
Abortion and Adventists: Significant Theological Themes

by Ginger Hanks-Harwood

Women usually come to the church for support and counsel long after they have decided whether or not to bring their pregnancy to term. In those rare instances where a decision has not yet been made, we can stand with a woman making her decision. In our presence she may be able to see herself reflected as the treasured moral agent that she is. Without trying to abrogate her own process, we may be able to provide information, ask questions that help her examine her choices, and assist her to realize that she at least has moral choices.

We may begin by helping her envision the significance of pregnancy itself: woman as lifegiver, a cocreator with God. The decision to bring a person into the world is a sacred one, and the pregnancy a sacred interval in which women participate in a mystery with God.

The decision to participate in such a project is not to be undertaken lightly, and is not without serious and lifelong effects. Does she possess the reserves required to complete the project adequately, so that she is not like the poor stewards whom Jesus chided for not counting the cost before the project was undertaken and so ended up in disaster? What is her particular situation, and what are the specific needs of the child she would carry?

As we together gain clarity regarding the significance of the choice to be made, the mother-to-

be faces the responsibility that creation entails and the consequences of accepting or denying that privilege. As she recognizes her human limitations and the enduring significance of the decision she must make, she simultaneously samples humanity and divinity. For many of us confronted with the same choice, the conflict we would experience would be unendurable if it were not for the assurance of God's presence and grace.

With that assurance, all of us can explore the human tragedy and dilemma faced by women contemplating abortion. Our first premise, as Adventist Christians, must be that human life, as a gift of God, is always precious and sacred. This will be the first principle to be consulted before any ethical decision is made. Is a certain decision harmonious with respect to both the Giver of life and the gift? How may the principle of sanctity of life best be ratified in this situation?

Ultimately, however, this argument will only be as convincing as we are: If we do not treat the poor, the despised, the handicapped, and the criminal as a valued part of our community, then the rest will be regarded as rhetoric. Only a consistent program that extends grace to the undervalued and augments respect for the living creatures of the earth will render us credible witnesses, with a right to pontificate on the inviolability of the gift of life.

The emphasis on the sanctity of life will, of course, lead us to a position of marked conservatism vis-à-vis the practice of abortion. It will be our premise, as Adventist Christians, that abortion is a sign of failure within the human community, a cipher attesting to the tragedy of our fallen

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state and the plight which has subsequently evolved. As Jesus once observed concerning divorce, "In the beginning, it was not so." We cannot help but be moved to sadness and compassion for both the fetus and the mother. We cannot help but abhor the situation. Moral sensitivity and Christian compassion dictate that we mourn the great loss represented by each abortion and be prepared to intervene where we may, to prevent such tragedy and to facilitate healing among its survivors.

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At the same time, we must also recognize stewardship as a quality defining us as humans, creating a duty to respect one another. Every woman and every man have been made stewards over their own physical resources. Both humility and faithfulness to the creation story require that we acknowledge the integrity of each individual, that we do not attempt to enforce our perspective on others. Rather, we must defer to each person's sovereignty within his or her own domain, and assign to God the right to censure and convict of wrongdoing in cases of abuse.

For the woman who is considering becoming pregnant or the woman for whom pregnancy has catastrophic overtones, stewardship is exercised through a careful examination of the resources which she has at her disposal to bring the pregnancy to successful culmination and the baby to Spirit-filled adulthood. While crystal balls are anathema (to say nothing of unreliable), and Christianity is a walk of daily revelation rather than a static totem, a woman is not without the capacity to weigh the judiciousness of a particular pregnancy. While she may not know the calamitous (or favorable) events which may unfold in the future, she can assess her present condition. She can learn whether it is probable that her body

is able to sustain a pregnancy, bring a fetus to birth, and take care of it after it has arrived. She can make a judgment as to her own psychological stamina, and the effect (or risk) that a pregnancy (or additional child) would have on her ability to function productively. Far better than anyone else in the situation, she may consciously or intuitively know the reverberation the pregnancy would have on her familial and social community. Finally, she may be able to evaluate the support she will receive both during and after the pregnancy, and whether that would be sufficient, not only to bring a sacred being into the world but subsequently guide it.

As female physiology designates women as the door to human embodiment, it is women to whom the stewardship of population has ultimately been assigned. While this does not nullify male procreative responsibility, the final decision has been placed with women. In this way, women, just as they must appraise their personal, familial, and spiritual resources and how those need to be allocated, must also evaluate the capacity of the society and the earth to welcome new additions to the human population. The conduct of stewardship will necessitate painful decisions as women realistically survey the finite resources of the community and the demands that specific additions (i.e., children with severe physical handicaps) would make on those resources, as well as the impossibility of providing for a limitless potential number of new humans. Women, through the execution of their role in procreation, assume a distinct and peculiar custodianship of the earth.

The moral mandate of choice decrees that women cannot be passive observers in the Grand Drama. Rather, each woman must make the choices (and bear the ensuing responsibility) with respect to her generative capacity. Some women, after careful assessment of their desire and ability to embrace parenthood, have intentionally become pregnant, only to discover their pregnancy threatens their lives or exceeds their capacity to provide care. Other women face an unwanted pregnancy because of self-abasement and neglect. In either case, each woman, as an endowed moral agent, must exercise her obligation to make a choice. In making that choice, whatever it is, she

reflects the will of God toward her as a human being. She functions as a moral actor; she assumes agency for her destiny and procreativity.

