

Adventists, Abortion, and the Bible

by John C. Brunt

Despite the fact that the Bible gives no explicit advice to those contemplating abortion, the Bible has played, over the past two decades, a prominent role in Adventist discussions of the subject. In important respects these authors agree. All believe the Bible teaches that God values life highly and that we should respond to this gracious God by valuing it as well. All agree that this important biblical principle has serious implications for the question of abortion. No one sanctions the kind of wholesale abortion of convenience that has become commonplace in our society. Differences center on whether there are kinds of principled considerations that would make abortion the lesser of evils in certain situations.

In journals such as *Ministry* and *Spectrum*, Adventist authors have used Scripture in four distinct ways to come to these agreements and also some clear disagreements about abortion. It is important to see how these Adventists have actually used Scripture. It is also useful to reflect on what basic principles ought to guide our application of Scripture to concrete moral problems such as abortion.

The Bible as a Source of Specific Rules

Few Adventists have attempted to make Scripture yield specific rules governing abortion, but some of the strong-

est opponents of abortion have come very close in their use of the sixth commandment in Exodus 20:13, "Thou shalt not kill."

Ardyce Sweem, for example, uses Exodus 20:13 and Genesis 9:6 to show that the Bible forbids violence and killing and then concludes: "The techniques of abortion are violent acts of killing."¹ Muller reaches the same conclusion through a series of rhetorical questions. After quoting the commandment he asks:

Is this commandment not straightforward, clear in itself? . . . Some might argue that the commandment in its original setting speaks about murdering, not about accidental killing, but is not murdering exactly what we find in cases of abortion? . . . Is this not one of the most brutal forms of murder?²

Fredericks is slightly less emphatic when he sets forth his first in a series of four Old Testament principles as the principle that God is against abortion. Again he uses the sixth commandment and argues that even though this commandment may allow for some forms of capital punishment or self-defense, it never allows for the taking of innocent life by violent means.³

In all three Adventist authors the sixth commandment becomes a specific rule against abortion because abortion is defined as murder. If the Bible says "Thou shalt not murder," and abortion is murder, the Bible does give an explicit rule against abortion. But is this simple equation of abortion with murder justified?

It is not within the scope of this study to answer the question of whether abortion is murder. But it is important to notice that none of the authors who find a specific rule against abortion in the sixth commandment make a *biblical* case for why abor-

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tion should be considered murder. In fact, the biblical data are simply not sufficient to establish this case.

The Bible as Arbiter of Facts

Adventist authors have also looked to Scripture in order to settle certain factual matters. They have done this either by bringing specific questions, such as when life begins, to the text or by looking at texts that appear to have some relevance for abortion and asking about their significance.

Some of the strongest Adventist opponents of abortion have used Scripture to show that human life begins at conception, although no biblical writer specifically addresses that question. Muller takes the close relationship between conception and birth in Genesis 4:1 (Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son) and Luke 1:31 (She conceived a son) as evidence that “the beginning of personhood starts with conception.”⁴

Fredericks uses Jeremiah 1:5 and Psalm 139:13-16 as support for what he calls the “principle” of the value of life. But his conclusion is not so much a principle as a statement that life begins before birth. He says:

He [God] views the unborn not as potential life but as persons, individuals with identity and worth for whom He already has a destiny.⁵

Sweem also uses Scripture to argue that life begins before birth. She points out that passages such as Genesis 16:11, 19:36, and Matthew 24:19 refer to pregnant women as being “with child” and that texts such as Jeremiah 1:5, Luke 1:13-17, 35, and Galatians 1:15 show God’s involvement with persons before birth. She concludes: “God looks at fetuses as having personhood prior to their birth.”⁶

On the other hand, Maxwell and Woodward use Genesis 2:7 to posit that it is the breath of life that leads to a living being. After pointing out that the fetus is not viable until 20 weeks gestation, without giving specific endorsement they conclude: “According to the Genesis approach, the infant would become a human being when it has

taken its first breath and is able to live apart from the mother.”⁷

Paulson objects to arguments such as those of Muller, Sweem, and Fredericks. “Adventist doctrine and practice should be based on a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ And nowhere does inspiration declare that personhood begins at conception.”⁸

The Bible does not solve the problem of when life begins. The texts cited by the authors above may have some general significance for the question of abortion, but all of them have a purpose in their original historical and literary context very different than determining the moment when human life or personhood really begins.

Another factual question faced by authors on abortion has been the interpretation of Exodus 21:22-25 and its significance for the abortion question. The passage reads:

“When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman’s husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (RSV).

