
Adventists and Abortion: A Principled Approach

by Gerald Winslow

It may seem odd that a church with stated positions on such matters as card playing and theater attendance has no official stance toward one of the most widely debated moral issues of modern times — abortion. But such is the case with Seventh-day Adventists today.¹ Though we have published “suggestive guidelines,” we have not legislated hard-and-fast rules on abortion for church members or church institutions. Nor is this paper a call for such legislation. No one would be more dismayed than I if our present efforts to address the moral questions in human biology and medicine were to result in attempts to produce moral conformity through policy-making.

What is needed, I will suggest, is a continuing discussion of the general moral principles which should guide decision-making about abortion. If moral consensus ever emerges, it will be because we have engaged one another in serious discourse at the principled level of moral thought. Several years ago in a signifi-

cant essay on abortion, Jack Provonsa indicated that his work “should be considered as one more contribution to what should remain, as yet, an ongoing conversation.”² The present paper is based in part on the conviction that the possibility of such a conversation remains open. My purpose is twofold: to seek understanding of the evolution of Adventist thought on abortion during recent years, and, in the light of this understanding, to invite consideration of three moral principles which I think should inform decisions about abortion.

It should be obvious at the outset that even if consensus were possible at the principled level of moral thought, this would in no way imply the possibility of uniform moral judgments at the level of specific cases. By any calculation, abortion presents us with a dilemma of immense complexity. The intricacies of borderline cases bring us to the edges of our ability to reason morally and threaten to reduce us to babbling.

But tough dilemmas, such as abortion, may also lead us toward moral maturity. The fact that an issue is called a moral *dilemma* generally reveals that two or more of our firmly held values are in conflict. If we do not rush to resolve the conflict in facile, one-

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dimensional ways, if we pause long enough to explore in some depth our colliding values, we may become clearer about why the problem troubles us so. And, as a result, we may be able to state with greater clarity and force those principles which we must balance if we are to remain true to our Christian convictions and honest about the complexity of the moral dilemma confronting us.

It seems important to describe briefly the kind of abortion case I consider paradigmatic. Too often, I am convinced, there is a tendency to concentrate a disproportionate amount of the discussion on the types of cases which are almost never encountered. My own view of a typical case is shaped, of course, by my experience. Let me illustrate with a bit of recent biography. In one week of a recent school year, four students came to my office at different times to talk about abortion. One had recently had an abortion; the other three were thinking about seeking abortions. All four were church members. Two were married, and two were not. Many of the basic elements of their situations were similar: unexpected pregnancies, fear of financial and academic difficulties, social embarrassment, generally disrupted plans, and varying degrees of guilt. Their stories would, I think, elicit profound feelings of compassion from any sensitive person. And few of us would have ready-made solutions to offer. But, if we are to maintain integrity, such cases prompt us to scrutinize our own moral convictions.

There is value in knowing where we have been before we proceed; otherwise we may be like the driver who did not want to check which road he was traveling because he was making such good time. I will therefore attempt briefly to reconstruct Adventist thought on abortion during the past few years. I base these remarks partly on personal experience and partly on the small amount of literature which Adventists have written on the topic. Since I can lay no claim to be doing thorough church history on the matter, I must offer these observations in the form of an extended hunch. I trust that others with more experience can add essential details and

correct inaccuracies.

Let me begin this reconstruction with another biographical note. In 1967, I was a newly graduated minister serving as a hospital chaplain. Early in my experience, the physician in charge of the obstetrics and gynecology department asked for a conference. Had I known at that time that he was a Roman Catholic, I might not have been so surprised at his concern: He was troubled by what he considered dubious therapeutic abortions. These abortions, he claimed, were being done for the most trivial of medical reasons, if indeed any medical reasons could be given at all. If Adventists had no moral compunctions about such cases, he wondered, were we not at least concerned that such procedures were against the spirit and letter of the state's abortion law? He closed the conference with a question which could not be easily forgotten: "Do you Adventist theologians have nothing to say on such matters?"

I was, I knew, a fledgling in the Adventist theological ranks. So I attributed my own lack of a position to the fact that I might have missed something in my education or experience. But a search for articles by others treating the subject from the perspective of Adventist theology led to the conclusion that little, if anything, had been written.