It is easy to critique the obvious lack of self-awareness and personal respect demonstrated by the woman who approaches abortion as a “quick-fix” for a situation engendered by delinquent sexuality. Neither her attitudes nor her actions seems congruent with sensitivity to the moral dimensions involved. While she may seem an unlikely candidate for adequately processed ethical decision-making, the gift of choice remains hers to exercise. With her alone stands the final decision on how she will utilize the temple given, whether to her glory or her destruction, as a stronghold of the Spirit or the defiled shell of a dwelling place. Except in cases where she loses the ability to speak for herself through catastrophic mental or physical debilitation, the gift of choice must stand and be respected. Even at such a point, those who would speak on her behalf must continue to exhibit respect for her integrity as a person, not sacrificing her for the benefit of a “new” or “more deserving” other.

Perhaps it is central to God’s plan that those who make the choices bear the consequences, as women most certainly do in the case of abortion. Abortion, while posing less physical risk (if done under proper medical circumstances) than full-term pregnancy and delivery, still poses several threats to the well-being of women. The first is that of possible infection and other gynecological complications which may result in future sterility. Repeated abortion, even without infection, significantly increases the chances of miscarriage in future, planned pregnancy, and may result in the inability either to conceive or to be able to carry a baby to term. The elimination of one’s potential to reproduce and thereby effect biological continuation of their family line, to create a concrete expression of the love shared between a man and a woman, or to participate in the wonders of gestational development, is the heavy price many women pay for choosing abortion.

The physical scarring is only a material manifestation of the emotional and psychological scars

born by women who have taken this path. Awareness is just beginning to dawn within the therapeutic community of the intense need for grief counseling for women who have been through this trauma. Anorexia and suicide are only the more dramatic manifestations of the depression, anxiety, grief, and sense of loss that are typical residual effects of abortion. The loss of any child is a significant event in the life of a woman. In the case of abortion, the death is not simply mourned it is complicated by doubts as to the ultimate validity of the decision: its reflection on the woman’s maternal qualities, its impact on the woman’s position within her faith community, its effect on her relationship with God. Whatever else abortion is, it is not “an easy way out” or “a way to escape the consequences of sexuality” any more than pregnancy itself is a punishment for sexual expression.

Women’s lives are shaped and permanently sculpted by their generative power and their decisions surrounding it. Pregnancy, whether one’s first or fifth, always augurs change, transition, and peril for women. For those of us who receive the news in circumstances where we cannot provide

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adequate prenatal care (those of us addicted to drugs or alcohol, or who are too diseased, poor, or ignorant to find proper nutrition and medical information), the jeopardy is immediately transferred to the child. In many of these cases, there is no opportunity to gestate a holy thing in the image of God. The only thing we can produce at such a point is formed in the image of our own brokenness, suffering, and shame.

Pregnancy finds some of us outside of a committed relationship, or in a relationship marked by abuse, degradation, and violence. Our resources

are consumed by efforts to survive or to protect other family members (perhaps even other children). We have not discovered enough love for ourselves to nurture even the holy within ourselves, and are not likely to bring a baby into the world enveloped in love. We know that any child we bear will have received nine months of trial, trauma, and distress that may have chemically altered the very physiology of its existence. For others of us who have been careful stewards of our own resources and would seem to be ideal candidates for maternity, the pregnancy of dreams is transformed into a nightmare when it is discovered that our baby is incompatible with life.

In addition to these cases, there are those of us who become pregnant because we are small or very young and do not know of our right to say No to a stepfather or brother or uncle or family friend, or we have had a brutal and forced sexual encounter with a stranger or former friend. While these situations are in many ways very dissimilar, they have at least two things in common. First, the great discrepancy between God's intention to provide procreativity to humanity as a gift, and the actual circumstances of procreativity in the fallen creation; secondly, in all these cases, procreativity is experienced as an injury.

The gift, once bequeathed so that we might experience the joy of creating new physical life, has become transmuted into a curse. That which was given to put us in communion with God alienates us not only from God but also from our lovers, our community, even ourselves. The choices with which we are confronted, often through no fault of our own, are no longer between good and evil, but only between bad and worse.

It is within this situation that redemption, the one gift that cannot be perverted to work our destruction, must be found. Where human beings are required to make

moral decisions that exceed their wisdom, where it is impossible to know fully the ramifications of the choices involved, we are left with the mandate to accept our responsibility to make a choice. We must choose and rely on God to bring something salvific out of the experience. The promise that "My grace is sufficient unto thee" functions to allow us to retain the vestiges of God's original plan for humanity. That promise allows us to remain moral actors in the universe; allows us to exercise our God-given obligation to choose.

When a decision whether or not to disrupt a pregnancy has been made, there is always then the opportunity for self-doubt and recrimination. There is the endless reflection on the possibility that we have, in our human fallibility, deceived ourselves and made a mistake. Without the intervention of divine grace and the mediation of the Spirit, the woman may wound and rewind herself for years. The recognition of our own inadequacy to preside over such decisions, and the verity that our decisions are frequently the product of myopia, confusion, and pain, may be the first step in healing the wound. The knowledge that our insufficiency has been compassionately recognized and provided for by the God of grace gives us permission to forgive ourselves for the finiteness and fallibility that characterize our fallen state.

As we have shared the questions, fears, and hopes of the woman facing an unwanted pregnancy, we become aware that we have participated in the approach of the Great Physician, the great Lover of Souls. We have sensed, as we explored biblical themes and stories, the presence of Christ the healer restoring wholeness in the midst of a fractured and aching world. And in that experience of healing we have glimpsed the mission of the Adventist church: to make it possible for beleaguered, bewildered, vulnerable human beings to experience the reassuring power and goodness of God's presence.