The major difficulties with this verse are the meanings of the words translated *miscarriage* and *harm*. Is the contrast being made in the passage between a premature birth where the fetus lives and one where it dies, or is it between a miscarriage that does no injury to the mother and one that injures her? If the latter is in view, the passage places less value on the fetus than the life of the mother. If the former, the fetus is valued as a life.

Muller takes “harm” to refer to the accidentally aborted fetus and concludes that if the child survives there is only a fine, but if the child dies the one causing the miscarriage must die.⁹

Other authors, such as James Londis and Gerald Winslow, recognize that interpretation is problematic and use the text with more caution.¹⁰ Wittschiebe, for example, recognizes the different possibilities and opts for a still different view from Rabbinic interpretation. It holds that according to Leviticus 24:18 “life for life” can refer to mere monetary compensation, thus in no case is the “harm,” whatever it is, punished by death.¹¹

Discussion of this text reveals how little attention is given to the process of exegesis by most of those who use the text. In actual fact the text is probably not very helpful to the ongoing debate on abortion since its interpretation is so problematic. A review of any good commentary will show the complexities of the text and the numerous attempts at its interpretation.¹²

Both of these attempts to find factual data in the Bible speaking to abortion actually are examples of how Scripture fails to give any specific and clear commands about abortion. These passages certainly do not provide direct factual data about when life begins.

The Bible as a Source of Principles

By far the majority of appeals to Scripture in Adventist discussions of abortion are at the level of principle rather than that of specific rule or fact. We can only briefly survey the major principles and concerns to which Adventist authors appeal.

Value of life is by far the most popular and frequently utilized principle, especially as it is seen in God's personal valuing of human life. It is often pointed out that this value that God places on life includes fetal life. The most frequently used text to support this principle is Psalm 139:13-16, which reads:

For you created my inmost being;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
 My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place.
 When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
 your eyes saw my unformed body.
 All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be (NIV).¹³

Frequent use is also made of passages that speak of God's purpose for specific individuals while they were still in the womb. These include Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), John the Baptist (Luke 1), and Paul (Galatians 1:15).¹⁴ Numerous other

Biblical appeals to God's value for life include Genesis 2:7,¹⁵ the "lost" parables of Luke 15,¹⁶ John 3:16,¹⁷ Jesus' warning against despising "little ones" in Matthew 18:10,¹⁸ and the Bible's pervasive regard for life in general.¹⁹

Justice, or God's impartiality and even special concern for the vulnerable, is a second biblical principle or theme that receives frequent attention. In at least three different articles Winslow calls this the principle of justice and uses Deuteronomy 10:17, 18 and Matthew 5:43-48 for support.²⁰ Fredericks appeals to Psalm 82:3,4 to show God's special regard for the vulnerable and goes on to argue, on the basis of texts such as Romans 5:6, Ephesians 2:3-6, and 1 Timothy 2:15, that God's unconditional acceptance of human beings apart from their achievements precludes any kind of quality-of-life ethic.²¹

The "*person-image* concept" is a principle Waddell says he finds in the Creation story in Genesis 1. This is part of his attempt to give biblical support for the specific reasons for "therapeutic" abortion given in the 1971 General Conference guidelines. Since God intended for humans to be born in his image within the context of family, this "concept" supports the legitimacy of abortion in cases of deformed fetuses that cannot be "normal," and in cases of rape and incest.²²

Freedom is a principle used in different ways by different authors. Winslow calls this the principle of "choice"²³ or "respect for personal autonomy."²⁴ For Winslow this principle means that even though he personally opposes abortion when carried out merely for convenience, and would see only a limited number of "exceptional" cases as legitimate, he nevertheless opposes efforts to remove the choice from the pregnant woman.²⁵ Others specifically argue that reverence for life has primacy over freedom of choice. The Youngbergs use Deuteronomy 30:19 to support this,²⁶ and both they and Fredericks appeal to 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 to show that since the body belongs to God a woman does not have the right to choose what she will do with her own body.²⁷

Forgiveness is another principle that is used by a couple of authors. Winslow appeals to Colossians 1:13, 14,²⁸ and Duge to the *pericopae adulterae* of John 8 (some manuscripts).²⁹ Winslow

stresses the need for forgiveness to be mediated to all concerned in the tragedy of abortion, and Duge stresses that the result of the antiabortion argument is often a punishment of the victim, which is not in keeping with the spirit of Christ.

