

Sanctity of Life Position

June 29, 2022

Introduction

On June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States made two rulings that resulted in a legal declaration that abortion procedures are not a right that is protected by the Constitution and that States have the right to regulate such procedures in ways they were not afforded since 1973. The world expectedly responded with celebration, agony, condemnation, observation, and in some rare cases, indifference. We wanted to offer a position on the decision that was pastoral and prayer-filled as we will all engage in a variety of responses among our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, friendships, etc. To be sure, this ruling has far-reaching political, medical, legal and other implications, many of which we feel inadequate to address.

Terminology

Before we discuss some of the issues, we must take a moment to define terms in order to communicate with clarity. Often, dialogue can be shut down due to unnecessary misunderstanding. While the following terms can be defined in various ways by individuals and groups, here is an explanation of what we mean based upon common medical definitions. Given the emotionally charged nature of this conversation, we are doing our best to define terms directly and succinctly without the unnecessary addition of words that carry a self-righteous tone that can often unnecessarily escalate conflict.

Abortion

A specific *process* involving the *removal* of a fertilized egg from the uterus (or fallopian tube if ectopic) as the result of OR resulting in the termination of zygote, embryonic, or fetal development. There are three general categories of abortion:

- **Spontaneous abortion** is the *unintentional* termination of development and expulsion of a fertilized egg. If this occurs before 20 weeks gestation it is often referred to as **miscarriage**. If it occurs after 20 weeks gestation, it is often referred to as **stillbirth**. People are sometimes shocked to see the word "abortion," on medical reports following miscarriage and stillbirths and there is ongoing dialogue in the medical community as to terminology of care since the language can often lead to unnecessary stress.
- **Medically necessary abortion** is the *intentional* termination of development and expulsion of a fertilized egg because further development is determined to threaten the life of the mother and/or the viability of the embryo or fetus. This is most often the case following an ectopic pregnancy (where the fetus does not implant in the uterine wall).
- **Elective abortion** is the *intentional* termination of development and expulsion of a fertilized egg for any reason other than what is medically necessary to protect the health of the mother and/or the viability of the embryo or fetus. This is generally the procedure opposed by those who want to prevent abortion.

Birth Control

Any effort made to prevent a pregnancy from occurring OR developing to full term. There are two primary methods of birth control:

- **Contraceptive birth control** is designed to prevent the fertilization of an egg and therefore prevent human pregnancy. Examples include vasectomy, tubal ligation, and barrier methods (i.e. condom, cervical cap, etc.). Contraception and birth control are NOT synonymous as there are birth control methods that are not contraceptive.
- **Abortifacient birth control** is designed to terminate the development of a fertilized egg and end human pregnancy. The morning after pill or Plan B are examples. It is difficult to provide a complete list because the way some of these methods work is either disputed or not always shared. In some cases, hormonal birth control pills are described as preventing sperm from reaching the egg, in others, they prevent a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus. It is best to discuss these methods with a medical professional and have a solid understanding of what method you are using, as some are thought to prevent fertilization of an egg, but actually expel a fertilized egg and terminate development.
- The primary difference between contraceptive and abortifacient birth control is that the former is designed to *prevent* pregnancy while the latter is designed to *terminate* it.

Pregnancy

The period of time in which at least one fertilized egg implants in the uterus and develops (gestates) prior to delivery. This is generally measured beginning from the last day of a woman's menstrual cycle through 40 weeks. There is debate about when this actually begins.¹ There are several processes in pregnancy:

- The **conception** of pregnancy is the union of sperm and egg resulting in fertilization and referred to as a **zygote**. It is at this point that a unique human DNA has been established and begins to develop.
- The zygote begins to multiply and becomes a **blastocyst** (around the 5th day) and two types of cells develop at this stage of development. The outer cells form protective and provisional membranes that will become the **placenta**, while the inner cells will develop into an **embryo**.
- The blastocyst will travel down the fallopian tube and attach to the uterus in a process called **implantation**, where it continues to develop all the necessary organs and systems needed for **viability** (life outside the womb).
- Once the major systems and organs have formed, the embryo is referred to as a **fetus** and continues in that stage until delivery. This transition takes place around 8 weeks after fertilization. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) clarifies that for 8 weeks after implantation, it is called an embryo. From 9 weeks after implantation until birth, it is called a fetus.²
- **Gestation** is the period of time that all of this development takes place.

Viability

Strictly speaking, viability refers to the stage of development at which a fetus can continue to develop under normal circumstances outside the uterus. Multiple factors influence viability based

¹ Grens, Kerry. "When does Pregnancy Begin: Doctors Disagree," *Reuters*, Nov. 17, 2011.

