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Issue #5

Abortion: It's Wrong Even if the Bible is Silent

Answering the Theological Case for Abortion, Part II

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In our previous discussion (Issue #4), we concluded the biblical permissibility of abortion comes down to just one question: Is the unborn a member of the human family? If so, elective abortion is a serious moral wrong that violates Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life (Exodus 23:7, Psalm 106: 37-38, Proverbs 6: 16-19, Matthew 5:21). It treats the distinct human being, made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 9:6, James 3:9), as nothing more than a disposable instrument. Conversely, if the unborn are not human, elective abortion requires no more justification than having your tooth pulled.

While Scripture (we will grant) is silent on the humanity of the unborn (as it is on the humanity of Whites, Blacks, and Asians, to name a few), it's clear that we are not to take human life without justification. Hence, if a positive case can be made for the humanity of the unborn apart from Scripture (as we know the French are human apart from Scripture), we can logically conclude that Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life apply to the unborn as they do other human beings. At this point, science provides an assist to theology. That is to say, science gives us the facts we need to arrive at a theologically sound conclusion. What the science of embryology makes clear is that from the earliest stages of development, human embryos and fetuses differ from the adults they will one day become *not* in virtue of the kind of thing they are, but only in their degree of development.¹

Are Embryos Just Body Cells?

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, whose work is prominently featured by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (www.rcrc.org), is not impressed with the pro-lifer's scientific case. "The fetus is biologically human only in the sense that any part of a human body is human; every cell carries the full genetic code. A severed hand," she continues "is genetically human as well but we don't call it a person."² In other words, Mollenkott would have us believe there is no difference in kind between a human embryo and each of our cells. Her mistake is easy to spot. A bodily cell from a severed hand is merely part of a larger human organism; it's not a whole human entity the way Mollenkott was when she was an embryo. Dr. Maureen Condic, Assistant Professor of Neurobiology and Anatomy at the University of Utah, points out that embryos are living human beings "precisely because they possess the single defining feature of human life that is lost in the moment of death—the ability to function as a coordinated organism rather than merely as a group of living human cells."

Condic explains the important distinction between individual body parts and whole human embryos overlooked by Mollenkott. "The critical difference between a collection of cells and a living organism is the ability of an organism to act in a coordinated manner for the continued health and maintenance of the body as a whole. It is precisely this ability that breaks down at the moment of death, however death might occur. Dead bodies may have plenty of live cells, but their cells no longer function together in a coordinated manner." Condic writes that from conception forward, human embryos clearly function as whole organisms. "Embryos are not merely collections of human cells, but living creatures with all the properties that define any organism as distinct from a group of cells; embryos are capable of growing, maturing, maintaining a physiologic balance between various organ systems, adapting to changing circumstances, and repairing injury. Mere groups of human cells do nothing like this under any circumstances."³

In His Image: Who Counts?

Do humans come to be at one point, but only become valuable later in virtue of some acquired characteristic? In his article, "Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate," Paul D. Simmons concedes that zygotes (early embryos) are biologically human but denies they are "complex" or "developed enough" to qualify as "persons" in a Biblical sense. "No one can deny the continuum from fertilization to maturity and adulthood," writes Simmons. "That does not mean, however, that every step on the continuum has the same value or constitutes the same entity." Simmons' larger purpose is to defend abortion rights by telling us who does and does not bear God's image. He argues that humans bear that image (and hence, have value as "persons") not in virtue of the kind of thing they are (members of a natural kind or species), but only because of an acquired property, in this case, the immediate capacity for self-awareness. A "person," he contends, "has capacities of reflective choice, relational responses, social experience, moral perception, and self-awareness." Zygotes, as mere clusters of human cells, do not have this capacity and therefore do not bear God's image.⁴

There are several problems with Simmon's claim. First, the idea that a human becomes a person only after some degree of physical development amounts to saying, "I came to be after my body came to be," or, "I inhabit a body that was once an embryo." Absurd. Second, why should anyone suppose that brain development bestows value on a person? Simmons never tells us, nor does he say why certain value-giving properties are value-giving in the first place. True, he later appeals to one's immediate capacity for self-awareness, moral perception, and relational responses, but isn't that just question-begging since the issue is whether one is a human subject even if one does not have self-awareness, moral perception, or relational responses? Third, newborns lack the immediate capacity for these things until several months after birth. Are we to conclude the Bible permits infanticide? As Peter Singer points out in *Practical Ethics*, if self-awareness makes one valuable as a person, and newborns like fetuses lack that property, it follows that fetus and newborn are both disqualified.⁵

Abraham Lincoln raised a similar point with slavery, noting that any argument used to disqualify blacks as valuable human beings works equally well to disqualify whites.

You say 'A' is white and 'B' is black. It is color, then: the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are a slave to the first man you meet with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean color exactly — You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again: By this rule you are to be a slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.

But you say it is a question of interest, and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.⁶

The problem for Simmons is that he cannot account for basic human equality. As Patrick Lee and Robert George point out, if humans have value only because of some acquired property like self-awareness, it follows that since this acquired property comes in varying degrees, basic human rights come in varying degrees.⁷ Theologically, it's far more reasonable to argue that although humans differ immensely in their respective degrees of development, they are nonetheless equal because they share a common human nature made in the image of God.

To sum up, we don't need Scripture to expressly say elective abortion is wrong before we can know that it's wrong. The Bible affirms that all humans have value because they bear God's image. The science of embryology affirms the humanity of the unborn. Hence, Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life apply to the unborn as they do any of us.

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Notes:

1. See T.W. Sadler, *Langman's Embryology*, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1993) p. 32.
2. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Respecting the Moral Agency of Women," Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.
3. Maureen L. Condic, "Life: Defining the Beginning by the End," *First Things*, May 2003
4. Simmon's article can be found at http://www.rcrc.org/pdf/RCRC_EdSeries_Personhood.pdf
5. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 169-171
6. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Rutgers University Press, 1953) vol. II, p. 222
7. Robert George, "Cloning Addendum," *National Review Online*, 7-15-02; Patrick Lee, "The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity," Tollefsen Lecture, St. Anselm's College, 11-14-02.