The *love of money and danger of wealth* concludes our by-no-means-exhaustive list of principles. Fredericks shows the danger of the love of money and greed from texts such as 1 Timothy 6:5-11, Colossians 3:5, and Ephesians 5:5, and then goes on to add that James (4:2; 5:5, 6) even shows a link between greed and violence against the innocent. For Fredericks this rules out economic factors as a reason for abortion.³⁰

With the exception of the “person-image concept,” which seems quite problematic, the principles and themes in this list all appear to be valid biblical emphases that do indeed have at least some relevance for the question of abortion. This method of using principles from Scripture appears to be the most fruitful of the various uses we have surveyed so far. Yet, here as well, there are problems with the manner in which the Bible is utilized.

Most of the authors line up biblical principles to buttress a certain position without any recognition that a given principle might be applied in a different way. For example, almost everyone would agree that the principle of God’s concern for the vulnerable and oppressed has significance for the question of abortion. But when a fifteen-year-old girl is raped and becomes pregnant, who is the “vulnerable one” who should be in focus? A given principle might be very clear in the abstraction, but it might also become quite problematic when we realize that there are legitimate claims and interests that can be brought on behalf of different subjects, i.e., the fetus and the pregnant woman.

Most Adventist authors also do not acknowledge that different principles can sometimes legitimately come into conflict. For example, personal autonomy and freedom can conflict with our desire to preserve life. In other words, the line from biblical principle or theme to specific decision on a topic such as abortion is not as straight and uncluttered with complexity as many of our authors assume.

The one person who gives explicit recognition to this potential conflict between principles is Gerald Winslow. He sees such conflicts as an opportunity for moral maturity. He says:

[T]ough 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-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.³¹

The Bible as a Source of Analogies

The final use of the Bible to be explored overlaps with the previous one, but there is a distinction between them. Here, the focus is not on broad biblical themes and principles but on individual stories and incidents that are used to speak to some aspect of the abortion issue. In each case the author sees some analogous features between the biblical incident and the current problem of abortion. We will here look at only two examples.

Muller points to God’s anger at the nations around Israel for their disregard for unborn life as an analogy pointing to God’s disapproval of abortion. He mentions incidents such as those recorded in Isaiah 13:18, Hosea 13:16, and 2 Kings 8:12; 15:16-18 where enemies slash open the wombs of pregnant women, killing both mother and unborn child, and then concludes: “These acts are presented in Scripture as acts of sinful cruelty because they reveal a total disrespect for unborn life.”³² The reader is left to wonder if perhaps a small part of God’s anger might have been caused by what was done to the women.

Winslow offers the most self-conscious use of biblical analogy. He explicitly states that even though the Bible offers no specific instruction on how prenatal life should be treated, the Bible

nevertheless enlivens our moral imagination. As an example he presents the analogy of the birth story of John the Baptist recorded in Luke 1. He points out that John's conception was a miraculous fulfillment of a divine mandate, that his mission was designated prior to his conception, that his prenatal movements were given symbolic significance, and that his name was chosen prior to his birth. Thus we see that the fetus is one whom God calls by name. This analogy helps us see the value of fetal life.³³

Such analogies can not be expected to give unambiguous answers to modern dilemmas. How

How does one decide what really counts as a valid analogy when there are always elements that are not analogous? Biblical analogies seldom produce unambiguous conclusions to specific dilemmas, but they do support broader biblical themes and principles.

does one decide what really counts as a valid analogy when there are always elements that are not analogous? For example, Muller's analogy may say something about the value of the unborn, but the differences between the violent murder of a pregnant woman and abortion are quite marked; Manson's murder of Sharon Tate is something different than an abortion.

In Winslow's analogy also there are factors that could lead one to argue in a very different way. For example, Winslow shows that John's mission is designated prior to his conception. Why could not this analogy be used to speak for the value of potential life before conception and thus lead one to oppose birth control?

These objections certainly do not rule out the use of analogies to "enliven our moral imagination." In fact, these stories do much to shape our characters at a level deeper than that of specific decision-making. Biblical analogies seldom produce unambiguous conclusions to specific dilemmas, but they do support broader biblical themes and principles.

Proposed Approaches to Scripture

The preceding description and evaluation of how Adventist authors use the Bible to address abortion leads to several concluding suggestions as to how Scripture should be used in discussions of not only abortion but other contemporary moral issues.

Respect the Bible's Own Agenda. This means that every passage must be considered in the light of its own literary and historical context, if we are to discover the author's own agenda and concerns. Our use of Scripture must be consistent with that original intent. Unfortunately, the articles surveyed often reach conclusions that appear to be some distance from the author's intent.

Respect for the Bible's agenda would result in the following specific guidelines for our agenda as we move from Scripture to the issue of abortion.

First, there must be less lining up of texts to support a position and more interpretive analysis of texts to determine whether they actually speak to the question of abortion. That means interpreters must be sensitive to the kind of literature they are interpreting and must show how stories they utilize are analogous to the abortion issue.

