

Abortion and Infanticideⁱ

Situational—The world as it exists...

1. Abortion/infanticide throughout history
 - a. Common practices historically
 - b. In biblical times: exposure (a form of infanticide) was fairly commonⁱⁱ
 - c. A social evil or socially allowable, perhaps unavoidable?:
 - i. In the distant past and today, different cultures, clans, and social groups have wrestled with abortion and infanticide. Attitudes, allowances, and restrictions have waxed and waned. Still, despite restrictions, people invented or found ways of relieving themselves of unwanted pregnancies or infants.
 - d. The mental and physical struggle to care for other human beings is not a new phenomenon
2. Why did abortion, infanticide, or exposure occur in the ancient world?
 - a. Deformity or abnormality
 - b. Illegitimacy
 - c. Economic need
 - d. Omens or despairⁱⁱⁱ
3. Today—Roe vs. Wade, 1973.
 - a. Abortion in decline?^{iv}
 - b. Emergency contraception/non-medical abortion since 2000^v
 - c. Unreported abortions still occur
 - d. Why do abortions happen today?^{vi}
 - i. Support and security problems
 1. 45% percent of women who get (an) abortion(s) are unmarried *and* not cohabitating.
 - ii. Age and fear of changing life circumstances
 1. Over half of women who get abortions do so in their early or late 20s (again, primarily unmarried)
 - iii. Economically unable or impoverished
 1. Many women who get (an) abortion(s) are economically disadvantaged. This has been growing.
 2. 42% of women who get (an) abortion(s) are **100%** below the poverty level
 3. 27% of women who get (an) abortion(s) are **100-199%** below the poverty level
 - iv. Difficulties in family expansion (often, but not exclusively, related to economics)
 1. 61% of women who get an abortion already have at least one child^{vii}
 - v. From the Guttmacher Institute's "Fact Sheet":
 1. "The reasons women give for having an abortion underscore their understanding of the responsibilities of parenthood and family life. Three-fourths of women cite concern for or responsibility to other individuals; three-fourths say they cannot afford a child; three-fourths say that having a baby would interfere with work, school or the ability

to care for dependents; and half say they do not want to be a single parent or are having problems with their husband or partner.”

4. The church and abortion
 - a. The church’s historic position^{viii}
 - b. Abortion in the church body^{ix}
 - c. Fear of speaking out? The silent many...^x
 - d. Medical allowances—abortion to save the life of the mother^{xi}

Normative—What does the biblical text say? In what ways does the Lord want us to act?

1. Sixth commandment—murder and the image of God [Gen. 1:26; 2:7; *death*, a product of the fall, is also something that Jesus grieves deeply]
2. Murder and the covenant with Noah:
 - a. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” [Gen. 9; also, see: Numbers 35:33]
3. The biblical text and the sacrifice of infant children in the ancient near east:
 - a. Acting as God’s people, Israel was to be unlike the surrounding nations, especially when it came to child sacrifice:
 - i. All firstborn were set apart for God, but not for sacrifice. Instead, they were redeemed [Exodus 13]
 - ii. It was also a sign of their being led out of Egypt—a place where their children were killed to control the Israelite population [Acts 7:19]
 - b. One aspect of the Israelite failure to be set apart was due to infanticide:
 - i. At times, Israelites seem to have participated in the ritual slaughter of children [Isaiah 57:5; Jer. 7:30-34]

Read and Discuss: Abortion debates tend to focus on the question of when “life” begins?

1. What does the biblical text say about human life in the womb?
 - a. Read: **Psalm 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5; Luke 1:39-45** (attached below; also if you want, see: Job 31:13-15)
 - i. What are these passages talking about? How should we read them individually or together? (as poetry, as binding law, as ethical precepts, as simply narrative flourish, etc.)
 - ii. What other themes or stories in Bible are similar to these passages?
 - iii. Do these passages seem to imply that there is life in the womb?
 - iv. What do these passages say about God’s sovereignty and the forming of an unborn human?
 - v. How does God relate to human beings in the womb?
 - vi. Do these passages apply to the issue of abortion? How strongly?
 - vii. Do we need a biblical passage that outright condemns the practice of abortion?

Existential—How does the biblical text affect our hearts?

Read and Discuss: Deut. 27:19; Zec. 7:8-11; Malachi 3:5 (attached below):

[These passages note a common theme about the poor and suffering, repeated throughout the OT and NT., for future reference: Amos 8:4-6; James 1:26-27]

- Who do these texts claim we have a responsibility to protect? What do all of the people mentioned in these passages have in common?
- What does support or protection for the widow, fatherless, and others who are disadvantaged look like today?
- What does it look like in your own life?
- From your view: in evangelical circles, has adequate attention been given to the difficult circumstances women face?
- Do we have a responsibility to those who might be considering abortion? If so, what might that responsibility be?
- What responsibility do we have in shaping medical and public policy?
- What should be our Christian response to those in our midst who have had (an) abortion(s)?
- In your experience, does it seem that the church could be more open about abortion?
- We have wicked hearts and exist in a broken society with broken relationships: How do we “abort” people in our own lives? Or, those who are not in our lives directly?^{xii}

“Special Case” Abortion—For many Christians, there is considerable difficulty with “specific” or “special” case abortions, such as pregnancies involving incest or rape (happens, but much rarer)—there is no simple or easy answer to these cases: how should we think about abortion and unborn life in these situations?^{xiii}

Passages for Discussion:

Psalm 139:13-16

13

For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

14

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it 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 saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,

when as yet there was none of them.

