

Eight Problems

WITH THE

Adventist Abortion Guidelines

BY JONATHAN MARTIN

Like most Adventists raised in the church, I have for most of my life been somewhat ignorant and ambivalent about abortion. I saw it as a concern of the “Christian Right”; a political wedge issue. Although I was never fully comfortable with it, I saw it as something we had to tolerate in a fallen world and didn’t spend much time thinking about what the Church’s hospitals were doing. Despite having a theology degree from an Adventist university, I was not aware the Church even had a policy on abortion. I assumed that our hospitals probably didn’t perform abortions, but didn’t really enquire. In my experience, most Adventists are unaware of the Church’s official stance on this topic. In fact, most pastors are not aware of it.

Abortion stopped being theoretical for me and my wife when we found ourselves pregnant with a child who was diagnosed with a rare congenital heart defect which made survival outside of the womb uncertain, and a long, hard road ahead, a certainty. Abortion was offered as an option right away but there was never a doubt in our minds that this was not what God wanted. We went through the painful ordeal, choosing to have faith and hope that God would somehow be glorified whatever may come. I will not hide the fact that my wife suffered the brunt of this experience. But killing that innocent life was just not an option. I look back and shudder at the thought of ripping our own child’s limbs off. Our resolution was that Caleb (what we named him) might die, but he would die loved. He would not die because his parents rejected him as unworthy of their tears and suffering. If the devil would take Caleb, God would have

to allow it. We were not going to hand Caleb over to death voluntarily.

Caleb died in the womb a few days before his due date. He was delivered by caesarian and we got to hold him and spend time with him before we had to lay him to rest, awaiting the resurrection. We know that to God, he is as much a person as you and I. After that experience, the grieving and recovery period for my wife was quite long. She never wanted to be pregnant again. We had two children and that was her third delivery by caesarian and pregnancy becomes quite risky after three caesarians. A ruptured uterus is a very dangerous thing. As a Type 1 diabetic, pregnancy was always especially difficult and stressful for my wife, and recovery afterwards takes years. She was therefore not happy when we became unexpectedly pregnant, three years after Caleb died. She was scared. This was the first time in my wife’s life that she considered abortion as a legitimate option for her. She found strength in verses like: “children are a blessing from the Lord” (Psalm 127:3) and “your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed, and in your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

This was an unwanted and unplanned, high-risk pregnancy, at a time in our life that was not convenient. I was a first-year lawyer working insane hours but not making much money and we were heavily in debt, far from home and without a very developed support network. The strain on our marriage and family took years to recover from. It was not until Layla was born that my wife really felt bonded to her. But as soon as she saw her,

that bond was instant and incredibly strong. As much as Layla was not what we had planned and it was a difficult and stressful pregnancy that we did not want or feel we could handle, we cannot imagine life without her today. She has brought such joy and healing to our home.

My wife found strength through her pregnancy with Caleb in books like *I Will Carry You* by Angie Smith. Another great book we learned of later is *Perfectly Human* by Sarah Williams. These women carried children with fatal congenital defects to term and gained a powerful story and spiritual growth through this experience. These stories would not have been possible if all churches were providing the moral relativism found in the Guidelines. It is because these Christian women, like my wife, knew what was right and true that they were able to make the powerful decisions they made.

My beliefs about abortion were further solidified by assisting various Canadian pro-life organizations in freedom of speech litigation against various government entities in Canada. In Canada, speaking out against abortion is seen as borderline hate speech and the government is working very hard to prevent it.

As I have looked at the evidence and been confronted with the facts, statistics, and numerous personal stories, I have had to conclude that abortion really is a great evil in this world and not a solution to any problem. It does not belong in our church and this terrible stain from our collective conscience must be removed.

