

Chapter 12

Abortion: Is It Really a Matter of Life and Death?

by [Paul F. Taylor](#) on May 2, 2014; last featured March 15, 2016

Life begins at fertilization, and all human life is precious and made in the image of God.

The whole subject of abortion¹ produces very strong emotions on both sides of the argument. The two primary sides are:

Pro-life: The pro-life position is that life begins at fertilization, and that all human life is precious and made in the image of God.

Pro-choice (or more so “anti-life”): The pro-choice position is that it is the woman’s right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, because an unborn child is considered to be a part of the woman’s body. Under this definition, the unborn child is not considered to be fully human.

You would think that pro-choice meant that someone would allow the baby to choose whether he or she should live or die (miscarry), but that is not the case. Even while the baby is choosing to live and continuing to develop, some do not respect *that* choice. And that has brought us to the heat of a debate that rages around the world.

Such emotions are understandable and can cloud the debate, hiding the truth of what the Bible teaches. However, as this chapter will hopefully make clear, emotional responses to the subject of abortion are not necessarily inappropriate—indeed, such responses may be the most appropriate. Also, an acknowledgment that emotional issues cloud both sides of the debate should not be taken to imply that this chapter will steer a “middle ground” between the two positions. It will not—because the Bible does not do so.

The emotional arguments against abortion include a disgust at the nature of the procedure being discussed. Emotional arguments in favor of abortion focus on an anger that suggests that no one has the right to undermine a woman’s right to choose what she does with her own body.

Although this essay is not designed to steer a middle way, it will be necessary to examine some issues dispassionately. This is not because I believe the subject does not demand one’s emotions, but because I want to start by cutting through the emotional charge and examining the issues from a “first-principles” biblical perspective. Only when this foundation is laid can we return to the issue of which emotional responses may be appropriate.

Life Before Birth

Of crucial importance to the debate is the status of the embryo, fetus, or baby before birth. Please forgive the coldness of the question—but what exactly is it? Should we refer to it as it, or is it a he or she?

The Bible does not directly refer to abortion. There are many other issues about which the Bible does not give specific comment. However, in many cases, it is clear what the biblical position is. And the Bible does have a great deal to say about the status of life before birth. In *Jeremiah 1:4–5* we read:

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”

The Lord is giving a number of pieces of information to the prophet. First, God says that He knew Jeremiah when he was in the womb. Second, He makes clear that He knew Jeremiah even before He was formed in the womb. Third, He tells Jeremiah that his growth in the womb was as a result of being “formed” by God Himself.



Today, we have a great deal of knowledge of how a baby develops in his or her mother’s womb. In this passage, God is making clear that this is not an arbitrary process. It is a direct act of

formation by God. The Hebrew word that is translated as formed is *yatsar*, and refers to being formed or shaped in the same sort of manner that a potter shapes clay. This analogy is interesting, because the image of God as a potter is closely associated with the Book of Jeremiah. *Jeremiah 18* is the famous chapter that talks about the potter and the clay. It is significant that a similar image is being used of an unborn child in *Jeremiah 1:5*.

The passage implies that there is a personhood associated with the unborn Jeremiah. Therefore, the unborn child should be considered as a full human being, with all the implications that the fact entails. We need to examine whether other passages of Scripture make a similar assumption of personhood for other characters, and, hence, whether we can determine if the Bible counts unborn babies as human beings.

Jesus and John

Scripture makes clear that both Jesus and John the Baptist were human before their birth. Jesus was given a name, and His birth was foretold to Mary, at the time of His conception, as recorded in *Luke 1:26–38*. Some might want to argue, however, that Jesus was a special case. However, no special case argument can be made to apply to John, the account of whose birth is closely wound up with the account of Jesus' birth.

In *Luke 1:41* we note that Elizabeth was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” She was immediately able to ascertain that Mary was pregnant with the Messiah.

Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
(*Luke 1:43*)

What is interesting about this passage is that the unborn John joins in the celebration.

For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. (*Luke 1:44*)

John does not just leap—he leaps for joy! Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this Scripture has been recorded in order to emphasize that John's prophetic work in “preparing the way of the Lord” was beginning before his birth. Therefore, John must have been fully human before his birth.