Jeremiah 1:5

5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Luke 1:39-45

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **42** and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! **43** And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Deuteronomy 27:19

19 “‘Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”

Zechariah 7:

8 And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, **9** “Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, **10** do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” **11** But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear.

Malachi 3:

5 “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Endnotes for Facilitators:

ⁱ This was a handout resource created for a course on biblical ethics. This particular session included considerable group discussion and elaboration from the facilitator. The notes have been adapted to act as a print/web resource; *they are not comprehensive for what was addressed verbally*. Any questions about the biblical ethics course and how it was facilitated can be directed to the author: m.h.brittingham@emory.edu

ⁱⁱ It is no wonder that in the after effects of *Roe v. Wade*, and the rise of the religious right’s anti-abortion campaign, scholars of ancient history renewed debates on the impact and extent of infanticide, especially exposure. It appears that we (Christians) are not dealing with anything new in the human heart. Humans have constantly struggled with

caring for others. On debates about exposure in the ancient world (mostly Greco-Roman), see: William V. Harris, “The Theoretical Possibility of Extensive Infanticide in the Greco-Roman World,” *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1982): 114-116.

ⁱⁱⁱ The reasons specifically given for exposure are provided by Cynthia Patterson, “Not Worth Rearing”: The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 115 (1985): 103-123. On the complexities of exposure and law, even in the Christian era of the Roman Empire, see: W.V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 84 (1994): 1-22.

^{iv} There are still many, many abortions in the U.S., but according to statistics from the Guttmacher Institute and the CDC, abortion is declining. This decline does not necessarily suggest positive futures where conservative Christians are concerned—the use of emergency contraception is rising in its place. See: “Abortion in the United States,” Guttmacher Institute, accessed February 2016: <http://ow.ly/ZfsIX>; also, see the CDC’s numerous reports on abortion: Karen Pazol, Andreea A. Creanga, and Denise J. Jamieson, “Abortion Surveillance—United States, 2012,” CDC, published November 27, 2015, accessed February 2016: <http://ow.ly/ZfvBY>; also, Kimberly Daniels, Jo Jones, and Joyce Abma, “Use of Emergency Contraception Among Women Aged 15–44: United States, 2006–2010,” *NCHS Data Brief*, No. 112, February 2012: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db112.pdf>

^v Evangelicals should be aware of this issue and thoughtfully engage scientific data on the use of emergency contraception.

^{vi} Below are *some* reasons why *some* women get abortions (or *some* men pressure pregnant women to get abortions). For many, the issues get quite complicated. For others, it can be a decision made with little worry or care. Despite the fact that some women might not be terribly convicted by their decision to have an abortion, the statistics show that many women who receive abortions are greatly affected by problems associated with economic, social, and familial instability. According to many scholars and scientists, abortions are today extremely safe procedures with few, if any, complications. Likewise, it is very difficult to tell whether post-abortion psychological strain actually results directly from abortion, or is caused by other complicated factors in the lives of many women who get abortions (i.e.—poverty, familial instability, etc.). The complicated reasons that women might get abortions, or feel distraught over such a past choice, should lead us as conservative Christians toward broader concerns regarding women’s health and wellness. Abortion requires us to take unpopular stances, but it does not detract from the fact that our work against abortion intersects other social problems relevant (or should be!) to conservative Christians everywhere.

^{vii} Pazol, Creanga, and Jamieson, “Abortion Surveillance.” Also, see: “Fact Sheet: Induced Abortion in the United States: March 2016,” Guttmacher Institute: http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

^{viii} To help facilitate this section, see: John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 4th Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 132-137.

^{ix} According to the Guttmacher Institute, 73% of those who get an abortion are religiously affiliated; see: “Abortion in the United States” Guttmacher Institute. By itself that stat says very little. The Her.meneutics Blog found statistics from the Guttmacher Institute that suggested one in every five women who gets an abortion identifies with more conservative Christian traditions, such as evangelical, charismatic, or fundamentalist; see: Julie Roys, “The Secret Shame of Abortion in the Church,” Her.meneutics Blog, *Christianity Today*, published February 2015: <http://ow.ly/Zfstn>

^x Roys, “The Secret Shame of Abortion in the Church.”

^{xi} Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 146-160. Davis lays out several positions, but it is clear on what is the dominant view in Protestant circles (p.146).

^{xii} To understand the full social impacts of abortion and how to combat the issue, in many cases evangelicals must be more attuned to long-term aid. The struggles and pressures associated with caring for a child obviously continue past the moment of birth. For a long time, conservative Christians, at least those who dominated the media, were exclusively interested in women’s health and wellness from the moment of conception to the moment of birth. Our care should extend before and after. The issue of abortion should encourage us to tackle many social problems: general economic inequality, problems associated with unstable living arrangements, domestic violence, equal pay for equal work, etc.

^{xiii} For another resource, see the PCA’s position paper: “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Abortion,” 6th General Assembly, 1978, Appendix O, pages 270-281. Also, see OPC position papers: 38th GA of the OPC: <http://www.opc.org/GA/abortion.html>; and 39th GA: http://www.opc.org/GA/Abortion_GA39.html