1. The Guidelines do not uphold a biblical view of the unborn.

The Bible only ever refers to the unborn as children: Luke 1:36 (*huion* – son); Luke 1:41, 44 (*brepheos* – baby); Genesis 25:22; 2 Kings 19:3; Ruth 1:11; Isaiah 37:3 (*banim* – sons). Many of the Church's leading scholars such as Dr. Richard Davidson, Dr. Ron DuPreez, Dr. Roy Gane, Dr. Richard Fredericks and Dr. Colin Standish have agreed that the Bible unequivocally presents the unborn in this way. Dr. Gerald Winslow, who was involved in the drafting of the current Guidelines, has, in at least two articles, taken the position that the unborn are fully human lives and ought to be protected as such:

But from a biblical perspective, human life is not respected because of some human agreement or

some human capacity. Rather, it is respected and preserved because it is the gift of the Creator, because in His love He has given it value. We love because He loved us first (see 1 John 4:17–20). The right to life and the duty to preserve it are secured first of all by His love. Human contracts can always be broken or ignored, but God's love is steadfast. Human traits wax and wane, but God's love is unconditional.¹

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 Guidelines cannot be said to uphold the biblical view that the unborn are children. With the exception of the provision for abortion to save a mother's life in a situation where both lives cannot be preserved, none of the exceptions permitting abortion in the Guidelines would be permissible for the intentional killing of any other child. One could not morally kill a child because they were conceived in rape or incest, had a severe congenital defect, or if caring for the child presented a risk to the mental or even physical health of his or her mother. The Church appears to be adopting an unstated agnostic stance about the state of the unborn, and then using the language of autonomy to paper over the lack of clarity on that crucial point to condone some abortions, and restrict others, with no clear reason why, besides appeals to compassion in difficult situations.

2. The Guidelines are a compass without a needle which could be used to support genocide.

Valuable as it is, human life is not the only or ultimate concern.
(Guidelines)

The Guidelines present various biblical principles in non-committal, open-ended ways and leave it open to the reader to conclude that the biblical freedom of the Christian includes the right to intentionally kill innocent human life in self-defense against speculative fears. This is exactly the kind of loose moral reasoning that is used to justify wars of aggression and genocide. This may seem extreme, but my point is that this is a supportable reading of the

Guidelines. It is the fallout of being agnostic about what an unborn child is, saying that it might be fully human, and then saying it's okay to intentionally kill it anyway in some cases. The middle ground the Church is trying to walk on this issue has no clear principled basis and can thus be easily manipulated.

3. The exceptions for abortion in the Guidelines are mostly based on emotional reasoning and have no real science to support them.

In his 1981 *Spectrum* article, Dr. Winslow stated that exceptions to the protection of the unborn must be subject to a “heavy burden of proof.” However, despite their appeal to emotion to encourage the reader to accept the exceptions provided in the Guidelines, there is no scientific evidence at all that the exceptions for abortion in the Guidelines (other than situations of strict life or death, which is self-evident) are in fact compassionate towards women. There is no science showing that rape victims who abort their pregnancies have a better emotional recovery. Most, in fact, choose to carry to term, and most who do, choose to keep the baby. I personally know someone who did this and that is the only child she was ever able to have—a daughter who now attends an Adventist University.

There is significant evidence, that goes unaddressed in the Guidelines, that abortion merely victimizes a victim of rape a second time. Most who have kept their babies would agree that the baby was the silver lining in a terrible life event. Why would we, as a church, want to in any way encourage the destruction of that silver lining in the absence of some compelling evidence that we are doing any good?

Ministries like Silent No More Awareness³ are presenting a very important perspective that Adventist leaders generally seem unaware of. There, you can read several thousand heart-breaking testimonies from abortion victims.

There are no websites which show similar regret and shame by women who chose to carry their unwanted pregnancies to term.⁴ Though the data on the psychological harm from abortion is admittedly contradictory, scientific data has not clearly shown that women who abort their unplanned pregnancies have better mental health outcomes than those who carry to term.

4. The Guidelines falsely present the preserving of one's freedom or autonomy as a biblical basis for killing innocent human life.

