

REFLECTION ON ABORTION BY THE REV. MIKE SOLBERG

JULY 25, 2022

A few years ago, in a previous church I served, I led a funeral for a man named Dick Ragsdale. Dick grew up in that church and continued as a member throughout his life. His mother was a matriarch of the congregation, and Dick sang in the choir with a deep, bass voice. Dick was a well-known doctor, compassionately treating thousands and thousands of people in town through the years. He was an OB-GYN doc, and his life's work was about caring for his patients, or better, families, during some of the most important and vulnerable times of their lives. Notably, for many years, Dick was the only doctor in Rockford to perform abortions. People regularly protested at his clinic and at his home – sometimes with threats and intimidation. When he died, we were tipped off ahead of time that people would come to protest even at his funeral, so we had extra plans and precautions in place. The protesters ended up not showing.

Leading Dick's funeral was something of a clarifying experience for me. Although I believe funerals are for the sake of the living, and thus that a pastor's involvement is not a "divine blessing" on the life of the one who has died, still, the nature of Dick's life and work was clearly part of the pastoral dynamic of the situation. Although I have been involved in several other pastoral situations through the years when abortion was one of the issues involved, Dick's funeral was probably the first time I really worked through my own beliefs about abortion: Biblically, theologically, morally, pastorally, and yes, legally/legislatively. What follows is not an argument in defense of a position, but some of my reflection on the issue of abortion, from that time and since. This is a personal statement, and although it is undeniable that I write as the Sr. Minister of Union Church, I don't write on behalf of Union Church. I have tried to keep this reflection at a somewhat readable length, although even laying out the basics of my thinking will take a bit: I hope any reader finds this worth their time.

At Dick's funeral I said that "compassion, integrity and courage filled his life." Integrity is a word I don't use lightly. Integrity is about being "of one piece" or "whole" (like an *integer* in math), and my claim at his funeral was that there was nothing inconsistent about Dick singing praises to God in our church choir and being a doctor who sometimes ended pregnancies. How did I (and how do I still) arrive at that conviction, affirming Dick's integrity? Although some Christians believe in a faith-based and Biblically mandated opposition to abortion, I see my faith and scripture differently. The reality is that the Bible has no direct reflection on abortion, and there is no single Biblical way to describe "when life begins."¹

¹ People sometimes refer to verses such as Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I (God) formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." At most, what this theo-poetic language reveals is that God is actively involved in the origination of life (at least of Jeremiah's life), and that God uses the womb to actually create life. Given that the most common Biblical vocabulary for development in the womb is of God "forming" a person (like a potter working with clay) or "knitting together" a person (like one would stitch together a doll), the process seems to involve the passage of time over the natural course of pregnancy, and, in any case, this theo-poetic language certainly cannot be used as Biblical evidence that "life begins at the moment of conception." You can't get from verses like Psalm 139:13-14 to an answer to the modern, biological question of "when life begins."

Those who claim absolute moral clarity on these matters are not interpreting well, in my view. But again, how then did I come to affirm Dick's Christian integrity?

I will make three main points, and although they may seem to point in different directions, they all need to be understood as an interlocking commentary on abortion. At the risk of oversimplification, here are the three main points:

- 1) Grounded in the Christian commitment to the mutual sharing of burdens, my "default" belief is that those who are pregnant, supported by the church,² should (almost always) allow a pregnancy to continue and be willing to give birth.
- 2) Grounded in the Christian belief that "moral goods" sometimes conflict with each other, and that being created in the image of God includes the responsibility of making moral choices, it can be a faithful choice to choose to end a pregnancy.
- 3) Given that reproduction is a unique and inherently morally complex aspect of human life, and given that reproductive decisions ultimately involve questions that are deeply personal and/or transcendent/religious (or at least cannot be settled "objectively"), the government should not restrict the options for those who are pregnant to make a decision about continuing a pregnancy.

I'll unpack each of my three points in a moment, but first let me say that my reflection applies primarily to a subset of situations in which abortion is at issue. Unpacking this claim would make this reflection even longer, but I will simply state that abortion in situations of rape³ or serious health risk is clearly a faithful choice. Rape is raw violence and it does not involve any of the characteristics of human procreation that make abortion morally complex. Also, serious health risks change the nature of pregnancy, turning gift into threat. My reflection on abortion applies primarily to "unwanted" or "wanted but unbearable" pregnancies.