Why were we relatively silent on abortion? There were, no doubt, many reasons. But my guess is that two or three factors would rank near the top. First, there are no biblical passages explicitly prescribing or proscribing abortion. Nor do the writings of Ellen White offer direct guidance. With these sources silent, it is not surprising that Adventists would be reluctant to take a definite position. Second, Adventists have roots in a conservative type of Protestantism which, as Ralph Potter has pointed out, has traditionally disapproved of abortion except in those rare cases when the life or health of the mother is seriously threatened.³ Though it is empirically unsubstantiated, my guess is that a large proportion of rank-and-file Adventists still holds essentially to this conservative position. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, state laws until the late 1960s and early 1970s generally reflected a conservative stance toward

abortion.⁴ These laws provided an umbrella which protected many people from the moral ambiguities of abortion. This point is illustrated by the reported words of one Adventist minister when he was asked about the “church’s position on abortion.” He replied: “It’s illegal in this state, and the church’s position is that we should abide by the laws of the state in such matters.”⁵ My hunch, then, is that the basically conservative attitude of many church members coincided with conservative state laws and made taking a definite position unnecessary.

What happened in the late ’60s and early ’70s was a rapid liberalization of the state laws. This process culminated in the Supreme Court decision of 1973 which ruled that the abortion decision during the early months of pregnancy is a private matter to be settled by the pregnant woman and her physician.⁶

The movement toward more liberal abortion laws left many people in a moral quandary. People whose traditional attitudes had been largely unexamined now had to take conscious positions. As early as 1968, Potter made what turned out to be an accurate prediction. He suggested that a large segment of Protestantism would support reform abortion legislation and judicial rulings. And he predicted that the reform would probably be patterned after the Model Penal Code of the American Law Institute.⁷ According to that code, a physician is justified in performing an abortion if “there is substantial risk that continuance of the pregnancy would gravely impair the physical or mental health of the mother, or that the child would be born with grave physical or mental defect, or that the pregnancy resulted from rape, incest, or other felonious intercourse.”⁸

Only three years after Potter’s prediction, Seventh-day Adventists published the first, and, so far as I know, only set of “suggestive guidelines” for therapeutic abortions. The similarity to the Model Penal Code is striking. Even the order of indications is the same:

It is believed that therapeutic abortions may be performed for the following established indications:

1. When continuation of the pregnancy may threaten the life of the woman or seriously impair her health.

2. When continuation of the pregnancy is likely to result in the birth of a child with grave physical deformities or mental retardation.

3. When conception has occurred as a result of rape or incest.⁹

I have no idea whether or not the authors of the guidelines had the Model Penal Code in mind. My point is that when we did formulate guidelines on abortion, they reflected the general tenor of a moderate reform position. The guidelines can be located somewhere between the very restrictive traditions of earlier years and the very liberal position of those calling for abortion on demand. Perhaps the element which is most obviously new in this moderate reform position was the inclusion of the likelihood of birth defects as a legitimate indication for “therapeutic” abortion.

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tions. This indication expands the earlier meanings of “therapeutic” beyond the immediate well-being of the pregnant woman. Further evidence of the reform nature of the guidelines is revealed by the two indications which were later added to the statement which was sent to Adventist institutions:

4. When the case involves an unwed child under 15 years of age.

5. When for some reason the requirements of functional human life demand the sacrifice of the lesser potential human value.¹⁰

More important, for our present purposes, than an analysis of these specific indications for abortion are the theological and moral warrants for the positions taken. The

guidelines are prefaced with the following words:

The basis for these guidelines exists on the person-image concept, which is governed by a system of priorities with an ascending scale of values. It is believed that this person-image concept is the Biblical basis enjoined upon the church, is one that can be defended, and is one that we should support.¹¹

What is this "person-image concept?" The preface does not elaborate, but an article by R. F. Waddell does discuss this notion. The author affirms that human beings were created in the image of God, and it is this image which gives human beings their value. Therefore, the author adds, "man should attempt by every means at his disposal to ensure that offspring be perfect in mind, body, and spirit."¹²

One of the means for ensuring the best possible reproduction of the image of God is apparently the abortion of defective fetuses. The author says that the pregnancy may be terminated if there is evidence that the fetus has been "mutilated, deformed, or mal-developed to the extent that it cannot become a normal individual."¹³

It is not entirely clear from this article how close to normal one must be in order to be deemed a possessor of the "person-image." But it is clear that during the early months of pregnancy the "person-image" is not considered to be present. It is said that justified abortions should be done early in the pregnancy because "During those first three months the embryo . . . has not reached the stage where it can be considered an identity."¹⁴ The author adds that during the first trimester the embryo cannot be deemed to "possess life in itself."¹⁵

It seems fairly clear, then, that the "person-image concept" encompasses the following set of ideas: The embryo does not have a "person-image" during the first trimester. From that time forward the "person-image" gradually develops. No time is designated for the completion of the "person-image." However, any serious defects — as examples, the article lists mental retardation, being crippled, and having an incurable disease¹⁶ — lessen or limit the po-

tential for attaining the "person-image." Thus, on the view of fetal life which apparently undergirds the "suggestive guidelines," the fetus achieves whatever protectable value it has on the basis of its *potential* personhood.