Women, at times however, may face exceptional circumstances that present serious moral or medical dilemmas, such as significant threats to the pregnant woman's life, serious jeopardy to her health, severe congenital defects carefully diagnosed in the fetus, and pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. (Guidelines)

It is no secret that individual freedom and autonomy are the sole moral principle used in the Guidelines to justify the intentional taking of the innocent human life. Yet the Bible does not present the preserving of our freedom or autonomy as justifying the murder of the innocent. In fact, the Bible invariably teaches the opposite, that suffering personal loss of freedom for what is good is pleasing to God. (Acts 5:41; Romans 8:17; Ephesians 6:20; Philippians 1:3,29; Colossians 4:3; 1 Peter 3:17, 4:13, 19; Hebrews 11:35–38). It is not only unbiblical, but anti-biblical, to classify situations that call for principled self-denial as cases of “serious moral dilemma,” opening the door to what may in fact be murder. If there is no countering moral imperative, then there is no moral dilemma, only a biblical imperative to suffer for what is good. Thus, the Guidelines nullify the Word of God for the sake of human ideas, prejudices, desires, and traditions (Matthew 15:3).

5. In the same way that euthanasia creates a cynical culture where certain people are expected to die, the Guidelines create a cynical culture where women are expected to get abortions in certain situations.

The Guidelines implicitly suggest that abortion is likely the wise and best choice for women who are raped, are victims of incest, are pregnant with a child with a congenital defect, or face a high-risk pregnancy or a pregnancy that otherwise threatens their current way of life. The Guidelines thus create an expectation that those in this type of situation should have abortions and fails to shine the bright light of faith and optimism in a dark, cynical and hopeless world. Rather, it succumbs to the darkness and invites women to think as though there was no God and no promise of Divine care, provision and protection. Rather than upholding the promises of God and the promise that we can do all things through Christ who

strengthens us, (Philippians 4:13), the Church essentially teaches that there are situations that the redeeming and sustaining love of Christ simply cannot reach.

By treating these situations as moral dilemmas, rather than practical challenges in doing what is right, the suggestion is made that women who keep such pregnancies may in fact be making the wrong decision. The Church thus fails miserably to be a faithful light to those women who seek God's glory above all else and betrays its pastoral responsibility to these faithful women so it can approve the decisions of those who place their personal autonomy first.

In my religious-liberty work as a lawyer who defends pro-life organizations against the Canadian government's attempts at censorship, I have come across many stories from women for whom abortion was not some act of personal liberation, but rather an act of submission to the wishes of those around them.⁵ Some may argue that the Guidelines oppose coercing women into having abortions. But anyone with any degree of experience in clinical ethics understands that we cannot effectively eliminate or detect subtle, soft, suggestive coercion that family members regularly exert on one another in these types of situations.

The Adventist Health slogan on its headquarters building in Roseville, California is "Living God's Love by Inspiring Health, Wholeness and Hope." The Adventist health mission was supposed to present an alternative to the quick, but shallow, fixes of drug-based medicine. We were instead supposed to seek to heal the whole person by calling people down the more difficult path of following all of the laws of physical and spiritual health, and walking along with them in that path. This would serve as the right arm of the church by both advancing the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, and also growing true disciples of Christ who know from experience what love really means. The Church is supposed to be encouraging us with the hope that we can, with the help of God and one another, be better and stronger than we think we can be and it is in these moments that the most significant spiritual growth can take place as God's promises are truly put to the test. The Guidelines, however, encourage the easy way out of the situation, not just for the woman, but for Adventists who then don't have to be burdened with the duty to provide

material and spiritual support to those who would make the more difficult, but faith-inspired decision. It is no accident that our health care system has no crisis pregnancy centers, like other Bible-believing Christians do. This is the inevitable result of presenting abortion as a solution to difficult situations.

6. The "serious jeopardy to her health" exception is unnecessary and has no real outer limit.

None of the exceptions for abortion in the Guidelines are as wide as this one. Those in the know within the Adventist health care system will readily admit that they do not know how far this exception actually applies in practice. So far, none I have spoken with have been willing to commit to the position that it only applies to physical health risks, and not to emotional, economic, psychological, or psychosocial health risks. Basically, any woman with a story that sounds sad enough can qualify for an abortion under this exception. This exception is unnecessary because the "serious jeopardy to a mother's life" exception provides for therapeutic, unintentional abortions, in life or death situations.