- 1) *Grounded in the Christian commitment to the mutual sharing of burdens, my "default" belief is that those who are pregnant, supported by the church, should (almost always) allow a pregnancy to continue and be willing to give birth.*

Scripture does not contain any direct reflection or guidance on the issue of abortion. Abortion is not mentioned in either the moral law of the Old Testament, nor in the teaching or stories of the New Testament. The omission is notable given that abortion was practiced in the broad cultural world of the

² By "the church" here I mean any individual or community, acting from Christian faith, who is in a position to support those who are pregnant. Obviously, the church should, at all times, be a community of the support and mutuality, so that it is not difficult or shameful for people to accept the support of the church at the time of pregnancy.

³ Rape, in my view, should be defined broadly. It not only includes forced physical intercourse, but other forms of coercion as well. For example, when a "popular" high school senior boy uses psychological and social pressure to coerce sex from a sophomore girl, that is still rape, even if she does not physically resist.

Old Testament (known as “the Ancient Near East”),⁴ as well as in the Greco-Roman world in which New Testament was written.⁵ While notable, it is very difficult to argue anything from this omission. Perhaps “everyone knew” abortion was a violation of God’s will, and thus it needn’t even be mentioned. Perhaps “everyone knew” abortion was sometimes needed, and thus it wasn’t mentioned. We just don’t know.⁶

When we don’t have direct Biblical reflection, and yet need to make thoughtful, and hopefully faithful, judgments about important issues, like abortion, our wisest option is to try to make “analogical leaps” from Biblical themes or stories to the questions we face today.⁷ By “analogical leaps” I mean that we can look at themes or stories in scripture, and then try to apply the same dynamics to issues on which the Bible is silent, and to our own issues today.⁸

I believe the Biblical theme of the mutual sharing of burdens is particularly relevant to the issue of abortion. Although the theme is reflected in many ways in both the Old and New Testaments, two of the most concise expressions of this theme are Galatians 6:2, *“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ,”* and Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus says that when we share the burdens of “the least of these” we are doing it for Jesus himself. Indeed, whenever the Bible talks of love (*agape*), it is not talking of affection or emotion, but of mutuality embodied in the sharing of burdens.

This theme guides my thinking about situations in which abortion is being considered. No one “likes” abortion. For Christians, the whole area of procreation (from sex to pregnancy to the birth of a child) is a gift of God, meant for human enjoyment as well as reproduction. Through sex and procreation we share

⁴ In the Ancient Near East, abortion is almost exclusively treated as a matter of property, not life. There are ancient mentions of how to induce an abortion (from consuming various substances to jumping up and down), with no reference to the legality or morality of the action. In the few known ancient references condemning abortion, it is treated as denying the father his rightful property (a son or daughter), and thus the penalty is financial compensation to the father. In one case of Ancient Near Eastern law, if a woman/wife acted independently to end a pregnancy (i.e. without the knowledge of the husband/father), she was to be killed for denying the man his offspring. Most scholars believe that in the Ancient Near East (including in the Bible) harsh laws were often written to discourage certain actions, but we know little about how they functioned in practice. These ancient societies were deeply patriarchal, meaning they protected the authority and power of men, and gave woman little personal autonomy and ability to fully flourish as people made in the image of God. In my view, such patriarchy, and even misogyny, still plays a role in societies around the world that seek government control of abortion decisions, including here in the United States.

⁵ In the Greco-Roman world, procreation, and therefore abortion, is generally treated as a matter related to the needs of the city (“polis”) or, later, to the empire. Abortion is sometimes encouraged and required to keep the city population from growing too large, and sometimes forbidden due to the need for more soldiers and other servants of the empire.

⁶ That said, the omission is striking, given the extensive moral casuistry of the law in the Old Testament. As the Ten Commandments show, even something as “taken for granted” as “You shall not steal,” apparently needed to be explicitly stated.

⁷ This idea of “analogical leaps” is implicit in much of the way we read the Bible today, but is perhaps described most clearly by Richard Hays in “The Moral Vision of the New Testament.”

⁸ We do this all the time with regard to issues that did not exist in the Biblical world, but do exist today. For example, in vitro fertilization is not addressed in the Bible, but given Jesus’ ministry of healing and the gift of human intelligence (part of being created “in the image of God”) embodied in modern medical abilities, we can conclude that IVF can be a faithful choice in the world today.

in the creative life of God, and partner with God to create life – and God “delights” in human life (Psalm 139). Furthermore, life “belongs” to God. This is not a “possessive” belonging, but an “identity-based” belonging (like “I belong to the Solberg family”). First Corinthians 8:6 says, “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.” It is not that life has *intrinsic* or *inherent* value; it is that life is precious because it is precious to God. Because of this, when life begins to develop in pregnancy, I believe we can and usually should welcome that life into the world.

