

# Abortion through the Lens of Culture

## An Adventist Woman's Perspective

BY STELLA OLIVERAS

With the growing commotion both online and on the streets over the issue of abortion, I have encountered a personal philosophical dilemma that I never thought I would have—given that I never thought I would have premarital sex or need to have an abortion. Georgia was the fourth state to pass the heartbeat bill, which prevents a woman from getting an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy. Alabama sparked particular outrage among pro-choice advocates when the state passed the bill with the same limitations being placed on victims of rape and incest.

My biggest concern as a Christian is understanding my relationship to society and what God requires of me. I believe my role is not to bring judgment upon secular society but to bring people to the knowledge of Christ. How I go about this, matters. How can one navigate the current political climate without being judgmental?

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My journey in consideration of the abortion issue began at Southern Adventist University where I took a Christian ethics course. That's when I started to think about fertility as an ethical issue. My professor taught from an absolutist perspective and told us that life began when a sperm joined an egg. I don't remember him using biblical texts or expounding on the steps of fertility and fetal development. What I do remember was when he said that taking a Plan B contraceptive after having sex was an unethical decision; That once the ball of life started rolling, it was unethical to do anything to stop it.

After I graduated from SAU in 2008, I went to South Korea to teach English as a Second Language. Engaging the advanced students in a debate helped them do critical thinking in English. We picked the topic of abortion, even though abortion was illegal at the time. Everyone in the class agreed that abortion wasn't right, but the students needed to pick a side and advocate for that cause. It was fascinating to see students who truly

believed in the pro-life concept come up with incredibly well-developed arguments as to why an abortion would be needed in certain circumstances.

One student was a female police officer. As we went around the class having each student make comments to practice their English, we started talking about the dangers of rape in South Korea. She said that the drinking scene was very popular and that it was common for women to have drugs slipped into their drinks and become victims of rape. She said that she would investigate these cases and try to bring about justice for the women who reported the crime.

These discussions helped me understand how emotional and dramatic this topic can be. Taking the time to listen to personal stories helped me see the world in a different way. My stance began to take new shape and I'm grateful for the students that brought their perspectives into my world and helped me become a more open-minded person.

Later, when I worked for the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, I became confused about the Adventist stance on abortion. A coworker said that we didn't have a stance on this issue and that our hospitals were performing abortions. I thought this was crazy, how could we allow this to happen? So, I called an Adventist hospital and I asked if they were performing abortions. They replied with an emphatic no, and then explained that they only performed abortions when a mother's life is in danger. I felt such relief when I got off the phone, but I was still a little confused about our stance; "What did Adventists really believe about abortion?"

Then, in the fall of 2018, I had a miscarriage. That experience taught me what a human life looked like at nine weeks in the womb. This experience impacted my thoughts and ideas about the unborn child. During my miscarriage, globs and globs of blood came out of me. It

was a period on steroids. I had to wear Depends because pads just didn't do the trick, but I didn't feel like I was delivering a baby; I didn't think to myself, "This is a baby." I felt loss and pain, but my loss was over my dreams and hopes for this growing life, not that I knew him/her personally, or that I had some kind of emotional attachment. It was physically painful, but the idea that a human life was dying or being killed did not cross my mind, even though my body was naturally aborting this

fetus. Having a nine-week-old fetus inside of me miscarry was vastly different than the experience of giving birth to that baby and then the baby dying in my arms. I don't understand how people can compare these two perspectives.

After a few weeks, I began to tell my family in Brazil that I had miscarried and along with condolences came the stories of women within our family and friends who had also miscarried. Through this experience I learned that in Portuguese

there is no distinction between the word miscarriage and abortion. In Portuguese, they simply called it an abortion, the technical term being "spontaneous abortion."

It felt strange hearing the word abortion when they described my miscarriage experience. I realized that in English we have created two separate narratives with these distinguishing words, miscarriage and abortion. For one group of women we feel sympathy and for the other we feel judgment. In both worlds, women can be secretive, there is a feeling of shame and failure that comes with having this type of loss and most women don't share their experiences until one person finally comes forward.

Having an abortion or having a spontaneous abortion, though differing experiences, have the same ending, it's an abrupt stop to a developing life. I didn't have any control over what happened when my body decided to

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terminate this developing life inside of me. And it helped me understand that women who choose to have an abortion may also feel a lack of control over their own lives.

My husband and I waited four years before starting a family. We waited that long for many reasons, we enjoyed our freedom and we wanted to spend time with each other without a major interruption. But I honestly was scared of what it meant to become a mother. I would have to house a human in my body and then I would either need to stop working to take care of a child alone all day or put my child in the hands of an underpaid, overworked childcare worker. On one hand I would have to stop my retirement savings and extra income, and on the other I would have to face this devastating feeling every time I handed over my child to someone else. And I'm lucky, I'm in a good situation with a husband who loves me and who is incredibly supportive. There are countless women who work multiple part-time jobs without access to health care and have to make these same decisions by themselves without any support.