Probably the most significant Adventist statement of a type of potentiality perspective is Jack Provonsha's essay on therapeutic abortion published about the same time as the "suggestive guidelines." According to Provonsha, the fetus is a potential human being at least from the time of implantation. The quality which makes a being truly human is the capacity to experience value and meaning made possible by the ability to use symbols. On this view, the fetus is not yet human. But the fetus stands for or symbolizes the human. In Provonsha's words: "The increasingly potential human organism developing in its mother's body is not yet human — but it 'means' human and can serve human values by crystallizing and conditioning respect for human life."¹⁷ Thus, the fetus is a "secondary symbolic value." Full human value is achieved only when the being is able to join in the community of those who use symbols, experience value, and make moral decisions.

Since the publication of this essay and the guidelines, most Adventist authors have continued to develop a moderate position, attempting to balance the life of the fetus (variously described) against the life, health, and choices of the pregnant woman.¹⁸ Less prevalent, but not unknown, are Adventists whose stated positions are similar to the 1973 Supreme Court decision — the pregnant woman's choice is the basic indication for abortion.¹⁹ The other end of the spectrum is also represented in Adventist literature. In what may be a growing reaction to rapid liberalization of the last decade, some authors appear to be taking a fairly conservative stance. Typical of this view is a recent editorial in which the writer says that a pregnant woman "holds in her hands the future of at least two human beings: herself and that of the child within her body."²⁰ And apparently rejecting something akin to the "person-image con-

cept,” the editorial adds: “Even during the first trimester . . . we see too much evidence that the creature growing within her [i.e., the pregnant woman] is a living human being, not merely a mass of cells or protoplasm.”²¹

If the foregoing reconstruction is at all accurate, then it seems clear that the mainstream of published Adventist thought can be described as moderate on abortion, reforming the more restrictive positions of the past but generally unwilling to endorse abortion on demand. My own perception is that a significant proportion of the Adventist membership holds views somewhat more conservative than the mainstream of published statements, while much of Adventist practice could be characterized as more liberal than the published statements. What seems almost totally lacking is any sustained moral discourse in which Adventist thinkers engage one another in published discussion at the level of moral principles. It is with the goal of promoting such a discussion that I now wish to consider three examples of moral principles which I believe should inform decisions about abortion.

The statement of general principles, no matter how carefully formulated, will not assure responsible moral judgments. Moral decision-making requires, in addition, virtues such as sensitivity, imagination, compassion and courage. And, from beginning to end, the Christian acknowledges the essential guidance of God’s Spirit. Even then, there is no total escape from all uncertainty. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the value of systematic reflection on and the precise exposition of moral principles with supportive reasoning. Such principles establish presumptions in favor of certain types of actions and against others. And exceptions to the principles are required to bear the burden of proof.²²

With this understanding of the purpose of principles in mind, I now wish to state three which I believe are relevant to the discussion of abortion.

1. *The principle of respect for human life.* The Bible leaves no doubt: human life is the precious gift of God.²³ The expensive plan of

salvation reveals God’s incalculable commitment to bring life to dying human beings. But what quality gives this human life such great value?

The answer often given in Christian theology is that human life is valued because of God’s overflowing love. We love and respect others because He first loved us.²⁴ The worth of a human life is not seen to reside in any identifiable quality in the life itself. Whatever worth or dignity human beings have is attributed to them because of God’s steadfast love. Thus, Christians have sometimes referred to the value of human life in terms of an “alien dignity.”²⁵ This is a dignity bestowed upon human life by the choices of God in creation and redemption, and not by the achievements of human beings themselves. This means that the fundamental respect we have for human life is not dependent on measurements of some developed capacity. Such measurements would always be in terms of “more or less,” but our respect for human life is unconditional. Helmut Thielicke does well to remind us that “Even the most pitiful life still shares in the protection of alien dignity.”²⁶ We stand in awe of human life because we stand in awe of God and His abiding love.

