

Should Christians challenge the moral behaviour that creates the need for abortions?

Abortion is a very controversial and emotional subject. Christians are divided on the moral rights and wrongs surrounding the topic. Some Christians are so focus on stopping abortion they are missing the opportunity for mission through the pastoral care needed for those who are going through or considering abortion. There is no doubt that any woman who is seeking an abortion faces a large amount of personal pressures and needs the help and support that Christians can give. Surely our priority should be to show Christ's love compassion and understanding and reach out in love, but sadly to many in the stop abortion campaigns show hate and anger which is not the way of Christ.

Abortion has been practiced throughout the world illegally for centuries. I will use UK law to help illustrate the point I am trying to make, because I am familiar with the situation in the UK. The first law that really highlighted the subject in the United Kingdoms was in 1861 the offences against the person act outlaw, followed in 1929 by the infant life (preservation) Act. In 1938 The Bourne Case when Gynaecologist Aleck Bourne was acquitted of performing an illegal abortion on a girl who had been raped, provided the basis for the campaign to have a legal frame work for abortion.

In the UK, the law established in the 1967 Abortion Act (as amended by the human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990). It gave six reasons for allowing an abortion. 1. Risk to the women's life. 2. To prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the mother, also risk to the women's health (physical or mental). 3. Risk to health of existing children in the family. 4. Risk that the child will be born seriously handicapped. 5. Emergency: to save the woman's life. 6. Emergency: to prevent grave permanent injury to the woman. The law in Northern Ireland is different from rest of UK, I will not go into this but it does serve to the highlight the complexities of the issues.

The original bill set the age of viability at 28 weeks, but this was amended in 1990 by Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act which changed the upper limit to 24 weeks for most abortions because advances in medicine mean it is now possible to keep some babies alive born after about 24 weeks of pregnancy.

Prior to the introduction of the law there were illegal or criminal abortions, estimates vary from 10,000 to over 100,000. This resulted in the death of many of these women after illegal abortions. These women had the choice of attempting to abort themselves, a difficult and frequently unsuccessful ordeal, or of persuading some medical practitioner to break the law and risk their professional status and livelihood, or seeking out some unqualified person who would help them. There are many lurid tales of terrifying experiences. The pressure for reform finally resulted in Abortion Law.

The debates centre on the moral status of the growing embryo/foetus, and the rights of the mother to determine her future and the future of her pregnancy. The law must protect human life and protect the freedom of the individual. There is also a moral argument involved in giving individuals freedom to make their own choices.

In our pluralist society, the law should try to provide a fair and just system for all. The law in the UK has probably got the balance right as things stand now, although it does make it easier for abortions that are for social reasons to take place. In the moral debate, not all Christians think that every abortion is wrong, especially when the mother's life is genuinely at risk. The medical conditions do make some abortions socially acceptable. Often the action of Christians to changes in the law can be counterproductive and create resentment toward the Christian faith. The hard line Roman Catholic position is seen by many as showing no care or compassion for the women who have for medical reasons to face the trauma of an abortion. Continuing to argue for reform of the law in the UK would not be successful. I believe Christians ought to stop acting to prevent abortions, but instead, concentrate on the moral issues that have created the present situation.

The moral issue

The Roman Catholic Church has ruled that abortion is unacceptable except in very exceptional cases. (It should be noted that it is only since 1869, when Pope Pius VI declared that 'ensoulment' (gaining a soul) happened at conception, that Catholics have been taught that abortion is always morally evil.) The basis for this is the commandment 'Thou shall not kill'. They take the view that the embryonic child is a human being from the time of its conception and therefore has an equal right to its life with its mother. This principle means that neither the mother or a medical practitioner can lawfully take that life away. No matter how desirable it might be to save the life of the mother. This declaration was clearly

implemented without the knowledge of modern medical understand. The Church is clearly unwilling to revise rules which have a poor biblical foundation and are questionable from a humanitarian and medical point of view.

Other Christian Churches take a different view to that of the Roman Catholic Church. The Free Churches hold the view that abortion is a matter for the individual to decide. The Methodists have been outspoken in their view that personal and social factors need to be considered in each case. The Church of England takes a more moderate view, which combines a strong opposition to abortion with recognition that there can be strictly limited conditions under which it may be morally preferable to any available alternative. They have expressed the opinion that the number of abortions carried out since the passage of the Abortion Act 1967 is unacceptably high.

In a pluralist society, the law should consider the views of those with religious affiliations and those with none. The defenders of abortion have difficulty in answering the challenge, is the foetus a human being, if not when does it become one? Some say life starts when the baby is conceived, others when it is born. Medically it is at a point somewhere between. The foetus is a potential person, but without the mother's life giving nutrients and oxygen it would die. However, it can survive after 24 weeks or just before, with medical help. (See above)

So, when could abortion be morally right? The clear reason should be when the mother's life is at risk or when the mother's mental and physical health, but not her life is at stake. One example of this would be when a woman who is pregnant is diagnosed as having cancer of the uterus. Even the Roman Catholic Church is beginning to accept that this is an exception to the rule. The fact is that if the mother dies, the foetus will also die. If the mother is saved she may be able to have another baby, she may also have other children, who need a mother. Surely Christian compassion and understanding have a role to play it is in this type of situation. No compassionate person would want to tell children that their mother will die because she cannot have an abortion, even if the baby did survive, it would be resented by the other children for taking their mother's life. When a pregnancy has arisen as the result of rape, there is no reason why we should believe that God wills the life conceived after this act, to live, as it is clearly conceived against God's will and commandments. There will be instances when the rights of the mother may compete with the rights of the foetus, abortion can only seriously be justified when the life of the mother is seriously endangered by the pregnancy.