7. The Guidelines represent the relics of a legalistic and elitist Adventism we have yet to fully renounce.

The Guidelines come from an era in the church when members faced tremendous pressure to be "perfect" and abortion fit nicely within this culture of hiding one's sins for the sake of preserving status in the church. The church's obsession with perfection led many to the belief that we are only of value in the eyes of God to the extent we can overcome sin through our personal efforts. A person who believes that God's love or regard for us is based on performance—on personal efforts in self-discipline and responsible behavior—will naturally see those less capable of this as being less important in God's eyes. It thus comes as no surprise that Dr. Jack Provonsha's views on the value of human life at various stages were readily accepted by the church in the 1970s and became the basis for the predecessor to the current Guidelines. Dr. Provonsha's view was that human dignity is linked to the ability to exercise individual responsibility. Perfectionism and humanism are essentially one and the same when it comes to their view of human worth.

This spirit of ableism is now understood to be out of sync with biblical understanding of God's salvation as being based on grace rather than merit, and received through childlike faith and dependence rather than personal resolutions to do what's right. It is those who are the humblest who are most precious to God, and none are humbler than little children. God's love for little children is thus arguably greater than for the carefully disciplined and trained religious adult. As Christians, the biblical exercise of our will is not towards a self-obsessed quest for perfection through individual effort, but rather towards a continual quest for the childlike, innocent heart that rests in God's faithfulness and lives by gratitude and praise.

8. The Guidelines destroy our moral high ground to teach that God's Ten Commandments are binding and that grace and gospel freedom do not justify their transgression.

The principle of individual autonomy as a counterbalance to the moral duty (in the Sixth Commandment) against the destruction of innocent human life is problematic to Adventist theology in two ways:

- A. It confuses a legal right with a moral duty. We do not have a moral duty to exercise all of our rights. I have the right in this country to be a homosexual. This does not mean I have the duty to be a homosexual. The existence of a legal right to choose does not offer any guidance on how that right ought to be exercised. Only a moral duty can counter another moral duty. So simply stating a right to bodily autonomy does not answer the question of how we ought, as Christians, to exercise it. Saying that freedom is in and of itself a moral imperative that counters obedience to God's commandments, is exactly the theological mischief the Church was raised up to put down.

- B. The statements in the Spirit of Prophecy enjoining coercion of worship (for example, *Desire of Ages*, 466, 550) cannot apply to the situation of abortion. They apply to individuals and institutions of superior power, enjoining them from

compelling worship from those of lesser power. An unborn child is not such a person of superior power. They are ones in inferior power, to whom the operative principle is that those who have received undeserved, lifesaving grace from God must not withhold it from those weaker than them because of their newfound "freedom," but are duty bound to their master to extend the grace and gift of life they themselves have received (Matthew 18:21–35).

The Adventist Church's credibility is severely undermined by the incoherent approach to the Sixth Commandment presented in the Guidelines. The ideas presented go to the heart of the Church's message about God's law and the role of grace and Gospel freedom in enabling us to keep the law, rather than excusing and enabling its transgression. The Guidelines, to many, represent a significant betrayal of those who financially support a church they believe to be the Remnant Church precisely because they are taught that it has rejected the false teachings about freedom and grace that are so prominent in the confusing religious systems we understand to be the systems of spiritual and eschatological Babylon.

Endnotes

1. Gerald Winslow, "Abortion and Christian Principles," *Ministry* (May 1988). www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1988/05/abortion-and-christian-principles.
2. Gerald Winslow, "Adventists and Abortion: A Principled Approach," *Spectrum* (December 1981). www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/Periodicals/Spectrum/1981-1982_Vol_12/2_December_1981.pdf.3. <http://www.silentnomoreawareness.org/>.
3. www.silentnomoreawareness.org/.
4. D. M. Fergusson, L. J. Horwood, J. M. Boden, "Does abortion reduce the mental health risks of unwanted or unintended pregnancy? A re-appraisal of the evidence," *Aust N Z J Psychiatry*, 57:9 (September 2013): 819–27.
5. "A Letter To Someone Thinking About Abortion." www.silentnomoreawareness.org/testimonies/document-print.aspx?ID=3881. "In Sorrow Alone" <http://www.silentnomoreawareness.org/testimonies/document-print.aspx?ID=3860>.



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