When someone faces an “unwanted” or “wanted but (possibly) unbearable” pregnancy, the joyful and creative aspect of human procreation is clearly disrupted. This is when the church (*see note 2 above*) can and should attempt to turn a difficult situation into something better through the mutual sharing of burdens. When a pregnancy is “unwanted” or “wanted but (possibly) unbearable” the active, willing, and sensitive support of others can make a huge difference. If someone could be confident in ongoing support during pregnancy and after delivery, what is “unwanted” or “unbearable” may be transformed into something wanted or bearable. The “burden,” can be shared and thus endured out of appreciation for God’s love of the life being formed. This support may come at considerable “cost” to those acting in the name of Christ, but that is simply part of the calling of Christian discipleship, to bear one another’s burdens.

As New Testament scholar Richard Hays says, “If this proposal sounds impractical, that is merely a measure of how far the church has drifted from its foundation in the New Testament.” That strikes me as exactly right. The fact that so many people feel the need to end pregnancies is itself a “judgment” on the church – a sign that the church is not fully living into its calling of bearing one another’s burdens, and so fulfilling the law of Christ.

- 2) *Grounded in the Christian belief that “moral goods” sometimes conflict with each other, and that being created in the image of God includes the responsibility of making moral choices, it can be a faithful decision to choose to end a pregnancy.*

While welcoming a child into the world is, in the Christian faith, a “moral good,” it also must be acknowledged that there are other “moral goods” involved in any life, including the person bearing the child. The ability to secure health and safety are moral goods. Personal moral autonomy is a moral good. The ability to parent a child, leading to healthy human thriving, is a moral good.

Sometimes moral goods conflict, or are even mutually incompatible. Telling the truth is a moral good, but it would be monstrous to tell Nazis you were harboring Jews during the Holocaust, because showing love of neighbor is a more fundamental moral good.

When it comes to abortion, some people claim that “protecting life” or “honoring life” is the greatest moral good, and believing that “human life begins at conception,” they claim that all pregnancies must be allowed to continue to birth, no matter what other moral goods are involved. But I believe there are at least two important matters that call this into question. First, the question of “when life begins” is by no means something easily or firmly decided. In the Bible and in Christianity, that determination is

clearly more influenced by theology and morality than by biology. Earlier under footnote 1, I noted that the most common Biblical vocabulary for development in the womb is of God “forming” a person (like a potter working with clay) or “knitting together” a person (like one would stitch together a doll), so the process seems to involve the passage of time over the natural course of pregnancy, not the creation of a human life instantly at conception. The Bible, of course, is using *imagery* to describe this process, not *science* – but that in and of itself should be a sign that theology and morality are at least as much involved in this judgment as biology. Acting as if “human life begins at conception” is a clear determination of our faith is simply to mask different, and often unstated, grounds for actually making that determination.

Second, the view that “human life begins at conception” often grows from a belief that a human soul is given to, or perhaps infused with, a physical body at conception. To simplify a complex philosophical history, this dualistic view of an eternal/immortal soul, almost mechanistically, being combined with a physical body resulting in the creation of a fully human person reflects some strands of Christian thought, but by no means all.⁹ The vocabulary of “body” and “soul” is very confused in the modern world, and at least should not be understood in this dualistic sense.¹⁰

I believe these two points show that “human life begins at conception” cannot be used as a way to say that all pregnancies must be allowed to continue to birth, no matter what other moral goods are involved, lest something akin to murder is involved. Absent that inflexible criterion, how should the balance of moral goods be weighed? Well, thoughtfully, prayerfully, and with compassion. For me, a key question is whether enough of the characteristics of divinely blessed human procreation are present in order to outweigh the “default” presumption that the pregnancy should continue. Are there other serious risks of life or health at stake? Can the various burdens of pregnancy and ultimately parenting be shared? While I believe that humans need not fit into one normative pattern of health and ability, and thus children with “limited” or perhaps better “non-majority” mental and physical abilities should be welcome into the world, obviously the viability of the developing life is a critical question as well. Does the pregnancy, in fact, belong to someone too young to reasonably understand the significance and responsibility of bringing a child into the world? If support from church or others is not possible for various reasons, is the pregnancy going to make life unbearable or even dangerous situation given the psycho-social reality of the situation?