Both sides in the debate use biblical passages to support their point of view. Those against place their emphasis on the commandment 'You shall not kill'. Genesis 4.10 is used to illustrate how God condemns the murder of an innocent person. They also use verses from Jeremiah and Job to show that God knows the person when it is still a foetus. (Exodus 20.13, Deuteronomy 5.17, and Matthew 5.21-22 are also used.) Throughout the Bible there is emphasis on the duty of the strong to protect and support the weak.

The above verses illustrate that the Bible can be used selectively to support both sides point of view. The Bible does not condemn or support abortion. The Bible's emphasis is on caring for one another, the weak and vulnerable. It would be wrong to take the life of a child, when there is no sound medical reason, but when the mothers life is at risk, then this is a different matter.

The moral arguments make it difficult for a Christian to know what is right or wrong. Abortion comes down to the individual to make the choice. It is here where the Christian views can help a person in making their decision, presenting a balance between legislation and moral conviction, supporting the woman through the very difficult decision process.

All human life is intrinsically valuable so there is a fine balance between saving the life of the mother at the expense of the foetus. For the woman who is in this situation faces an agonising choice. Abortion cannot be regarded as a serious moral offence when the mother's life is at risk. To accept the legal argument is not a kind of moral surrender, but an acknowledgment that there needs to be legal protection for the mother who must have an abortion for medical reasons. In a free pluralist society, there should be protection for all including the unborn child. The foetus is a live being that will grow into a person, until it grows into a physically independent person there should be legal protection for it, so that abortion cannot be simply used to kill an unwanted child.

The root cause of the high numbers of abortion is the attitudes within the modern sexually permissive society. Until Christians can change the basic attitudes, that creates the need for abortions, the numbers of abortions will not be reduced, so therefore there should be laws that protect the rights of the mother and unborn child. Prevention is better than cure. It would be far better to prevent a child being conceived than have the need for decisions on an abortion. This then raises the question on the use of contraception, which is also frowned upon by the

Roman Catholic Church. Yet if the Roman Catholic Church changed its stance on contraception many unwanted children would not be born and the number of abortions reduced.

When people claim to have sexual freedom, which usually means authentic love is replaced by instinctive impulse and desire, then this has nothing Christian in it. Sexual intercourse between unmarried young people is in many instances taken for granted. Modern society has too many unwanted pregnancies and thus too many abortions. Christians are often too tolerant of the blatant exploitation of sex in advertising, television, movies and other forms of entertainment. Our culture encourages sexual relations among young people who are not prepared to handle the consequences. If Christians want to see a reduction in abortion, then they must stop trying to change the law and concentrate on the problems of sexual immorality within modern society.

Women may choose an abortion as a way out of a crisis, it could be for social reasons, lack of support or finance, and they may be worried about the relationship with the child's father or because of pressure from parents or peers. Those who are going through or have been through abortion need love and support. Others who have chosen to have an abortion suffer from post abortion syndrome, grieving for the child they have lost, and their lives, relationships and family life can be very badly affected. However, at times Christians preach hell fire and damnation to those who have made a mistake, instead of love compassion and understanding. If Christians showed the compassion and understanding that Jesus taught us to do, people would be more willing to take notice of what they are saying.

Why we need a change in approach to this issue?

Changing the law will not bring down the number of abortions. This will only be reduced when there is a change in attitudes to sexual morality. There needs to be a change in approach if we want to see a reduction in abortions. Abortion does not solve social problems, such as unstable relationships, poor housing and financial insecurity which lead women to seek to end their pregnancies. While these issues are not addressed by church and state, women will still be forced to have abortions for these reasons. There are many forms of contraception which can prevent pregnancy, but while so many religious leader act in an irresponsible manner and oppose contraception many woman will be forced to have an abortion.

Another issue which must be addressed is the irresponsible males who think it's okay to have unprotected sex and cause a girl to become pregnant without being prepared to support the mother and child. These irresponsible people in my opinion lack the courage to take responsibility for their own selfish actions. I hope Christians will start to challenge the actions that led to abortion and put less emphasis on the act itself. We must also pray that the Roman Catholic Church will change its view on contraception, which led to many unwanted children being born into poverty.

Christians who are opposed to abortion need to consider the issues that lead to abortions. They firstly should set a moral example in the way they lead their lives and seek to show the love of Christ in their actions which is not always the case by those who campaign against abortion. They can bring pressure on politicians and the media to address the moral decline within modern society and the social problems which have created the increased need for abortion. Also, people need greater encouragement to prevent pregnancy, by using contraception, which also prevents sexually transmitted diseases. I hope that this article will encourage people to bring fresh thinking to their views on abortion.

End

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