² <https://www.princeton.edu/~prolife/articles/embryoquotes2.html>

upon technological capacities and there is no uniform developmental benchmark for viability. At the time of publication (2022), the standard in western cultures with Pediatric Intensive Care Units is 24 weeks. Prior to this, the delivered baby has less than a 50% chance of survival, although the world record for earliest delivery took place in Nov. 2021 at 21 weeks.

Personhood

Personhood is the point at which the biological makeup of an organism with human DNA is considered a human being. Personhood is at the center of the issue of the sanctity of life. There are a plethora of various developmental benchmarks vying for the point at which a human should be conferred with the rights of a human being and there are a multitude of moral, ethical, and legal considerations based upon human rights and dignity. Some view life beginning at the moment of conception, some implantation, some at fetal development, some at viability, and some at birth. One of the aims of this position paper is to declare the theological convictions of Missio Dei Church based upon the teaching of Scripture.

History

The question of when personhood begins has been a question of theology throughout the ages.

Traditional Jewish teaching

In countless ways, the Jewish foundation of the Christian faith is undeniable. It is a worthwhile endeavor to consider the ways in which Judaism interprets shared sacred texts to consider continuity and discontinuity. While there are some Jewish sects that adhere to different ideas, the predominant teaching in Judaism is that **personhood begins at birth**.

According to the Talmud, which is a commentary on the Jewish Law compiled in the first few centuries AD, an unborn "child" is lower on the hierarchy of life dignity compared to the mother unless the head of the child has been born³. This is connected to the teaching in Genesis that life begins, not at conception or in the womb, but in drawing the first breath.⁴ Consequently, it ends at the last breath.⁵

Traditional Christian teaching

The traditional Christian teaching is that **personhood begins in the womb, before birth**. *The Didache*, which is the oldest Christian teaching outside of the New Testament states, "thou shalt not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide."⁶ While alone, it doesn't necessarily advocate for personhood in the womb, it does forbid the practice of abortion, which was not necessarily forbidden in Judaism.

³ *Talmud*, Tohoroth II Oholoth 7:6. "If a woman is having trouble giving birth, they cut up the child in her womb and brings it forth limb by limb, because her life comes before the life of [the child]. But if the greater part (the head) has come out, one may not touch it, for one may not set aside one person's life for that of another."

⁴ Gen. 2:7 "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."

⁵ Gen. 25:17 "These are the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years. He breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people."

⁶ *Didache* 2:2.

Tertullian, a Christian author born in the 150s AD who is considered one of the Fathers of Latin Christianity states,

“In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the foetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth.”⁷

Tertullian refers to the fetus as a human being and equates the destruction of it with murder, man-killing, and the destruction of life. For him, life begins in the womb and advances toward birth.

Augustine, the great bishop of North Africa poses the thought for inquiry,

“When does a human being begin to live in the womb? Is there some form of hidden life, not yet apparent in the motions of a living thing? To deny, for example, that those fetuses ever lived at all which are cut away limb by limb and cast out of the wombs of pregnant women, lest the mothers die also if the fetuses were left there dead, would seem much too rash. But, in any case, once a man begins to live, it is thereafter possible for him to die.”⁸

For Augustine, it would be audacious to deny that a fetus is a human life. There may be difficulty in measuring life without movement, but that doesn't mean there isn't human life in the womb.

This raises the question throughout history on the matter of “**ensoulment**,” or the time when the living body of a human was animated with a living soul. The measurement at the time was referred to as “**quickening**” and was marked by the mother's ability to feel the movement of the fetus in the womb. This idea dominates Christian thought throughout the ages. Despite being a dominant thought, one theologian, Gregory of Nyssa believed that it was meaningless to try to nail down the exact point in time. He writes,

“In the power of God's foreknowledge all the fulness of human nature had pre-existence and in the creation of individuals not to place the one element before the other, neither the soul before the body, nor the contrary, that man may not be at strife against himself, by being divided by the difference in point of time.”⁹

In other words, there is no body without ensoulment and no ensoulment without a body. For Gregory, personhood certainly exists in the womb and by implication, could be at conception.

Not only individual teachers were making these conclusions, but gatherings of Christians at formal Councils designed to debate, pray, and draw unifying conclusions on aspects of theology were articulating the belief that personhood begins in the womb and that abortion was sinful. “If a woman conceives in adultery and then has an abortion, she may not commune again, even as death approaches, because she has sinned twice.”¹⁰ This was equated to murder by 691 AD,

“As for women who furnish drugs for the purpose of procuring abortion, and those who take foetus-killing poisons, they are made subject to the penalty prescribed for murderers.”¹¹

⁷ Tertullian. *The Apology*, chapter 9.