Mosaic Law

There is an interesting account in the Mosaic Law about the various penalties for different types of murders.

If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as

the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Exodus 21:22–25)

When examining Mosaic Law, it is important to remember that the penalties prescribed do not necessarily apply to today, because these laws were civil laws for the children of Israel. For example, because the Church does not hold the sword of the state today, we are not entitled to legislate stoning for adultery. Nevertheless, the fact that stoning is the punishment prescribed for adultery in the Mosaic theocracy illustrates to us how seriously God views that particular sin.

So when we analyze the passage from Exodus 21 quoted above, we see that there are differing sanctions, based on differing circumstances. In the first case analyzed, we have a pregnant woman who is hurt and gives birth prematurely. In this case, however, the baby is not harmed. So the offense is treated in the same manner as it would if the woman had not been pregnant.

The situation changes notably if harm comes to the baby. On this occasion, there is to be recompense of the “eye for an eye” model. This is not to suppose that we are entitled to use the same sanctions today. Nevertheless, the concept of “life for life” illustrates that God considers the death of the unborn to be equivalent to the death of the living. Accordingly, a society should reflect this value in its laws, even if the sanction prescribed is different.

What we have seen from this analysis of Bible passages is that the Bible considers the unborn baby to be human and to have personality, and that God views the value of the life of the unborn, when it is prematurely harmed, to be of equal value to that of any other human being.

Amazingly, this passage has actually been used by some to attempt to condone abortion. This is because of a mistranslation in certain modern versions of the Bible. For example, the Message Bible has:

When there's a fight and in the fight a pregnant woman is hit so that she miscarries but is not otherwise hurt . . . [emphasis added]

The Message Bible puts the emphasis on the harm to the woman, whereas other editions emphasize the harm to both mother and baby. The Hebrew term translated either as premature birth or miscarriage is *yatsa*. This word, which means “to come out,” is used many times in the Old Testament, and in each case always refers to a whole birth. It usually refers to a live birth, though one passage refers to a still birth. In no other place, however, is the term used for a miscarriage.²

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

The most famous passage referring to the life of the unborn must be from Psalm 139.

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. 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 139:13–16)

This is a pictorial account of the development of an unborn baby. It refers to the formation of flesh (covering), internal organs (inward parts), and bones (frame). None of these developments was hidden from God, though they were “secret” from people, indicating that we cannot directly see the formation of the unborn. The concept of the “lowest parts of the earth” is a euphemism for the female reproductive system. Even in this unborn state, it is clear that the baby is human, as God has already determined “the days fashioned” for the baby.

What these passages from Scripture show us is that the unborn baby has personality and sensitivity before birth. It is therefore human, and subject to all the protections of the moral laws that protect other humans. If the unborn baby was an integral part of the woman's body, then it would not have the separate actions and reactions outlined in these scriptural passages. Viewing the evidence that shows that unborn babies can react to external stimuli, such as light and sound, is a further confirmation of their unique life apart from the mother.

Caring for the Mother

An argument frequently used in favor of abortion is that we need to have concern for the mother. Abortion was supposedly legalized in the UK and the United States to alleviate the suffering of women undergoing crisis pregnancies.

Such crises in pregnancies are very real. Women can be in very real distress during times of pregnancy, particularly if the pregnancy is not planned, or is going wrong because of illness, etc.

Nevertheless, a lot of the difficult cases become clearer once we have determined from Scripture, as above, that the unborn baby is human. Both the UK's Abortion Act of 1967 and the famous U.S. case of *Roe v. Wade* were supposed to eliminate dangerous backstreet abortions, and reduce difficult cases, without being used as a general abortion-on-demand measure. Nevertheless, the practical outworking of these laws on both sides of the Atlantic has been startling.

David Reardon has suggested that many women get abortions because they feel under pressure to do so.³ Some such pressures he identifies as circumstantial—women concerned about how they might cope, financially, emotionally, etc. But many more pressures come from other people. He particularly notes that the pressures frequently come from men—husbands, boyfriends, fathers, etc. Women are often coming under pressure to “do the right thing,” even if they have severe doubts. This is one of the factors, Reardon notes, which has made Post-Abortion Trauma such a major psychological illness among women in the last 20 years or so. Reardon's studies suggested

that 53 percent of women felt coerced into abortion by other people, and 65 percent by circumstances (obviously some overlap here). Only 33 percent had felt that their abortion was a “free” choice.

