



## Reproductive Choice Through the Lens of Reformed Theology

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### **1. With such a serious moral issue as abortion, where do Presbyterians turn for guidance?**

As Presbyterians, we believe that God provides us with the gifts of reason and intelligence for understanding the facts and the contexts that are involved in the reproductive issues we face today. In faith, we pray for guidance, both privately and as the gathered church. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we search the Scriptures for God's Word while aware of our different cultural contexts. We learn from our sisters and brothers in Christ by listening to their experiences of reproductive issues.

### **2. What does the Bible tell us about abortion? Does "thou shall not kill" refer to abortion?**

The PC(USA) Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion (1992) agreed that "...there are no biblical texts that speak specifically to the topic of abortion..." (27.086): <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/problem-pregnancies-and-abortion/> The meaning of Exodus 20:13 ("thou shalt not kill") is clarified by examples that follow in chapter 21. One of these describes the situation in which men who are fighting hurt a pregnant woman and cause a miscarriage. Exodus 21: 22 sets a monetary fine for the miscarriage. Verses 23-25 call for giving "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" only if the woman is harmed or killed. Thus, the commandment against murder did not apply to the miscarriage.

While there are no specific references to abortion in the Bible, Scripture attests to God, the good Creator, and to the preciousness of life. Created in the image of God, humanity is dignified by God's commission to care for creation with special regard for the poor and powerless. Because many contexts surround pregnancy (from the violence of rape or economic deprivation to the sorrows of profound fetal deformity or the joy of a healthy birth), the PC(USA) has emphasized the need for supporting women as they wrestle with their own circumstances. We believe that our redemption in Christ enables women and their loved ones to face these difficult issues with courage and compassion, always seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### **3. If God creates us, does abortion deny the will of God? Is each new life a gift from God?**

In the Reformed tradition we believe that God is the Sovereign Creator of all that exists. Yet, we also believe that God has given humans free will and we believe that nature is governed by the physical laws of creation (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.024-6.025). Therefore, we do not say that God's will is thwarted when we intervene medically to affect natural occurrences. We approve, for example, the use of contraception to block





unwanted pregnancies and the use of modern medical techniques to enable wanted pregnancies. We also approve of drug therapies, heart bypass operations, blood transfusions, and organ transplants. None of these rejects God's will for humanity.

Pregnancies occur under many difficult human and natural circumstances. For example, the PC(USA) Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion listed pregnancies involving severe fetal abnormalities, those resulting from violence or failed contraception, those threatening the physical or emotional well-being of the pregnant woman, and those that threaten the economic stability of a family. It concluded that "...we have neither the wisdom nor the authority to address or decide each situation" (27.090). Yet, women, with their families and doctors and pastors, must address them. The report concluded: "We affirm the ability and responsibility of women, guided by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, to make good moral choices in regard to problem pregnancies" (27.091).

#### **4. "God alone is Lord of the conscience," but should reproductive decisions be left up to individuals?**

Due to the enormous complexity that can surround human reproductive life, the PC(USA) has made two general responses. First, it has repeatedly affirmed its responsibility to provide moral guidance to those facing these issues. For example, PC(USA) policies state that abortion for the sole purpose of gender selection is not morally acceptable. It finds that there are only rare circumstances in which the termination of a pregnancy after fetal viability is acceptable. Second, the PC(USA) has repeatedly affirmed its conviction that in these complex circumstances, it is women, guided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, who must discern their own moral responsibility. The church defends each Christian's responsibility to exercise free will as the Holy Spirit has informed our conscience (*Covenant and Creation*, Introduction).

#### **5. Some people affirm "the right to life." Others affirm "the right to choice." Can they be reconciled?**

"Rights" try to name what every human needs in order to live with our God-given dignity. Obviously, life itself is necessary to live as God's image. The freedom to make decisions based on our faith is also necessary. As the Historical Principles state: "God alone is Lord of the conscience." So, both the "right to life" and the "right to choice" are essential to human dignity. Yet, neither is absolute. For example, when *in vitro* fertilization results in too many embryos, we would support a woman's choice to remove some in order to protect the others. Yet, we would also support her choice to try to bring all these embryos to term. If a woman is pregnant by rape, she should be able to decide whether to continue or to terminate this pregnancy - and have the support of the church whatever her decision. In these cases, the "right to life" is not absolute. On the other hand, some choices related to reproduction are clearly so wrong that the church opposes them: forced sterilization, forced marital intercourse, and abortion for gender selection. In cases such as these, the "right to choice" is not absolute.

