

Abortion: An Assault on the Defenseless

Elder Russell M. Nelson, Ensign, Oct. 2008

As I begin, let me apologize to readers for the use of terms that are not pleasant. The nature of the war to which I'm referring requires such clarity of communication.

As sons and daughters of God, we cherish life as a gift from Him. His eternal plan provides opportunities for His children to obtain physical bodies, to gain earthly experiences, and to realize their divine destinies as heirs of eternal life.¹

Death Rates from Wars

With that understanding and reverence for life, we deplore the loss of life associated with warfare. The data are appalling. In World War I, more than 8 million military fatalities occurred. In World War II, more than 22 million servicemen and women died.² Together, these two wars, covering portions of 14 years, cost the lives of at least 30 million soldiers worldwide. That figure does not include the millions of civilian casualties.

These data, however, are dwarfed by the toll of another war that claims more casualties annually than did World War I and World War II combined. Worldwide reports indicate that more than 40 million abortions are performed per year.³

This war called abortion is a war on the defenseless and the voiceless. It is a war on the unborn. This war is being waged globally. Ironically, civilized societies that have generally placed safeguards on human life have now passed laws that sanction this practice.

Divine Doctrine

This matters greatly to us because the Lord has repeatedly declared this divine imperative: "Thou shalt not kill."⁴ Then He added, "Nor do anything like unto it."⁵ Even before the fulness of the gospel was restored, enlightened individuals understood the sanctity of human life. John Calvin, a sixteenth-century reformer, wrote, "If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, ... it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fœtus in the womb before it has come to light."⁶

Man-made rules have now legalized that which has been forbidden by God from the dawn of time! Human reasoning has twisted and transformed absolute truth into sound-bite slogans that promote a practice that is consummately wrong.

Special Concerns

Concern for the health of the mother is a vital one. But circumstances in which the termination of pregnancy is necessary to save the life of the mother are very rare, particularly where modern medical care is available. Another concern applies to pregnancies resulting from rape or incest. This tragedy is compounded because an innocent woman's freedom of choice was denied. In these circumstances, abortion is sometimes considered advisable to preserve the physical and mental health of the mother. Abortions for these reasons are also rare.

Some argue for abortion because of fear that a child may have a congenital malformation. Surely the harmful effects of certain infectious or toxic agents in the first trimester of pregnancy are real, but caution is needed in considering the termination of a pregnancy. Life has great value for all, including those born with disabilities. Furthermore, the outcome may not be as serious as postulated.

I remember well a couple who endured such an experience. The woman was only 21 years old at the time—a beautiful and devoted wife. In her first trimester, she contracted German measles. Abortion was advised because the developing baby would almost surely be damaged. Some members of her family, out of loving concern, applied additional pressure for an abortion. Devotedly, the couple consulted their bishop. He referred them to their stake president, who, after listening to their concern, counseled them not to terminate the life of this baby, even though the child would likely have a problem. He quoted this scripture:

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

“In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”⁷

They chose to follow that counsel and allowed their child to be born—a beautiful little girl, normal in every respect, except for total hearing loss. After their daughter's evaluation at a school for the deaf, the parents were advised that this child had the intellect of a genius. She attended a major university on a scholarship. Now some 40 years later, she enjoys a wonderful life.

To deny life to an individual because of a possible handicap is a very serious matter. Policy consistent with that logic would dictate that those already living with such deficiencies should likewise be terminated. One more step in that tragic train of thought would lead to the conclusion that those who are either infirm or inconvenient should also be eliminated. Such irreverence for life would be totally unthinkable!

Abortion on Demand

Relatively few abortions are performed for the special circumstances to which I have referred.⁸ Most abortions are performed on demand to deal with unwanted pregnancies. These abortions are simply a form of birth control.

Elective abortion has been legalized in many countries on the premise that a woman is free to choose what she does with her own body. To an extent this is true for each of us, male or female.

We are free to think. We are free to plan. And we are free to do. But once an action has been taken, we are never free from its consequences.

To understand this concept more clearly, we can learn from the astronaut. Anytime during selection or preparation, he or she is free to withdraw from the program. But once the spacecraft has lifted off, the astronaut is bound to the consequences of the previous choice to make the journey.

So it is with people who choose to embark on a journey that leads to parenthood. They have freedom of choice—to begin or not to begin that course. When conception does occur, that choice has already been made.