But the question with regard to abortion is: Does the principle of respect for human life extend to prenatal life? Should the life of a human embryo or fetus also be accorded respect? Those who turn to Scripture for a definitive answer are likely to be disappointed. The Bible offers no specific instructions about how prenatal life should be treated.²⁷ But the Bible informs our decision-making in many more ways than simply by direct commands.²⁸ Scripture provides an over-arching universe of symbolic meaning which lends value or disvalue to specific acts. Through its stories and symbols, the Bible enlivens moral imagination.

An illustration of how moral imagination may be shaped by the Bible is provided by the familiar story of John the Baptist’s birth. At least four elements of this story merit scrutiny because of their potential for affecting our view of prenatal life:

a) The conception of John is portrayed as the miraculous fulfillment of the divine mandate. Many times in biblical stories, God's power is pictured as being revealed in the conception of a child.²⁹ Indeed, it seems to be a favored strategy for reaffirming God's intimate presence in the lives of His chosen ones.

b) John's mission in life was designated even prior to his conception. This is also an oft-repeated theme in the Bible. Take, for

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example, Jeremiah's poetic description of his own prenatal call:

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “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.”³⁰

c) Even John's prenatal movements were given symbolic significance and were interpreted as an earnest of his later service as forerunner of the Christ. In a similar manner, the prenatal movements of the twins, Jacob and Esau, were understood to have significance for their adult lives.³¹

d) John's name was chosen by God prior to his conception and birth. This last point may be of greatest symbolic significance for imagining the value of prenatal life. In modern cultures, children's names are often selected without reasons more significant than the fame of a movie star or the latest fad. But anyone who is acquainted with the Bible knows that God takes names seriously. When one was especially designated for a unique calling, when one returned to God, or when an important change in the life occurred, God would take care that the name

was appropriate. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. To name, then, is symbolic of the recognition of one's uniqueness, one's character, and one's mission. Naming represents caring.

It seems clear that the Bible leads us, through its stories and symbols, to value prenatal life and to consider the fetus one whom God has called by name. This view of prenatal life is also supported in the works of Ellen White. The absence of specific passages about abortion should not cause Adventists to overlook the clear-cut significance which Ellen White assigns to the prenatal period of human life. “The [pregnant] mother's needs,” she writes, “should in no case be neglected. *Two lives* are dependent upon her. . . .”³² Explicitly rejected is the idea that prenatal life may be treated casually. One who “endangers the physical, mental, and moral health of the child” through negligence during the time of pregnancy is “committing a direct sin against [the] Creator.”³³ The life which develops prenatally is not the possession of other human beings:

Children derive life and being from their parents, and yet it is through the creative power of God that your children have life, for God is the Life-giver. Let it be remembered that children are not to be treated as though they were our own personal property.³⁴

(With regard to this passage, it is important to note that Ellen White uses the word “child” for the fetus *in utero*.) I cannot imagine a line of argument which would begin by saying that great care should be taken to safeguard prenatal life and thus enhance the later life of the person and would end by saying that abortion is a matter of little consequence.

The thrust of this discussion of respect for human life calls into question the frequent attempts to determine when human life *really* begins. In one very important sense, since the sixth day of creation, human life *never* begins but is always a gift of earlier human life. As fire is passed from one torch to another, so life is the gift of previous life. Ultimately,

this gift is the endowment of the Lifegiver. When human gametes unite, as my medical dictionary puts it, “to initiate the development of a new individual,”³⁵ human life has been transmitted to a unique and unrepeatable new form — a new genotype. To search for the period of time when this new individual life may be destroyed without regret is to miss the point of respect for God’s magnificent gift of human life.

Yet, in their own way, nearly all the “times” which have been proposed as the “true” beginning of human life remind us that something important is transpiring: the unique form of human life initiated at conception is on its way to becoming *personal*.³⁶

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For example, the transition from embryo to fetus reminds us that the human body is taking shape. The onset of brain waves is a promise of future thought. “Quickening” informs at least the mother that someone with nerves and muscles is “alive and kicking.” Certainly by the time of viability and birth we know that we have a new member of the human community.