⁸ Augustine. *Enchiridion*, chapter 86.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Making of Man*, chapter 29.

¹⁰ Canon 63 from the Council of Elvira, 324 AD.

¹¹ Canon 91 from the Quinisext Eccumenical Council, 621 AD.

The corpus of writing among Christian teachers and Councils throughout the ages has affirmed human life and person in the womb.

Modern Christian teaching

Nearly every modern denomination of the Christian faith teaches that ***personhood begins in the womb at conception.***

The Roman Catholic Catechism declares, "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception" and

"Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law."¹²

The Anglican Church states,

"Every human being, from the time of his conception, is a creature and child of God, made in His image and likeness, an infinitely precious soul; and that the unjustifiable or inexcusable taking of life is always sinful"¹³

The Lutheran Church concludes,

"From the moment of conception the fetus is alive and biologically human, son or daughter, distinct from mother, with an unmatched genetic code. Beginning at conception, the development of human life is a continuum which unfolds until natural death. At some points in this continuum every human being is dependent upon others, while at other points independent. But at every point he and she are valuable. There is no identifiable moment on the continuum of life where "meaningful" or "worthy" life begins. Any attempt to locate such a moment, whether at viability, birth or any other time, is fundamentally arbitrary and rooted only in convenience and not in principle."¹⁴

According to the Presbyterian Church in America,

"Conception, then, is not a mere human happening. Apart from the sovereign intervention of God, conception (which Scripture designates a divine blessing) does not take place (Genesis 21:1-2; 30:1-2, 22; 1 Samuel 1:19; Job 31:15, 33:4). It would therefore be a willful act of defiance against the Creator intentionally to kill an unborn child whose conception is so intimately a Divine as well as a human act. No child belongs only to man. He is God's child. And His Word must govern the protection and care of that child both before and after birth."¹⁵

Surprisingly, the Southern Baptist Convention did not take the same stance until 1979. In fact, there was a point where,

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Second Edition, Paragraphs 2270-2271.

¹³ *Affirmation of St. Louis*. "Sanctity of Human Life." Principle of Morality, paragraph 2, Anglican Church.

¹⁴ "That They May Have Life." Article 3, paragraph 9, The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, 1997.

¹⁵ "Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Abortion." Presbyterian Church in America, 6th General Assembly, 1978, Appendix O, page 270.

“The SBC adopted a resolution at its 1971 meeting that supported legislation permitting abortion for reasons nearly as expansive as those the Supreme Court eventually would allow in *Roe v. Wade* and its companion ruling, *Doe v. Bolton*.”¹⁶

Some clergy members from mainline denominations formed the Clergy Consultation Services, which was “an international network of clergy that helped women obtain legal and illegal abortions from licensed medical professionals.”¹⁷ These viewpoints were short-lived, in a minority viewpoint among Christian, and disconnected with the historic teaching of the Church.

As the study of cellular structures has advanced since the 1830s, our understanding of the biology has increased the confidence that human life and personhood take place in the womb as early as conception. Marking the beginning at any point after conception seems arbitrary since the changes to conceived life are developmental. Even following the birth of a baby, there is a complete reliance on others for sustenance, provision, etc.

Biblical teaching

As a Reformed Church, our ultimate authority is the Bible, so we’re always looking to both description and prescription to determine doctrine and practice. Although Church History is helpful, it is not primarily authoritative.

Sanctity of Life

The Bible teaches that human life is intrinsically valuable because it bears the image of God (*Imago Dei*). It is this theology that grants “unalienable rights” to all human beings. According to Genesis 1, human persons were created by God and in His image¹⁸ bestowing a value and dignity that is to be considered sacred. The destruction of the image of God carries a high penalty¹⁹ because it is an assault on God Himself. This doctrine was one of the primary driving influences for Christians to seek an end to ancient bloodsports, adopt abandoned children, work to free slaves, start hospitals, etc.²⁰ Christian theology teaches that we should dignify and protect human life because of its value as the image of God.

Personhood in the womb

At creation, the image bearers of God were commanded to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”²¹ with more of the image of God indicating that the offspring would bear God’s image.

¹⁶ Strode, Tom. “Southern Baptists transformed as U.S. grappled with *Roe v. Wade*,” *Baptist Press*, Jan. 22, 2003.

¹⁷ Frank, Gillian. “The Surprising Role of Clergy in the Abortion Fight Before *Roe v. Wade*,” *Time Magazine*, May 2, 2017.

¹⁸ Gen. 1:27 “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

¹⁹ Gen. 9:6 “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”

²⁰ For more on this subject, we recommend the book, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History*, Zondervan, 2021.

