

# Abortion, Then and Now

BY SCOTTTSAULS | DECEMBER 5, 2021



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*The abortion debate has resurfaced significantly due to the most recent Supreme Court activity. Because of this, I and other pastors are receiving our fair share of requests to weigh in.*

*Below is an essay I wrote about the subject. As you will see, I favor championing the sanctity of all human life “from womb to tomb,” for as Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, injustice anywhere — whether it happens inside or outside the womb — is a*

*threat to justice everywhere.*

*I hope my words will help you as you navigate these important concerns in your own heart and situation.*

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I have never enjoyed publicizing my thoughts about the pro-life vs. pro-choice debate. It's a heated issue. To take one side or another is to invite negative critique. A few years ago, as a courtesy to parents of young children I announced to our church through email that I would be speaking on this issue in a sermon. A variety of strong opinions about my sermon soon landed in my inbox...*before* I gave the sermon. I started to think that I would rather stay home and chew tin foil than continue with this plan. "I am changing this sermon's subject to the evils of cannibalism," I said to myself. "Most people will agree with me on that one."

I don't like stirring up a hornet's nest. I want people to like me.

But then I remembered my calling as a minister to teach the word of God, whether in season or out of season, whether convenient or inconvenient, whether culturally engaging or culturally offensive. Teaching God's word selectively would make me a charlatan at worst and a coward at best.

So I went through with it. But before I did, I decided to discuss the issue with several medical professionals, some of whom are on the "pro-life" side and others of whom are on the "pro-choice" side, including a handful of abortion providers. I never like it when people who have never met or had a conversation with me automatically assume negative things about me because I am a minister or a Christian or balding... so I thought it was only fair that if I was going to speak publicly on this issue, I should hear directly from all the perspectives. After studying the Scriptures and listening to all sides, here are a few thoughts I would like to share.

## **The Core Issue**

I believe that the core issue in the pro-life vs. pro-choice debate is whose rights matter most. Is it the rights of the mother or the rights of the infant in her womb? I believe that the answer is *yes*.

In his letter to the early church, the Apostle James writes that we must show no partiality and reiterates what Jesus said was the greatest commandment in relation to our fellow human beings—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (James 2:1, 8). In writing these words, James was addressing a problem that he saw in the first century church. *Partiality* was being shown to affluent, successful, famous people because everyone was trying to climb the social ladder. While the privileged were receiving VIP treatment in the church, the poor were overlooked and sent to the periphery. This, according to James, was wrong. In the church, every person is supposed to get the VIP treatment because every person, wealthy or poor, obscure or famous, strong or with special needs, mother or infant, is a carrier of the divine imprint. Every human bears the image of God. As Martin Luther King, Jr. aptly said, “There are no gradations in the image of God...God made us to live together as brothers (and sisters) and to respect the dignity and worth of *every* (hu)man.”

This is where the pro-life vs. pro-choice discussion breaks down. *Neither side is known for respecting the dignity of every human in the equation.* Furthermore, neither side is seen by the other as being truly and consistently pro-choice or pro-life. Although there are exceptions, in many instances the use of these terms can be more euphemistic than honest.

Pro-life advocates allege that *pro-choice* is not an accurate term, because only one person in the equation gets to choose the destiny of all people in the equation, namely the mother. She has one hundred percent of the decision making power and the infant inside of her has no decision making power, no voice, and no ability to defend her/himself. The idea that a woman should have jurisdiction over her own body also breaks down, because roughly fifty percent of infants in utero are female who have no choice over what happens to their bodies.

Pro-choice advocates allege that *pro-life* is not an accurate term. This is precisely the concern that an abortion provider voiced to me. He said, “The so-called pro-life position seems focused on only one kind of life. After the infant is born, pro-life people don’t have much else to say.” He went on to say that over sixty percent of women who come in for an abortion are alone and live below the poverty line. Rarely has this doctor seen or heard a “pro-life” person express any significant concern for *her* life.

Now, it is an indisputable fact that pro-life people, and especially pro-life people who are Christian, are doing more for the poor and the needy and those Jesus called “the least of these” than the rest of the world combined. [As Nicholas Kristof has written](#) in *The New York Times*, and from the perspective of a secular liberal agnostic, evangelicals and Catholics are leading the world in mercy and justice efforts. That being said, there is still at least a perception of Christian ambivalence toward those outside the womb in certain circles. If our sin is *not* a failure to tend to the poor and needy, then perhaps we are guilty of a different sin — of not letting our light shine before men that all may see our good works and glorify our father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

And so it goes. Both sides are right in advocating for someone who is in a weak and distressed position. Both sides are challenged — whether in truth or perception — when they give partial treatment toward one party, and dismissive treatment toward another. Neither seems to be fully in line with what James called “true religion,” which is to attend to widows *and* orphans (i.e., to vulnerable women *and* children) in their affliction (James 1:27).