Obviously, this new member does not function as a *person*, in the full sense, either before birth or for a long time thereafter. Potentiality principles, such as those based on the “person-image concept” discussed earlier, remind us of this fact. To be sure, what we value about human life, as opposed to plant or lower animal life, has much to do with those traits which led us to call a human being a person. Among these traits are self-awareness, the ability to make plans, the ability to use symbols, the ability to deliberate rationally, and so forth. One of the reasons we value bodily human life is that such life

serves as the basis for the exercise of these personal traits. And one of the reasons we should respect and protect prenatal life is that in most cases it has the potential for later personal life. Moreover, this developmental perspective with its emphasis on potentiality helps us to realize that in cases of tragic conflict prepersonal human life may have to yield to personal human life. (More on this later.)

I would suggest, however, that the clarity of both our language and our moral judgments is better served by referring to life with a human genotype as human life and the potential of that life as personal life. Otherwise, when confronted with a normal six-month-old infant, we must say that this is not *human* life. This point deserves special emphasis if we are to avoid a new kind of anthropological dualism which once again denies or diminishes the value of bodily human life and claims that what really counts is the “interior” functioning of some type of mentation. In my view, it is tenable to affirm that personal human life deserves respect and protection without denying that prepersonal and postpersonal life also deserve respect and protection. This conclusion need not entail an idolatrous vitalism in which life is worshipped in place of the Lifegiver. Rather, respect for human life should be part of our appropriate response to the love of the Creator. Acceptance of the principle of respect for human life establishes a strong moral presumption in favor of preserving human life, including prenatal human life. Exceptions such as abortion must bear a heavy burden of proof.

2. *The principle of respect for personal autonomy.* If the principle of respect for human life encompassed all that we consider morally valuable, then our discussion would be nearly finished. The dilemma of abortion, if indeed it could be called a dilemma, would be resolved for nearly all cases. Abortion simply would not be permissible except, perhaps, in those extremely rare cases when the life of the fetus is in direct conflict with the physical life of the mother. But most of us sense, at least intuitively, that the problem of abortion is not so simple. As precious and irreplaceable as each individual human life is, life itself is

not the only human good. Nor is it the highest. Christians know that other goods may sometimes take priority: loyalty to God, the life of another, justice, personal integrity, freedom.

Few of us would really mean it if we said, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Nevertheless, personal liberty is a value for which many lives have been willingly sacrificed. And Christian faith has helped to foster a high regard for individual autonomy. God's people are liberated from all types of worldly bondage so that they may serve their Lord in a relationship of true freedom.³⁷

Seventh-day Adventists have been made keenly aware of the importance of personal autonomy: "In matters of conscience the soul must be left untrammelled. No one is to control another's mind, to judge for another, or to prescribe his duty. God gives to every soul freedom to think, and to follow his own convictions."³⁸ When we value personal autonomy, we imitate God. For God created human beings with the ability to make free choices. And God valued human freedom so much that He was willing to permit the grave misuse of freedom rather than reduce human beings to automatons.³⁹ Much of what we mean when we say that we respect a person is that we are unwilling to restrict his or her autonomy.

Surely, one of the most basic elements of personal autonomy is the freedom to decide what happens to one's own body. In recent years, much of the abortion debate has focused on this one aspect of personal autonomy: the right of the pregnant woman freely to determine what she does with her own body. As one author states the case: "The only criterion [for abortion] should be whether such an induced abortion is consistent with the individual woman's personal set of moral and religious values, and that is something only she can judge."⁴⁰

If we fail to comprehend the thrust of this line of reasoning, we certainly will not understand an important factor in the worldwide trend toward liberalized abortion laws. Even if the embryo or fetus is accorded *full* human rights, it can still be argued that

the decision to continue or terminate the pregnancy properly belongs to the pregnant woman (and possibly her spouse).⁴¹ Ordinarily we do not coerce a person to use his or her body for the good of another even if that good is exceedingly important. For example, there are many people with end-stage renal disease whose lives might be greatly improved or extended if only there were no shortage of transplantable kidneys. Yet we have not conscripted kidney donors. We do not even require a person to make provision for donating his or her kidneys at death. Nor do we force people to participate as subjects of human experimentation. And, so far as I know, we require no one to give even a pint of blood in order to save the life of another. Such actions are permitted, and in some instances, encouraged as acts of moral heroism. But, partly because we value personal autonomy, these actions are not required. Why, then, should a woman be enjoined to provide her body to preserve another human life?

Some will find this line of argument less than entirely convincing. But few who consider abortion a moral dilemma would deny that one of the values at stake is the personal autonomy of the pregnant woman. And few would claim to be so wise that they could specify in every case just what the pregnant woman should decide.