In the case of coercion by others, it can be seen that abortion is frequently not even an answer to this coercion. Many women have had abortions because of pressure from male partners in the hope of saving their relationships, only to find that the partner leaves anyway.

In the case of coercion by circumstances, it is my belief that pro-life Christians need to be proactive in providing help and care for mothers undergoing crisis pregnancies. Is the proposed abortion happening because the mother cannot afford baby equipment and care? Then Christians should be providing that equipment and care. Will the mother be thrown out of her home if she proceeds with the pregnancy? Then Christians must provide emergency refuge and shelter.

Reardon’s study, which examined women whose abortions had been about ten years previous to the study, also noted that adolescent women (aged 20 or under) were frequently likely to leave abortions to later in gestation, due to reduced ability to make decisions. This immaturity among younger women led to a greater likelihood of post-abortion trauma, and also physical issues, such as a high rate of subsequent infertility. The work of Christian post-abortion counselors, such as Image ([see reference 1](#)), has shown that women can be most helped through the application of God’s forgiveness, when the woman repents.

Reasons for Abortion



In 2007, 205,598 abortions were carried out in England and Wales,⁴ and 13,703 in Scotland.⁵ This UK total⁶ of 219,301 compares with 23,641 in 1968. There are currently more than 600 abortions performed per day in the UK. Of these figures, 82 percent were performed on single

women. About 1 percent of abortions were performed because of suspected handicap in the unborn child. One in five pregnancies in the UK ends in abortion. Abortion law was further liberalized under the 1990 Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill, with the result that, in certain cases, abortion can be carried out up to full term. Statistics like these seem to run counter to the generally held mythology that legalized abortions are not carried out for social reasons. Indeed, one top surgeon has recently criticized the “cavalier” way that young surgeons carry out abortions, complaining, “I know of no case where the Department of Health has questioned the legality of abortions.”⁷

Social justifications for abortion would seem to be of secondary importance, if the unborn baby is defined as human. Yet the overwhelming majority of abortions carried out in the UK are for “social reasons”—government statistics suggest that 98 percent of all abortions are for social reasons.⁸ The earlier sections have shown that abortions are not even in the interest of the mother, when one considers the violence that can be done to the body, the risk for young adolescent pregnant women, and the dangers of post-abortion trauma. However, many difficult cases continue to be cited, so it is worth examining the practical outcome of a couple of these.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that abortions are often offered to mothers when Down’s Syndrome is suspected. Indeed, in the UK, nine out of ten babies suffering from Down’s Syndrome are aborted.⁹ The attitude frequently seems to be that it is “kinder” in some way for such a child not to live, because of its “quality of life.” But the people concerned—the “sufferers” of Down’s Syndrome—may have very different opinions about their quality of life. The issue of “quality of life” is an evolutionary concept and has no place in a biblical worldview, which sees all human life as being in the image of God.

Anya Souza—a Down Syndrome sufferer—was allowed to address the 2003 International Down Syndrome Screening Conference in London. She said:

I can’t get rid of my Down’s Syndrome, but you can’t get rid of my happiness. You can’t get rid of the happiness I give others either. It’s doctors like you that want to test pregnant women and stop people like me being born. Together with my family and friends I have fought to prevent my separation from normal society. I have fought for my rights. . . . I may have Down’s syndrome but I am a person first.¹⁰

Another set of difficult cases often cited in support of abortion “rights” is what to do about pregnancies resulting from incest or rape. In these cases, it is clear that a crime has taken place—and that crime could well have been a very violent crime. The woman concerned has been violated, and is clearly already going to be suffering as a result of what has happened to her.

Abortion itself is an act of violence on the unborn baby (and the mother). It is not clear that the difficulties of undergoing an abortion could be in any way a comfort to the woman who has suffered the crimes of incest or rape. Moreover, the unborn baby is an innocent party to the event. It does not make sense to end the life of the innocent party because of another act of violence. Add to this the dangers that the mothers themselves may suffer, as stated above—such as infertility and post-abortion trauma.