At the same time the skills needed are more than those of technical exegesis. One must be sensitive to the basic directions that Scripture and biblical materials of moral significance are moving. Those issues must then be translated into our own circumstances so that we may discover where these issues intersect with our life and culture. This may necessitate saying something that is different from what the biblical writers said. As Ogletree has reminded us:

[T]o say the same thing as the texts, we must say something different, for that 'same' thing can live again only if it is expressed in a way that is suited to the different reality within which we live.³⁴

Second, respect for the Bible's agenda includes respect for its silence. The Bible simply does not give a clear, direct, unambiguous answer to the problem of abortion, and we must let that

silence stand. This, of course, does not mean that the Bible is irrelevant for the question. But the Bible should not be pressed to speak directly to issues on which it is silent merely because we believe it should address such an important issue.

Third, respect for the Bible's agenda means honestly balancing biblical evidence with other relevant data. Obviously our experience and empirical data will condition our views. The Bible is not our only source of evidence, even if it is the central controlling norm.

For example, if one believes, as does Sweem, that abortion always causes severe emotional damage to the woman,³⁵ his or her application of the principles of both compassion and justice might be quite different than for one who believes, as does Ziprick, that "few psychiatric disturbances occur in the aborted patient, since her feeling is mainly that of outstanding relief."³⁶ The answer to such a question is and should be important to our discussion, but empirical data, not the Bible, must solve it. We must clearly acknowledge what the Bible can and cannot do and carefully balance biblical and nonbiblical data.

All of this means listening to the Bible on its own terms before rushing to use it as sanction for our own views.

Recognition of the Nature of Principles. Appeals to biblical principles to speak to the abortion issue must show awareness of both the importance and limitations of principles. On the one hand, this is the most fruitful area for biblical exploration on issues such as abortion. On the other hand, in a sinful world where various biblical principles can point in different directions, this means that exceptions may be possible even when general biblical mandates are quite clear.³⁷

Naturally the more basic the principle, the greater must be the burden of proof that appeals to other principles to make a case for the exception. We must always recognize every such action as less than ideal. But if we fail to acknowledge the possibility of conflicting principles we may well hear only a part of the biblical witness and miss the wide spectrum of its notes and tones. Therefore an adequate understanding of the nature of biblical principles will lead us to keep at least two considerations in mind.

First, we must weigh various principles and show on what basis one should take precedence over another in conflict dilemmas. This includes showing the kind of burden of proof that is necessary to override values and principles.

Secondly, we will weigh the conflicting claims of various beneficiaries of the principles set forth in Scripture. Thus, in contemplating an abortion, all the principal subjects, including both mother and fetus, must be taken into consideration.

Commitment to Community-wide Reflection

When confronted with difficult dilemmas we need one another. Our different backgrounds, perspectives, and ways of thinking all contribute to making us the body of Christ with its many members. Moral reflection is most effective in an atmosphere of give and take and mutual respect. The Bible is not the private possession of any one of us. It is the community's instrument for listening to God's voice, and that voice is heard best when the whole body, with its diverse parts, participates together.

This commitment will give us a spirit of humility that motivates us to listen carefully to one another with respect and welcome discussion, even with those who disagree with us.

Once we have set these ground rules for the discussion of abortion as it relates to biblical evidence, is there any hope that our study of Scripture will yield any positive results? Will it be possible for the Bible to bring us to any kind of consensus, or must we remain in a hopeless sea of confusion?

Given the nature of the biblical evidence, we must admit that no approach, including this one, will ever resolve all our differences. Even though the Bible will lead all those committed to its teaching to value life, it will never give unambiguous and undisputed answers to those difficult cases where conflicting values really are present. We will have to rely on Spirit-guided, reasoned reflection to evaluate these specific dilemmas. To reject such reflection in favor of an all-or-nothing position on abortion is in itself unbiblical.

However, the degree of positive consensus

revealed in the Adventist literature surveyed in this study should not be overlooked or underestimated. My hope is that we will celebrate this consensus, continuing to listen to the voice of

Scripture with both intensity and care. The result will not only strengthen our individual commitments but our sense of participating in a vibrant moral community.

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37. A biblical example of this may be seen in Paul's discussion of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. Although he makes it very clear that the principle of the permanence of marriage is important even in cases where a believer is married to an unbeliever, and admonishes believers to preserve their marriages to unbelievers, he also allows for divorce when the unbelieving spouse wishes to leave on the basis that "God has called us to peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15, RSV). In this case the principles of peace and allowing freedom to others cause Paul to override the strong principle of the permanence of marriage.