It seems likely that future events will place more, not less, emphasis on the woman's freedom to control her own procreation. There is little evidence that the general drift of societies toward more liberal abortion laws will soon be reversed.⁴² Moreover, those who wish to restrict the woman's decision for abortion are likely to find their efforts annulled by developments in medicine such as the use of prostaglandins. Thus, the decision to abort may become a very private matter which only the pregnant woman need know about.

3. *The principle of justice.* To conclude that the abortion decision will (or should) continue to be governed by the pregnant woman obviously does not resolve all questions about what constitutes morally responsible reasons for the decision to abort. It is not illogical to say that the decision to have an

abortion belongs to the pregnant woman, while at the same time insisting that the choice should be informed by appropriate moral principles. Nor is it illogical to add that the decision to perform an abortion belongs to the involved medical personnel. Medical practitioners need to remember that they are caring for two patients. And the pregnant woman needs to remember that two lives are dependent on her actions.

When abortion is sought, it should generally be assumed that a conflict exists between the rights and interests of the fetus and the rights and interests of the pregnant woman.⁴³ What reasons for the abortion could the pregnant woman give which would lead us to say that her decision would be morally justified? In situations of this type, when human lives and interests are in conflict, the moral decision-maker generally must make some appeal to the concept of justice.

Justice may seem an appropriate word to use at this point. For reasons somewhat obscure to me, some people tend to associate justice primarily with the concept of retribution. Justice is viewed as an antonym for mercy. But justice may also refer to a much broader range of actions: the appropriate distribution of both burdens and benefits. When used in this way, justice is associated with our concepts of fairness and impartiality. The first (formal) principle of justice is, "Give to each what he or she is due." And a corollary of this principle is that equals should be treated equally. Such principles, often discussed by moral philosophers, are only formal; they prescribe the *form* of just action, but they do not specify the material or substantive criteria for making just decisions.⁴⁴

But in the Bible we find the substance of justice which can give the formal principles meaning and direction. According to the biblical faith, each human being is considered no less than a child of God. And God loves His children impartially. The alien dignity which God bestows on human life is given without gradation or qualification. God's love is for those who, from a human standpoint, appear unworthy as well as for those who seem worthy. Indeed, without

God's saving love, all human beings are unworthy and deserving of condemnation. Therefore, God is not influenced by what humans call excellence, nor can His love or justice be purchased:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.⁴⁵

In this passage and throughout the Bible, those who have accepted God's love are enjoined to imitate God by caring for others in need. And special care is prescribed for those who are most in need. As Bennett has stated: "God's love for all persons implies a strategic concentration on the victims of society, on the weak, the exploited, the neglected. . . ."⁴⁶ This strategic concern for the disadvantaged is not a denial of an essential human equality, but rather an outgrowth of it. Precisely because human beings are loved

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equally, the weak and vulnerable require special attention.

Thus, response to God's love entails a view of justice which begins with the affirmation of basic human equality. This is not simply the formal equality of the philosophers' principles of justice. Rather, as Mott has recently written: "Love has changed justice from merely the equal treatment of equals to the equal treatment of all human beings solely on the grounds that as human they are bestowed worth by God."⁴⁷

Biblical justice, then, is a reflection in judgment and action of God's impartial love.

If we seek justice of this sort, we must be prepared to resolve human conflicts by sacrificing personal bias and adopting the impartial “perspective of eternity.” With regard to abortion, we must be willing to imagine ourselves in the position of all those, including the fetus, who are substantially affected by the decision.⁴⁸ And we must ask what, on balance, we would consider a just or fair decision. It must be granted that adopting this impartial perspective is exceedingly difficult when we are among those who will be substantially affected. But this fact does not argue against attempting to seek justice, so much as it argues for serious reflection on moral dilemmas such as abortion prior to the “crunch” of actual decision-making. Without careful attention to principle ahead of time, we can generally expect decisions to be made in an ad hoc and capricious manner.

At this point, I must invite my readers to adopt the impartial perspective of justice and ask which abortions, if any, would be warranted. Even if it were possible, I have no desire to complete this work for others by describing a wide variety of cases and arguing for the courses of action I would consider just. I must say, however, that when I try to assume the perspective of justice and weigh the various claims and interests, many of the “typical” cases of abortion seem unacceptable. The reasons of convenience and expedience which sometimes characterize such decisions could only be deemed sufficient if a very low value were attached to prenatal life.

