

THE ETHICS OF ABORTION: A PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

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The following statement is being issued by several Protestant religious leaders affiliated with the Massachusetts Council of Churches, as a contribution to responsible public discourse and discernment about a difficult moral issue.

When considering the ethics of abortion, the affirmation of the potential right of the fetus (or the sanctity of life) and the rights of the woman, including the right to choose, are not mutually exclusive. Both are legitimate moral claims, even if they sometimes compete and conflict. It is not desirable to minimize either of them in order to arrive at a compromise position, nor is it proper to subsume one under the other. Both claims have their own validity and integrity; both need to be affirmed. Such is the paradoxical nature of the abortion debate which should not be mired in polarized positions, but should attempt to find common ground that respects both the right of the woman's choice as well as the potential rights of the fetus.

The Creator has endowed human beings with many gifts, including life and the freedom to be moral agents. The freedom to choose is a key to the acceptance of moral responsibility. As moral agents endowed by God, we freely recognize and affirm the wonder of life in all of God's creatures as a manifestation of the glory of the Creator.

Therefore, as children of God made in the divine image, we should have a reverence for the gift of life, especially human life. With this regard for the sanctity of life, we think it is morally necessary that the number of abortions (legal as well as illegal) be substantially reduced. This reduction can be accomplished through a number of means including preaching and teaching an ethic of sexual responsibility, and more effective and properly disseminated conception control measures. In addition, the range of choices available to women who are considering abortions should be considerably expanded (such as adoption, financial support, and requiring responsible behavior of fathers). Such a broad range of choices includes care for pregnant women as well as support systems (including counseling and support services for mothers, as well as adequate nutrition, housing, medical care and child care) that might enable a woman to choose to have a child rather than an abortion.

Both the availability of adequate conception control measures (which reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies) and support systems for parents and children (which can turn unwanted pregnancies into children who are wanted) enhance human freedom as well as preserve human life. Our society has a responsibility to guarantee both of these.

Since the freedom to choose is essential to moral responsibility, it is important that the full range of choices be preserved for all women as a matter of law, including the woman's right to choose an abortion as early as possible in her pregnancy.

Thus, churches should struggle to keep the legal system open while continuing to press the moral questions. The right to choose an abortion not only should be available in the case of rape of incest, but also if the woman's physical or mental health is impaired by pregnancy, childbirth, or motherhood, or if there is a significant negative impact on the family. That choice should be made available to all women even if we think that abortion almost never should be chosen. Abortions for convenience or for gender selection, however, are not morally justifiable. Although the father ordinarily should have some say in the decision, the right to choose an abortion rests ultimately with the woman and not anyone else, including the government. Medical and pastoral advice should be sought by both parties, when appropriate, before a decision is made.

If the full range of choices is to be preserved, it should be preserved for all women, not only for those who have adequate financial resources. For those women without adequate financial resources, society should provide a full range of support services, including abortion counseling and the means to have a medically safe abortion. The preservation of an equitable range of options for all women is a matter of social justice, of which the government, by both direct and indirect means, is a major guarantor. Another role for government and other groups in society, particularly religious institutions, is to find ways to get the father of the fetus to accept moral and financial responsibility.

Any legal attempt to restrict those choices should be resisted, because the outlawing of abortion will lead to greater inequities in our society. In addition, such attempts could undermine respect for all civil law, as occurred following passage of the Prohibition Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Those with the financial means who desire abortions will travel to places where abortion is legal, while those who do not have the financial means will resort to illegal and in many cases crude and unsafe abortions.

Thus, we avoid simple polarities of "pro-life" versus "pro-choice." Choice and human life are not always mutually exclusive and if they do conflict, the choice is always tragic. A woman's right to choose and the potential rights of the fetus are both legitimate moral claims. Both claims need to be affirmed and enhanced. In all cases, it is necessary that the institutions in society, especially the churches, help to create a community with an ethos and institutions to make the decision to carry the fetus to term more possible.

Signers include:

The Rev. Dr. Bruce B. Bueschel, Interim Executive Presbyter, Boston Presbytery, Synod of the Northeast, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); The Rev. Harry H. Hoehler, Council of Christian Congregations within the Unitarian Universalist Association; Bishop Robert Isaksen, New England Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; The Rt. Rev. David E. Johnson, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts; Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, Boston Area, United Methodist Church; The Rev. Bennie E. Whiten, Jr., Minister and President, Mass. Conference, United Church of Christ; The Rt. Rev. Andrew Wissemann, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Western Mass.; The Rev. Diane C. Kessler, Executive Director, Massachusetts Council of Churches