If we don’t show deep concern for both mother *and* child, James seems to be saying, then our religion is lopsided. Until we become both/and on this issue, our religion is *not true*.

## Infant-Advocate Concerns

Infant advocates or pro-life people get worked up by command-breaking that then leads to injustice. When God’s commands are ignored, they say, injustice and human rights violations are bound to occur. James writes, “He who said ‘do not commit adultery’ also said ‘do not murder.’” Many infant advocates would say that if only people would stop committing adultery and murdering, the abortion problem would be solved.

This begs the question of whether or not terminating a pregnancy equates to murder. Can it be considered merciful in certain situations to terminate? Is there something to be said for sparing mother and/or child from public embarrassment, economic burden, disability, and other “problems” that can sometimes come with carrying a pregnancy to term?

Interestingly, two major Old Testament figures wrestled over this very question. Both wondered if life is worth living with a burdensome quality of life.

Job was a victim of terror who lost all of his assets, his business, his wife's respect, and all ten of his children. Jeremiah was a prophet in exile, a bereaved widower, and hated by virtually everyone that God had called him to love and serve.

Both men made the same statement: "Cursed be the day that I was born."

Jeremiah took the thought further when he said, "Cursed be the day when my mother bore me...Cursed be the man who brought the news to my Father, *because he did not kill me in the womb*...why was I born to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?" (Jeremiah 20:14-18).

Someone on the pro-choice side might say, "You see? Even one of God's prophets said that he should have been aborted!" One might take Jeremiah's words to mean that he was in favor of the *quality of life* argument. If suffering is probable, says the quality of life argument, it is more merciful and just in some instances to terminate life rather than let it continue.

But if Jeremiah or Job truly believed this, each would have followed through with the thought and taken his own life, no? If the merciful and just thing to do with a life wrought by endless suffering and sorrow is to end the life and thereby end the suffering, why did neither of these men do the merciful and just thing? I think it is because in cursing the day they were born, both of these men of God were venting their raw emotions—emotions that were real but that were not necessarily true.

Deep down, in spite of expressing a desire to not go on living, both Job and Jeremiah understood that the decisive issue is not the *quality* of life but the *value* of life.

Jeremiah did not take his life in his own hands, no doubt because God had declared to him years before, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you..." (Jeremiah 1:5). Similar thoughts are expressed elsewhere in Scripture. "You formed my inmost parts," the Psalmist prays, "you knitted me together in my mother's womb...Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that

were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:13, 16). “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb,” it is said about John the Baptist (Luke 1:15). The Old Testament Hebrew word used in reference to a toddler (*yeled*) is the same Old Testament Hebrew word used in reference to a fetus.

Biblically, there is no debate on the issue. The testimony of Scripture is unequivocal that from the moment that sperm and egg unite, you have a new living soul and carrier of the divine imprint. Personhood begins at conception.

People who believe the Old and New Testament Scriptures are not the only ones who agree with this. The abortion provider I referenced above also said in the course of conversation that every abortion he has performed over the years has made him feel sick to his stomach. When his grandson with Down Syndrome was born, he resolved that he would never abort a child with Down Syndrome again (currently, over ninety percent of children with Down Syndrome are aborted). He went on to say that he believes human life begins at the moment of conception, and that to terminate a pregnancy is to end a human life. While many (myself included) disagree with the doctor’s willingness to perform abortions in spite of his beliefs about life in the womb, he deserves some credit for admitting that as long as he provides abortions, he must on some level live in a world of moral inconsistency.

As I understand it, this is the moral challenge for those on the side of “choice.” How is it possible to in the name of justice advocate for a woman’s right to elect abortion, when the weakest human being in the equation is left without a choice and without a defense? Justice and mercy, to be truly just and merciful, demand that the most vulnerable, powerless, defenseless, and voiceless ones be entitled to and receive the strongest defense, advocacy, and protection.

As James writes, “There will be judgment without mercy to those who show no mercy” (James 2:13). This is a weighty thing.

## **Mother-Advocate Concerns**

Mother-advocates, on the other hand, get worked up by a different form of injustice. Whereas pro-life people accuse pro-choice people of active aggression toward infants in the womb, pro-choice people accuse pro-life people of passive aggression toward

mothers who are vulnerable.

Anyone can cast a vote. Anyone can share her or his views about the matter on Facebook. But do pro-life people really think they have done justly and loved mercy by *merely* giving it their best effort to get the law on their side?

Pro-life people, too, must grapple with the imperative to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Loving your neighbor calls for showing mercy. Otherwise you are fooling yourself. You are pro-infant, but this does not mean that you are pro-life in the truest and most comprehensive sense of the term.