But if one discerns with compassion, reasons of apparent convenience are often found to mask reasons of genuine despair. No woman ever becomes pregnant in order to have an abortion. An unexpected and unwanted pregnancy can threaten the personhood of the woman in multifarious ways, some evident and some hidden. No one is better able to assess these factors than the pregnant woman who must live with the decision.

All this means that there are exceptional cases. Some are fairly obvious. In those cases when the life or health of the mother is seriously threatened, I have little difficulty be-

lieving that an impartial judge would protect her life over the prenatal life. The claims and interests of the established personal life (including the likelihood of responsibility to other persons) are greater in such cases. And in the unusual instance when a pregnancy results from rape, it seems unconscionable to compound the injustice of the original crime by urging that the woman continue the pregnancy. But some exceptional cases are less obvious. Life may endanger other life at many different levels of well-being. The principle of justice prescribes fair consideration of such exceptional cases, even the ones which bring us to the borders of our other principles.

From the foregoing, it should be clear that I have little or no quarrel with the first and third indications for therapeutic abortions as published in the church’s “suggestive guidelines.” But from the perspective of justice, the second indication raises a number of troublesome questions: Why should potentially defective fetuses be aborted? How many normal fetuses are we willing to abort in order to assure that no defective baby will be born? How normal must a human life be in order to deserve respect and protection? For whose sake is the selective abortion performed? Answering these and related questions must be the work of another paper. But, whatever else we might mean by the “person-image concept,” I hope we do not mean that human life must meet some standard we have set in order to earn our fundamental respect and protection. On this point, I am inclined to agree with Karen Lebacqz: “If indeed the strength of a people can be measured by their attitude toward the weak, the defenseless, and the outcast, then selective abortion points to the weaknesses in our society and in ourselves.”⁴⁹

Those who have been waiting for extensive casuistry — the application of moral principles to a variety of specific cases — will now be disappointed. The desire for casuistry is always present. But for me to produce such at this point would counter part of my own thesis: What the church needs throughout its membership is a sustained discussion of the

moral principles which stem from our shared faith and which should guide decisions about specific cases. Principles such as the three I have tried to enunciate are often like the un-matching pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. One of

the great values of engaging one another in serious moral discourse about such principles is that we may be better able to balance and match our principles.

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4. For a description of the changing legal situation during this period, see Daniel Callahan's, *Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 126-73.

5. This comment was quoted in Anna Lou Hall's, "The Woman and Abortion," *SPECTRUM*, 3 (Spring, 1971), p. 37.

6. *Roe vs. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, 93 S. CT. 705 (1973). Abridged versions of the Court's decision have appeared in many sources. See, for example, James M. Humber and Robert F. Almeder, eds., *Biomedical Ethics and the Law* (New York: Plenum Press, 1976), pp. 17-26.

7. Potter, "The Abortion Debate," p. 125.

8. American Law Institute, *Model Penal Code*, Proposed Official Draft, Section 230.3 (Philadelphia: American Law Institute, 1962).

9. General Conference Officers, "Abortion Guidelines," *Ministry*, March 1971, p. 11.

10. Medical Secretary of the General Conference, "Interruption of Pregnancy: Recommendations to SDA Medical Institutions," Washington, D.C., n.d. (mimeographed).

11. "Abortion Guidelines," p. 10.

12. R. F. Waddell, "Abortion Is Not the Answer," *Ministry*, March 1971, p. 8.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Provonsha, "Therapeutic Abortion," pp. 34, 35.

18. See, for example, James J. Londis, "Abortion: What Shall Christians Do?" *Insight*, March 19, 1974, pp. 12-17; Sakae Kubo, "Abortion," in *Theology and Ethics of Sex* (in press, 1979), Chapter 15; Robert Lee Osmonson, "Protest . . . Feticide," in *Protest and Promise* (Review and Herald: Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 55-68. In spite of the title of Osmonson's chapter and in spite of the general drift of the first part of his argument, he appears to arrive at what I would call a moderate reform position.

19. See, for example, Betty J. Stirling, "A Sociologist Looks at Abortion," *SPECTRUM*, 3 (Spring, 1971), 12-18. The author offers what is called a "possible compromise solution." Part of the proposal is to leave the abortion decision to the "free choice" of women. Thus, "Women who want abor-

tions would be able to get them on request, but those who do not want them would not be urged to comply" (p. 17).