Yes, a woman is free to choose what she will do with her body. Whether her choice leads to an astronaut's mission or to a baby, her choice to begin the journey binds her to the consequences of that choice. She cannot “unchoose.”

When the controversies about abortion are debated, “individual right of choice” is invoked as though it were the one supreme virtue. That could only be true if but one person were involved. The rights of any one individual do not allow the rights of another individual to be abused. In or out of marriage, abortion is not solely an individual matter. Terminating the life of a developing baby involves two individuals with separate bodies, brains, and hearts. A woman's choice for her own body does not include the right to deprive her baby of life—and a lifetime of choices that her child would make.

As Latter-day Saints, we should stand up for choice—the right choice—not simply for choice as a method.⁹

Nearly all legislation pertaining to abortion considers the duration of gestation. The human mind has presumed to determine when “meaningful life” begins. In the course of my studies as a medical doctor, I learned that a new life begins when two special cells unite to become one cell, bringing together 23 chromosomes from the father and 23 from the mother. These chromosomes contain thousands of genes. In a marvelous process involving a combination of genetic coding by which all the basic human characteristics of the unborn person are established, a new DNA complex is formed. A continuum of growth results in a new human being. Approximately 22 days after the two cells have united, a little heart begins to beat. At 26 days the circulation of blood begins.¹⁰ To legislate when a developing life is considered “meaningful” is presumptive and quite arbitrary, in my opinion.

Abortion has been legalized by governing entities without regard for God and His commandments. Scriptures state repeatedly that people will prosper only if they obey the commandments of God.¹¹ Individuals will prosper only when they walk in faith and obedience to God, who said:

“I, the Lord, ... built the earth, my very handiwork; and all things therein are mine.

“And it is my purpose to provide. ...

“But it must needs be done in mine own way. . . .

“For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare.”¹²

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has consistently opposed the practice of abortion. More than a century ago, the First Presidency wrote, “We again take this opportunity of warning the Latter-day Saints against those . . . practices of foeticide and infanticide.”¹³

Early in his presidency President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) said: “We have repeatedly affirmed the position of the Church in unalterably opposing all abortions, except in two rare instances: When conception is the result of forcible rape and when competent medical counsel indicates that a mother’s health would otherwise be seriously jeopardized.”¹⁴ Current policy now includes two other exceptions—incest and if the baby cannot survive beyond birth, as determined by competent medical counsel. Even these exceptions do not justify abortion automatically. It “should be considered only after the persons responsible have consulted with their bishops and received divine confirmation through prayer.”¹⁵

Adoption

Why destroy a life that could bring great joy to others? There are better ways of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. When a life is created by sinful behavior, the best way to begin personal repentance is to preserve the life of that child. To add another serious sin to a serious sin already committed only compounds the grief. Adoption is a wonderful alternative to abortion. Both the baby and the adoptive parents can be greatly blessed by the adoption of that baby into a home where the child will be lovingly nurtured and where the blessings of the gospel will be available.

Repentance Is Possible

Is there any hope for the person who has participated in the act of abortion? Is there any hope for those who have so sinned and who now suffer heartbreak? The answer is yes! “As far as has been revealed, a person may repent and be forgiven for the sin of abortion.”¹⁶ We know the Lord will help all who are truly repentant.¹⁷

Life is precious! No one can cuddle an innocent infant, look into those beautiful eyes, feel the little fingers, and kiss that baby’s cheek without a deepening reverence for life and for our Creator. Life comes from life. It is no accident. It is a gift from God. Innocent life is not sent by Him to be destroyed. It is given by Him and is naturally to be taken by Him alone.¹⁸ I testify that life is eternal as He is eternal.

Adoption—A Loving Decision That Blesses the Child

“We . . . express our support of unwed parents who place their children for adoption in stable homes with a mother and a father. We also express our support of the married mothers and fathers who adopt these children.

“Children are entitled to the blessing of being reared in a stable family environment where father and mother honor marital vows. Having a secure, nurturing, and consistent relationship with both a father and a mother is essential to a child’s well-being. When choosing adoption, unwed parents grant their children this most important blessing. Adoption is an unselfish, loving decision that blesses the child, birth parents, and adoptive parents in this life and throughout the eternities. We commend all those who strengthen children and families by promoting adoption.”

First Presidency statement, Oct. 4, 2006.