abortions, yet in favor of capital punishment? Does not our faith teach that no matter how evil a person is, that such a person is not beyond redemption?

So, where does all this leave. . . at least me?

Back to the case at hand; the murder of the abortion doctor. It was an evil, reprehensible act. It was an act against the sanctity of life itself. You simply cannot kill someone to make the point that life is sacred. At least, not if you are Christian. And to do such a killing at a church on a Sunday simply mocks the Christ in which we believe.

Christian protest must be, well, Christian. I think one way the Christian faith community has gone astray is that it is so eager, on so many issues, to make a political witness or a legal witness against evils they deplore, and forget to make a Christian witness. When Christians use words and actions to demonize those with whom they disagree, it is difficult for the transformational power of the cross to shine through.

The sight of Christians yelling epithets at women outside abortion clinics grates on my nerves. Such folk think they are leading women away from having abortions. Instead they are leading women away from the love of Jesus Christ.

When a position on abortion is couched in shrillness and anger, then the attitude of the speaker, instead of abortion itself becomes the issue. If the price of dissuading abortion is that we hide the grace of the lord Jesus Christ, then that is a cost far too high.

And shooting a doctor on church steps is simply appalling. It makes a mockery of everything we might say about the sacredness and blessedness of life. . . .And if the gunman were to dare say, "Christ led me to do this," then that is more horrific still. Does Jesus strike you as someone who promulgates violence? A final irony: the shooter is not subject to the death penalty. A grace he denied the doctor.

In other words, Christian people who oppose abortion by means of brutal tactics and ungracious words, undermine the very cause they seek to support. The moral case against abortion will make sense only insofar as folks come to see it as consistent with the notion of God's loving watchcare over creation.

Abortion is not an issue that lives out there all by itself, but rather in a more wholistic view of life's blessedness, as a gift from God, a view that takes seriously God's call for life free from

hunger and exploitation, a view that takes seriously life's dignity, from the youngest squalling infant to the most elderly and infirm of folks struggling for a last breath.

May I suggest the abortion dilemma will be solved ultimately not in the Supreme Court and not at the ballot box, but by Christian people living and acting as Christians. As we uphold a morality that is welcoming and affirming, as we continue to offer a vision of life that is sacred and compelling, as we bear witness to the blessedness of marriage and the God-gifted place for intimate relations to be fulfilled, then the number of abortions will decrease.

And on the other side of the equation, may we Christians be a people who welcome joyfully and with open arms single mothers; who affirm the choice to have the child instead of the alternative. We must support adoption and support for families for whom children might otherwise be a catastrophic financial burden.

A final incident. I happened to be visiting a crisis pregnancy center and spoke to a counselor who showed me all his group does to help single women. Financial help, emotional support. Adoption alternatives. And so on. And I asked him, but what of a woman who chooses to have an abortion anyway? Will you still counsel her? Absolutely, he said, because then she will need the grace and love of Jesus Christ all the more.