⁹ Although reflective of some schools of ancient Zoroastrian and Greek philosophy that influenced post-exilic Judaism, this dualism doesn’t seem to reflect older Hebrew thought, or the more Semitic side of Hebrew tradition that also influenced Christianity. 1 Corinthians 15 seems to be St. Paul’s attempt to express the unity of “body” and “spirit” (although even using those words is misleading) in a non-dualistic way, in spite of the fact he was obviously influenced by dualistic philosophy.

¹⁰ A “materialist sense” of the soul is perhaps most clearly reflected in those who claim proof for the existence of “life after death” by claiming to find a tiny, but measurable, decrease in the weight of the human body upon death, reflecting the soul leaving the body – the “21 gram experiment.” This idea is surprisingly durable in the popular imagination. Such materialism is not reflective of Biblical thought.

Again, absent the inflexible and unfounded criterion of “life begins at conception” all these factors may come into consideration when weighing the moral goods involved in continuing a pregnancy. These are difficult matters, and given the moral significance of the decision, should be very carefully considered, but considered they must be. Compassion and mercy¹¹ must allow us to say that sometimes ending the pregnancy can be a faithful choice.

- 3) *Given that reproduction is a unique and inherently morally complex aspect of human life, and given that reproductive decisions ultimately involve questions that are deeply personal and/or transcendent/religious (or at least cannot be settled “objectively”), the government should not restrict the options for people to make a decision about continuing a pregnancy.*

There could be very much to say when considering the proper governmental role in questions of abortion. Among many other issues, the authority of the Supreme Court, the way in which one interprets the Constitution, and the nature of federal authority and the authority of individual states obviously are key issues. The way in which patriarchy, misogyny, and other gender-based power dynamics come into play in the making of laws, often unrecognized and certainly unacknowledged, are also key issues. I believe that the regrettable patriarchal and authoritarian streak of conservative Christianity in the U.S. has also influenced politics, particularly around abortion legislation, in the last 50 years as well. I do not intend to address those types of issues here, however, being without competence on Constitutional and legal issues. But, more importantly, the legal issues seem largely beside the point of how I think about abortion. To put it clearly, I am not so much concerned here whether the various government institutions *can* legally ban abortion, but whether they *should*. Even with the Supreme Court overruling *Roe* and *Casey*, no state *must* ban abortion, and I believe no state should do so. In general, as a statement of political philosophy, I believe all government law should ultimately serve the well-being of the whole people, and that of course is the point of a democracy.

With human procreation being a unique and morally complex aspect of human life, and with reproductive decisions ultimately involving questions that are deeply personal and/or transcendent/religious, I believe that consideration of the well-being of the whole people, and the whole person, and especially of those who are pregnant, makes bans on abortion unjustified. Particularly when one rejects the strict view that “life begins at conception,” other components of human well-being must come into play in considering such laws. In the end, lawmakers should be guided by the moral humility that the complexity of human procreation demands, as well as by respect for the moral autonomy of those who are pregnant.

¹¹ Consider James 2:8-13 – “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

This is particularly true given the actual, real-life, practical results of abortion bans, which by no means simply stop abortions from happening. International studies show little difference in abortion rates between countries where abortion is banned and those where it is allowed.¹² Abortion bans, particularly in the United States with different laws in different states, will largely make abortion more difficult but not stop it. Abortion bans will also lead people to unsafe, “illegal” abortions, especially for those that face socio-economic difficulties due to racism and other forms of social injustice. These types of considerations must come into play when considering the real-world effect of abortion laws, and they add to the humility lawmakers should show when considering abortion bans.

Was *Roe v. Wade* a poorly reasoned case? Is *Dobbs v. Jackson* poorly considered? Should such decisions be left to the political and legislative process of the states, rather than the federal courts? As legal questions, I don’t know. But I do believe that government bodies *should not* ultimately remove decision making power about abortion from those who are pregnant, given the unique, complex, and deeply personal nature of all decisions around human procreation.

I believe Dick Ragsdale lived with compassion, integrity, and courage. Making safe abortions available to those who face excruciating decisions about their pregnancies is good, faithful service by a physician. In my view, people who carefully weigh the moral goods involved in a pregnancy, including the significance of developing life and their own well-being, and who then decide to end their pregnancies should be seen as acting faithfully and with integrity as well.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/12/world/12abortion.html>, and other more recent studies.