²¹ Genesis 1:28

It is undeniable that the Bible teaches the personhood of the imago dei in the womb. In what is considered the oldest text in the Bible, the character Job asks confessionally, "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?"²² Psalm 139 also declares that personhood was formed by God in the womb. "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb."²³ The New Testament continues the teaching that personhood is established before birth, in the womb. In the Gospel according to Luke, he claims, "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb."²⁴

Personhood in the womb doesn't necessarily equate to personhood at conception, unless the Bible teaches that as well. This seems to be relatively explicit in the opening chapters of the Bible. "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord."²⁵ The physical union is described in connection to both conception and with personhood. Over and over again, the Bible describes conception and connects it to personhood.²⁶

Dignifying Human Personhood

We have already seen that the consequences for the unnecessary taking of human life is high. Not only were many of the laws of the Bible designed to protect the vulnerable,²⁷ but the New Testament teaches that the law and prophets were dependent upon the great commandment to love God and love people.²⁸

There were multiple ways God's people were commanded to care for the vulnerable. One of which included the responsibility for a man to provide for the needs of a woman with whom he has a physical sexual relationship, regardless of the status of the relationship.

"If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and he has sexual relations with her, he must certainly pay the bridal price for her to be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must pay an amount in silver equal to the bridal price for virgins."²⁹

Additionally, there were responsibilities to reconcile any injury caused to a pregnant woman and her unborn baby. Exodus 21:22-25 teaches that if a pregnant woman is hurt causing her unborn baby to be born, there is only a fine if there is no injury, but if there is an injury (to the woman and/or baby) "you must give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound."

Concluding Convictions

We confess that human life is sacred because it is created in the image of God and must be protected.

²² Job 31:15

²³ Psalm 139:13

²⁴ Luke 1:40-44

²⁵ Gen. 4:1

²⁶ Gen. 21:2; Ex. 2:2; I Sam. 2:21; I Chron. 7:23; Hosea 1:6

²⁷ Exodus 22:21-23

²⁸ Matt. 22:34-40

²⁹ Exodus 22:16-17

We confess that human life mysteriously begins at conception and bears the image of God which should be dignified and protected. Because the genetic code of the human person is generally fully present, the primary changes in the human life are developmental and it would be arbitrary to mark personhood at any developmental stage as the point at which ensoulment takes place and personhood is established. What if development is slowed or stalled as we often see during pregnancy and in the first years (or after a tragic event)? Does that human life cease to be a person? Therefore, willful termination of a conceived life in the womb through elective abortion for any reason beyond the preservation of the life of the mother or the child is considered immoral, unethical, and should be avoided.

We confess that because the conception of a human being is not an individual isolated event, the choice of what happens with conceived human life is not an individual isolated responsibility. There is a responsibility for fathers to make provision and for church communities to provide support as they are able.

We confess that the ability to live according to the law of God requires a regeneration of the heart through faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, therefore our approach to these issues must be marked by love, humility, and service.

Implications

Given the need for regenerated hearts and the gospel-centered desire of our church, we want to ensure that we are making decisions with conviction and compassion together. The goal of the pastorate should be to serve as trusted advisors who listen, pray, and offer God's perspective where it is clear and be honest and humble where it is not.

Because we embrace the teaching of the imago dei, it is the posture of Missio Dei Church to proactively create ministry avenues that dignify the sanctity of life [and guide people to make life-affirming decisions](#). We have been involved and will continue to be involved in ministries that assist women with unwanted pregnancies, promote foster and adoption care of for children in troubled circumstances, proclaim sexual responsibility among men and women, and minister to women who have been or are currently in sexual exploitation.

At the time of the writing of this position paper, Missio Dei Church provides care for families who have experienced pregnancy loss, outreach to women who have been sexually exploited, resources, care, and support for families engaged with foster and adoption ministry, outreach and care for single mothers including teenage single mothers, and a consistent charge for men to be sexually responsible.

Because we embrace the sanctity of life, we are hesitant to embrace the term, "pro-life." Pro-life has come to describe a political position that is too often relegated to the prevention of abortion rather than the all-encompassing Christian doctrine of the Sanctity of Life. Therefore, if you ask if Missio is "Pro-life," we are likely to ask, "what do you mean by that?" We will do our best to provide, support, and direct resources that dignify human personhood no matter a person's age, race, gender, disability, or socio economic status. We believe that we can do this best relationally rather than legislatively.

Finally, we recognize that this is a complex issue considering the numerous exceptions that are constantly being asked by a variety of people who have experienced or love someone who has experienced an abortion either voluntarily or involuntarily. We're painfully aware that we cannot address every circumstance or situation within the limitations of a theological position paper. As pastors, we are always open to respectful dialogue on these matters.