20. "Editorials: Response of Editors to Karen's Dilemma," *These Times*, July 1, 1977, p. 7. For similar statements, see W. G. Dick, "Speaking Out: A Look at Abortion," *Review and Herald*, May 13, 1971, p. 11; Daniel Augsburger, "Abortion: Don't Believe All You Hear!" *Ministry*, September 1976, pp. 24-26; Frank B. Holbrook, "Frank Answers: The Christian and Abortion," *These Times*, April 1975, p. 21.

21. "Editorials: Karen's Dilemma," p. 7.

22. For a helpful discussion of the concept of methodological presumption in moral decision-making, see J. Philip Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), especially pp. 38-59. It is worth noting the similarity between the concept of methodological presumption and the well-known concept of *prima facie* duties set forth by W. D. Ross in *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930).

23. Genesis 2:7.

24. I John 4:19.

25. See, for example, Helmut Thielicke, "The Doctor as Judge of Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die," in *Who Shall Live?* ed. Kenneth Vaux (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 146-86; Paul Ramsey, "The Morality of Abortion," in *Life or Death: Ethics and Options* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), pp. 60-93.

26. Thielicke, "The Doctor as Judge," p. 172.

27. I leave aside the vexed issue of how to interpret Exodus 21:22-25. It is sufficient to note that the text neither prescribes nor prohibits abortion. Nor is it at all clear that the text implies the placement of a low value on prenatal life. On this point, see Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1973, pp. 6-9.

28. For a useful discussion of the ways in which the Bible can inform moral judgment and character, see Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).

29. For example, Genesis 15:1 ff. (Abraham and Sarah); Genesis 25:21 ff. (Isaac and Rebecca); I Samuel 1:10 ff. (Elkanah and Hannah).

30. Jeremiah 1:4, 5 (RSV).

31. Genesis 25:22.

32. Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1942), p. 373 (italics mine).

33. *Ibid.*

34. Ellen White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1952), p. 280.

35. *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, 25th ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1974), p. 628.

36. For an extensive discussion of the "beginning"

of human life from both philosophical and biological perspectives, see Daniel Callahan, *Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality*, pp. 348-404.

37. "In the work of redemption there is no compulsion. No external force is employed. Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man is left free to choose whom he will serve. In the change that takes place when the soul surrenders to Christ, there is the highest sense of freedom." Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1940), p. 466.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 550.

39. "God might have created man without the power to transgress His law; He might have withheld the hand of Adam from touching the forbidden fruit; but in that case man would have been not a free moral agent, but a mere automaton." Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1958), p. 49.

40. Alice S. Rossi, "Public Views on Abortion," in *The Case for Legalized Abortion*, ed. Alan F. Guttmacher (Berkeley: Diablo Press, 1967), pp. 31-32.

41. Probably the best-known philosophical argument for this point of view is Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1971), 47-66.

42. See, for example, "U.N. Study Shows Liberal Abortion Laws Have Spread Worldwide," *The Hast-*

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43. I leave to one side the question of whether abortion may sometimes be done for the fetus's own sake. But I join Camenisch in thinking that there is something odd about the concept of "benefits" for the nonexistent. Paul F. Camenisch, "Abortion: For the Fetus's Own Sake?" *The Hastings Center Report*, 6 (April 1976), pp. 38-41.

44. For a classic statement on the relationship of formal to substantive principles of justice, see Chaim Perelman, *The Idea of Justice and the Problem of Argument* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

45. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 (RSV).

46. John C. Bennett, *The Radical Imperative: From Theology of Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 13-14.

47. Stephen Charles Mott, "Egalitarian Aspects of the Biblical Theory of Justice," in *Selected Papers from the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the American Society of Christian Ethics*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse (Newton Centre, Mass.: The American Society of Christian Ethics, 1978), p. 13.

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Four Ways of Making Ethical Decisions

by David R. Larson

War. Eugenics. Euthanasia. Racism. Cloning. Money. Starvation. Abortion. In vitro fertilization. Pollution. Feminism. Urbanization.

The list of issues now attracting serious ethical analysis is as fascinating as it is long!

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One important branch of such analysis is that of "normative ethics." It helps us discover what sorts of persons and things are really valuable and what methods of making ethical decisions are truly valid. Before we can know if we are obligated to be or to do something — before, indeed, we can deal responsibly with timely ethical questions — we must know how to make such decisions. We need some decision-making methods, some conceptual tools.

This essay surveys four ways of making