
Control of the Body, Control of the Mind: A Personal Abortion Ethic

by Michael Pearson

If you wish to attach a label to me, it would have to be the pro-choice label. Such labels are often unhelpful, and oversimplify all kinds of complexities, but in the end I do believe that there are circumstances in which it is legitimate to abort the fetus—to do so is the best of a range of evil options available.

I hold this view against a background of experience which is clearly deficient in important respects. Not being a member of the medical profession, I have never been present on an occasion when a fetus was being aborted; I have never seen the contents of the womb in the dish; I have never had to consign the contents of the womb to the waste-bin. I have never confronted at the level of my own family the guilt and the remorse of a woman who has had an abortion, nor have I shared in any intimate way the relief of a woman who has chosen abortion as a way of extricating herself from difficulties that seem to her otherwise insurmountable. These are all important deficiencies in my experience.

Personal Experience

The first rather obvious but extremely important biographical

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detail about me is that I am male. I have never experienced, could never experience, the process of bonding with the child that is growing within. An adequate Adventist response to the question of abortion can never be formulated until Adventist women, and particularly Adventist mothers, have articulated their views on the subject. Any conclusions formed in a male-dominated forum like this must remain partial.

Like many males I am attracted to solutions to problems that are tidy and simple, and so in a crisis am likely to consider abortion as a serious option. Many males are, of course, strongly opposed to termination—that is also, in a sense, a tidy solution. I suspect, however, that they are mostly opposed to other people's abortions . . .

Furthermore, I am politically "liberal," inclined to "live and let live." Thus I am prone to favor legislation that provides a range of possible options for personal behavior. I therefore favor abortion law that is relatively permissive, though I greatly dislike the way in which many people use the freedom that the law confers. There is more to be lost than to be gained by a return to the days before abortion law reform, in Britain in 1967, and in the United States following the Supreme Court decision of 1973.

At this point the autobiographical detail becomes a little more precise. I acknowledge that I have been particularly influenced by the experience of counseling a student who had had an abortion. The relationship that eventuated in the pregnancy was not a serious one; the father had

had some history of drug abuse. There was a history of antagonism within the young woman's family, a history that, one suspects, had driven her to seek affection elsewhere. Without much prospect of support, she had opted for an abortion, and by and large felt relief afterwards, though she still had to deal with feelings of guilt. It seemed to me to be a case where the law permitted her to choose the lesser of two evils.

I asked myself, at a deep level, the question: Would you consider an abortion under such circumstances? The answer was "Yes."

I find that conviction disturbed but not dislodged by the case of a delightful and intelligent student whom I have taught. She gives a most moving testimony to the courage of her mother who rejected medical advice to abort her on the grounds that she (the mother) had a serious heart condition.

I am influenced by the experience of a friend who discovered that her contraceptive coil had become embedded in a fetus that she discovered she was bearing. She was told that the fetus, if it survived, was likely to be seriously malformed. In the distressing circumstances, it seemed to me that she and her husband were justified in electing to abort the fetus.

I am keenly aware also of a distressing experience I had once in an Adventist church. During Sabbath school I sat behind a young but haggard-looking couple who carried on their laps a child who moaned throughout the proceedings and whose body periodically jerked violently and uncontrollably. I later discovered that the couple had been warned at a fairly early stage by their doctors that their child would be severely mentally handicapped. I also learned that their pastor had advised them that abortion was a sinful act that God could not condone. Casual observer that I was, I felt that the pastor himself bore a heavy responsibility in the matter. My instinct was that it would have been better had the child never been born.

All of these experiences were poignant and

formative in their own way, but they were sufficiently distant from me that I could, to some extent, throw them off. But now I have to come the closest to home. There has been one experience of my life that has brought me closest to the abortion dilemma. Immediately after the birth of our second child, my wife suffered from post-natal depression and other symptoms of hormone imbalance that it took us months to unravel before we could return to a normal life. Despite all her courage and initiative in trying to resolve the problem, we entered into what at times seemed a long, dark tunnel from which it took us some 18 months to emerge. It was not unrelieved darkness; it was a roller-coaster experience, but with more downs than ups. It was perhaps the most painful experience of my life, but, paradoxically, probably the most fruitful as well.

As the darkness deepened, I found myself asking, and yet hardly daring to ask, questions about what we should do if my wife became pregnant now. I felt that with two children under the age of three, it would have been a desperate situation. I asked myself, at a deep level, the question: Would you consider an abortion under such circumstances? The answer came back "Yes."