The Life of the Mother

All human life is valuable. The unborn baby's life is precious—and so is the mother's. There are certainly a precious few occasions when, tragically, there is a choice between the life of the baby and the life of the mother. It may be necessary, under these extreme conditions, to consider saving the life of the mother or the child. These tragic situations arise because we live in a fallen world.

ALL HUMAN LIFE IS VALUABLE. THE UNBORN BABY'S LIFE IS PRECIOUS—AND SO IS THE MOTHER'S.

One example of the above would be an ectopic pregnancy, where the unborn baby has started to develop in the fallopian tube, rather than in the uterus. It may not be possible to move the baby, and the baby would, in any case, die in such circumstances, as would the mother. Sadly, it may be necessary for the baby to be removed surgically, which will result in his death. With this situation though, it is a matter of trying to save a life or two, as opposed to forcing death on one or both of them.

Other circumstances can be more complicated. When there is a tragic choice between saving either the baby or the mother, but it is impossible to do both, then individual families will need, prayerfully, to come to their own decisions on this matter, and no one would be able to criticize their painful choice. It is fortunate that such events are very rare—about 0.004 percent of all cases involve the possible death of the mother.¹¹

Language of Abortion

The issue of the personhood of Ms. Souza leads us to examine the use of terminology in the abortion debate. The terminology is important, because language that denies the humanity of the unborn child makes it easier for abortionists to make their case.

The unborn baby is often referred to using two terms. *Embryo* indicates the fertilized product of conception from implantation to eight weeks. *Fetus* (or *foetus*) indicates the baby from the eighth week to birth. Such terms are often easier to use, if the baby is to be terminated, as they do not sound human. The etymology of the latter term is interesting—*fetus* means “little one.”

There is also the word *conception*. It always has been, and to most people still is, the combination of the sperm and egg—or fertilization. But the 27th edition of *Stedman's Medical Dictionary* now defines *conception* as implantation of the combined sperm and egg (that must be over 4–5 days old [blastocyte]) when it attaches to the lining of the uterus (endometrium). This has now led to people aborting children with “morning after pills,” cloning of humans, and embryonic stem cell research all the while declaring that it is “before conception.”

The Real Issue

As with so many cases, we find that abortion is not the real problem. The real problem is much deeper, and abortion is a symptom of the deeper problem. A society that permits abortion does not do so by chance. It is a society that has neglected the fundamentals of God's law. The basis

for our objection to abortion has been the biblical position that the unborn baby is human. However, in an evolutionary view, why should any human be accorded special status, compared with, for instance, the welfare of animals? To put it crudely, if an animal is sick or injured, we will often take it to the vet to be “put down.”

The difference between the welfare of humans and animals stems back to Genesis. Humans were not made *ex nihilo* in the way that animals were. The first man was fashioned out of the dust, and God breathed into him the breath of life ([Genesis 2:7](#)). The first chapter of the Bible reminds us that God made us in His image ([Genesis 1:26](#)). This statement was not made of any other animal.

Evolutionary beliefs have influenced us to think that we are simply evolved animals—that we share a common ancestor with the apes—indeed, further back, we are supposed to share a common ancestor with all mammals. As one modern and rather base pop song puts it—“you and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals.” If that is the case, then the arguments against abortion become hollow. Even if the unborn baby is human, such humans are dispensable if we are just mammals. The dignity of human life means nothing if humans have evolved by millions of years of death, disease, and bloodshed.

The Bible’s position is vastly different. We did not evolve by millions of years of death, disease, and bloodshed; we are not just animals. We are special because we are made in the image of God. We are fallen from that image, certainly, but that image still sets us apart from the animals. Our certainty of the truth of Genesis provides us with the assurance that we are human, and that our humanity began at the moment of conception. It is for that reason that we oppose abortion, because it is a denial of the humanity of the unborn baby.

Further Study

Because this short chapter can only cover so much, I want to encourage you to do further study. I suggest the following resources:

- [Sanctity of Life](#) topic page
- David Menton, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, DVD, Answers in Genesis, 2005.
- Mike Riddle, *Cloning, Stem Cells, and the Value of Life*, DVD, Answers in Genesis, 2007.
- Tommy Mitchell, “[When Does Life Begin?](#),” *The New Answers Book 2* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008), p. 313–323.