The majority of women who have abortions in the United States fall below poverty levels. We don't have a good health care system for all in this country, nor do we have access to paid maternity leave and the ability to afford good childcare. We have a broken social structure that does not educate women and men on the process of fertility or provide the proper support for creating a family. No wonder we feel powerless.

I can hear the rebuttal to my statements, "well they shouldn't have premarital sex," as though everyone grows up in the same situation, with the same background, education and religious affiliation. It's such a complicated issue and it doesn't help that there is this dismissive attitude towards women who choose to have an abortion, like they have abortions in between errands and possess

this flippant and careless attitude towards pregnancy. But that's not true. This negative attitude towards these women is called judgment and it's not our place to condemn individuals.

People feel justified in their judgment because they believe that a developing human is a completely developed person. And that's what the conversation around this issue doesn't address: the concept of personhood. I believe life begins when an egg and sperm meet but I believe that personhood is given at birth.

When I was asked to write about my "abortion" experience, I began to search the scriptures. Exodus 21:22 talks about the consequence of someone causing someone

else to miscarry, and what would happen if the woman was seriously injured or died. The penalty for a miscarriage is a fine and the penalty for harming the mother is an "eye for an eye." This verse clearly gives a distinction between the mother and the fetus as not holding the same status of personhood. This came from the Mosaic law where you can be stoned to death for breaking the Sabbath or dishonoring your parents.

In further study of Rabbinic Jewish teachings, I found a common thread in the treatment of the unborn. If the unborn child was posing a threat to the life of the mother, those who are

delivering the baby are to terminate the pregnancy. Explicit language is used, instructing that the fetus is to be cut limb from limb in order to save the life of the mother. This definitely parts from the idea of waiting for the baby to be born and breathe its first breath to do anything for the mother.

This Bible study, the exploration of Jewish practice, and listening to the stories of women who have faced difficult situations have helped reshape my perspective on the abortion issue. We live in a broken and fallen world and though having an abortion is an incredibly difficult decision, I believe that having an abortion is a symptom of living in a sinful world rather than the root issue of

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the problem. Though I am in the stage of life where I'm excited to start my own family, I will advocate for women to have the freedom to make these very personal and life-altering decisions. It's my hope that through sharing my journey, individual Christians will begin to search the scriptures, have open discussions within their communities, and discover the nuances surrounding this difficult topic for themselves.

When I researched our official church stance on abortion, I was pleasantly surprised to find that our church cares not only about the growing life within the womb but also about the woman who chooses to have an abortion. We care about people's mental, physical, and spiritual health. We believe individuals have free will and we are not to serve as the conscious for these individuals. Our public stance clearly places a burden on the church to provide help and support to those in need. This could mean offering open and all-inclusive sexual education, couples counseling to strengthen marriage relationships, creating a safe environment to talk about abortion, and even, "committing itself to assist in alleviating the unfortunate social, economic, and psychological factors that add to abortion and to care redemptively for those suffering the consequences of individual decisions on this issue."

Though the Bible does not speak about abortion, it does have a lot to say about not judging people's motives and intentions. As tensions rise in our society between polarizing viewpoints, I notice fellow Christians moving away from the redemptive message of the gospel and towards judgment and condemnation, going as far as calling women who have abortions immoral, and calling doctors who perform them murderers. This type of behavior is un-Christlike and unbiblical. I urge my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to study this topic more deeply and to prayerfully discover what God is calling you to do. It is my plea that we move away from those who are wanting to condemn our neighbors and towards ways we can bring our neighbors into a meaningful relationship with our loving Savior.

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**Resources:**

1. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/birth-control/fertility-awareness>.
2. <http://fertilityfriday.com/>.
3. <https://www.valleybeitmidrash.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Judaism-and-Abortion-Text-Sheet-Adult-Ed-Mini-Course-2017.pdf>.
4. <https://ffrf.org/component/k2/item/18514-what-does-the-bible-say-about-abortion>.
5. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/lifechallenges/love-and-sex/abortion/what-the-bible-says-about-the-beginning-of-life>.
6. [https://www.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/9882/jewish/Chapter-21.htm#v26](https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/9882/jewish/Chapter-21.htm#v26).
7. <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/285130/abortion-daf-yomi-272>.
8. <https://www.pewresearch.org/search/abortion>.
9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_anti-abortion\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_anti-abortion_movement).
10. <https://www.gutmacher.org/news-release/2017/abortion-common-experience-us-women-despite-dramatic-declines-rates>.
11. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/abortion-what-the-bible-says-and-doesnt-say\\_b\\_1856049](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/abortion-what-the-bible-says-and-doesnt-say_b_1856049).
12. <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/guidelines/article/go/-/abortion/>.
13. <https://www.gutmacher.org/state-policy/explore/overview-abortion-laws>.



STELLA OLIVERAS is a dual citizen of Brazil and the United States. She became involved with the canvassing ministry during her time at Forest Lake Academy and spent the next eight years putting herself through Adventist education. After graduating from Southern Adventist University, Stella went to South Korea as a missionary. She now lives in the Washington DC area with her husband and two dogs. She cares deeply about environmental and social issues and how they impact the Adventist church community.