To show mercy is to lift a burden off of afflicted people and take that burden on our own shoulders. Mercy puts itself in the shoes of those who are ashamed, alone, and scared. *What if it was us or our loved ones* who were faced with the realities of an unexpected pregnancy? What if we were the pregnant, unmarried woman living below the poverty line? What if we were the college student who was a victim of date rape? What if we were the woman with a husband or a boyfriend demanding that we “take care of it, or else?” What if we were the teenage girl whose parents have made it clear that they will *not* support the birth or adoption route, but will *only* support termination, “otherwise she is on her own?”

These are real situations.

A close friend of mine who is a gynecologist, who has never and will never perform an abortion, and who is decidedly “pro-life,” relayed a real-time patient situation to me that seems as close to impossible as you can get. A young pregnant girl came in to his office distressed. Why was she pregnant, and why was she distressed? Because a few thugs decided one day that they would force her into a private room and then, one after the other, take advantage of her ten year old body.

Yes, you read correctly. The girl is *ten*.

If you are pro-life, can you put yourself in the shoes of this girl or in the shoes of her parents and be satisfied with simply getting the law on your side and for the sake of the child in utero? What about the child who is carrying that child in her underdeveloped uterus? Is it enough to vote your views and share your views on

Facebook and put a pro-life bumper sticker on your car? Referencing James again, is it enough for you to look at this ten-year old girl and her parents and say, “You shall not murder. Now that we have that settled, go in peace, be warmed and filled—Take care of *yourselves* while I head off to the next picket line or political rally”—without giving them any of the things that they need (James 2:16)?

This is what the scribes and Pharisees were known for doing. They demanded that people keep God’s law...don’t commit adultery, don’t murder, and so on...but they would not lift a finger to help share the burden (Luke 11:46).

Said another way, *Faith without works is dead*.

*There will be judgment without mercy to those who show no mercy.*

## **A Way Forward: Becoming Comprehensively Pro-Life**

I believe that the only way forward is to adopt a Kingdom vision that transcends the civic vision on this issue. If we continue to hold the pro-life vs. pro-choice debate hostage by treating it as merely a political issue, we will get nowhere.

What might such a Kingdom vision look like?

The Pax Romana can teach us something about this. The Pax Romana or “Roman Peace” was a term coined by the people in power during the first and second century Roman oppression. Social Darwinism was the rule of the day, in which the terms of justice were decided by the powerful, who made certain that the terms of justice privileged *them*. The weak had no choice but to be subject to those terms. One historian described the Pax Romana as a coerced compliance in which all opponents had been beaten down and had lost the ability to resist, and in which the weak and afflicted had no legal protection.

As in Hitler’s Germany, certain classes of humans were seen as a drain on society and therefore disposable. Widows, the infirm, people with special needs, the poor, and unwanted children...all were vulnerable and none had the assurance that their human rights would be honored.



Archaeologists discovered a letter written by a traveling Roman businessman to his pregnant wife. Unable to make it back home in time for the child's birth, he wrote to her that if the child is a boy, she should keep it. If it is a girl, she should throw it out.

In came the people of Jesus. Compelled by a Kingdom vision, "No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold...and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32-35).

In ancient Rome, people of the Way said to the Roman Caesar something similar to what Mother Teresa once said at a National Prayer Breakfast to a sitting U.S. President: "Stop aborting your babies and give them to me."

This is also what the early Christians said to the Roman Caesar. "We will take care of your sick. We will feed your hungry. We will shelter your widows. We will adopt and raise your children with special needs. We will take care of your pregnant mothers."

By the third century A.D., the fabric of Roman society was transformed—"infected by love," as one historian has said. Even the Emperor Julian, known by history as "Julian the Apostate" because of his hatred of Christianity, conceded in a letter to his friend that the growth of the "Christian sect" had gotten out of control because the Christians took better care of Rome's afflicted than Rome did.

What could this look like for us? I think I will leave you with an excerpt from a doctor from our church community, because I cannot find a way to improve on his words:

*The centerpiece of our life and faith is the One who so loved us that He died for us... Where does that leave us? First, don't murder. This is true for both sides of this issue. While exerting one's autonomy and taking of innocent life in abortion is clearly wrong and disallowed by Scripture, so is being vitriolic and hating others on the other side of an issue. Second, do unto others as you would want for them to do unto you—assuming your positions were reversed. Imagine that you are the one making a decision on the other side. As we fight about life in utero, let's not forget the person standing in front of us.*

*Build relationship and community. There is enough hurt to go around...I believe that abortion is wrong. I believe that God is the Giver of life. As a Christian, I want to support a politic that does give preference to Biblical views on this matter, because I believe that they make for flourishing of humans. I also must believe that government, Biblically speaking, must make room for dissent.*

*Wouldn't it be great if communities existed where ANY mother, married or unmarried, would feel welcomed and loved and known that her needs and the needs of her child would be attended to? If the Church does what the Church is called to do, then there will be no poor or disregarded or demeaned in our midst.*

*In short, I would rather build community and dialogue and live in a society where abortion, due to the love ready to be given to any child and any mother, is not merely illegal...*

*...but unthinkable.*