Significantly, my wife has subsequently told me that she would never have considered abortion an option. I am glad to say that the dilemma never actually confronted us, but the prospect of it was sufficient to make us seek a permanent contraceptive solution. I was obliged in that time to confront myself in a way that I had never had to before, and that moment of self-awareness has led me not to wish to preclude anyone from electing for abortion in circumstances that they perceive to be as threatening as mine then seemed. It would lack integrity to deny anyone a right which I might then have wanted to claim for myself. . .

Adventist Beliefs

In addition to the relation of our personal feelings to our other views on abortion, we need to pay more attention

to the relation of distinctive Adventist beliefs to the topic. For example, our attitude toward immortality is more directly relevant than we have acknowledged. In Catholic theology, a soul is infused into the embryo at the very moment of conception, and it, as an inheritor of original sin, must not be allowed to perish without baptism. The matter is clear-cut. There is a soul to save as soon as the sperm fertilizes the egg. The situation in Adventist theology is far less clear. At death, a person “goes down into the grave there to lie unconscious until the resurrection day.”¹ Adventists do not believe that there exists a separate entity called a soul; rather, in the gestation period, a human being “becomes a soul.”²

Adventists have tended to explicate their doctrine of conditional immortality from the point of view of the one who dies. He or she “sleeps,” unconscious of the years that intervene between death and resurrection. He or she awakens then as if it were the next moment of life, rather as someone who awakens from sleep may express surprise at the fact that he or she has been asleep. From the point of view of the bereaved, however, Adventist doctrine may offer less immediate comfort than traditional Christian doctrine. The loved one dies, the body decays, there is no soul that endures. Where is the loved one? What is this identity that will be reconstituted at the second advent? It seems that there is a kind of genotype, a unique formula, that exists in the mind of God—but nothing else.

The idea that a woman bears in her body a genotype that is going to pass into a genotype again—rather than an immortal soul—via the circular route of life, is perhaps sufficient in itself to diminish respect for the fetus. But more than that, countless millions of genotypes existing after their death in the mind of God will be called into life at the second advent only then to face the extinction of judgment—the second death. I fear that this comes uncomfortably close to being a model of abortion on a cosmic scale. In the center of Adventist theology then, we have a story of countless millions of lives, having been reactivated or reconstituted, being jettisoned, even if for the best of reasons or “therapeutic grounds.” Such a mechanism may predispose some Adventists to

regard human potential in a less serious way than would those who believe quite unequivocally that at conception there exists an entity that is of eternal significance. You may think that my explication of the second death as an abortion procedure writ large is farfetched, but we would be unwise to exclude entirely the possibility that the particular Adventist view of immortality affects our perceptions of the abortion decision. It does seem to contain within it the principle of the expendability of human life.

On the other hand, other Adventist doctrines might in some subtle ways encourage an anti-abortion stance; for example, our view on Creation. A common argument in favor of abortion is that through the evolutionary process the body has developed a mechanism for expelling the abnormal fetus from the womb spontaneously. Induced abortion becomes then only an extension of that process. As creationists, Adventists are unlikely to find that kind of explanation convincing. Furthermore, our belief in an imminent Advent might lead some Adventists to ignore the justification for abortion on the grounds of a spiraling world population. Moreover, some members would undoubtedly regard widespread abortion as evi-

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dence of the evils attending the climactic last days of human history. Again the notion of a detailed scrutiny of individual behavior—the investigative judgment—will only enhance this effect.

Surely, even if we are not aware at a conscious level of the correlation between Adventist doctrine and our decisions about abortion, years of living in the spiritual and theological ambiance we call Adventism will affect at a deep level each individual’s response to deep personal crisis.

Of course, no matter how more clear we may become about the relation of our deep feelings and

beliefs to our own attitudes to abortion, and no matter how better informed we may become on the subject of abortion ethics, no one has the right to tell a woman or a couple that a particular course of action is right or wrong, in a given situation. To do so would be to usurp the role of God's good

Spirit in guiding them to a free and wise decision. We can only help to fill in details on the map; we cannot tell them which route to take. Until such time as we are prepared to carry one another's burdens more effectively than we now do, we dare not, whatever their decision, cast the first stone.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Answers to Objections*, p. 372.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 511-519.