

## Consensus

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Volume 11 | Issue 4

Article 2

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10-1-1985

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### Recommended Citation

Crossman, Richard C. (1985) "Abortion: a case study in ethical decision making," *Consensus*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol11/iss4/2>

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# ABORTION: A CASE STUDY IN ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

*Richard C. Crossman*

Like many ethical issues that have emerged in Canada and North America, the matter of abortion has preoccupied the hearts and minds of persons within and outside the church for a number of years. The topic has been the focus of television documentaries, news magazine issues, numerous books, and social ministry statements of a number of churches. However, unlike many other issues, the question of abortion has generated a level of emotional intensity and polarization that has been rarely matched in recent years. As witness to this one need only note the recent incidents of abortion clinic bombings by anti-abortionists, and the headlong push by pro-choice advocates for abortion clinics across Canada despite the resulting arrests because of the questionable legal status of such institutions. The situation is obviously explosive and the rhetoric coming from both sides does not appear to recognize any middle ground.

In the face of this polarized situation many Christians are being pressed to choose sides and yet feel somewhat uneasy fully embracing either side. As Christians they affirm their responsibility to assist and support those who are weak, poor, and relatively powerless. Yet in the matter of abortion they recognize that this responsibility appears to reach out in opposite directions; on the one hand, to women trapped in radically destructive life settings, and on the other hand, to the unborn. Given this dilemma it is my feeling that in many a Christian's mind there is the often unspoken hope that a better alternative might be found, one that reaches beyond the current polarization and yet addresses the legitimate Christian concerns of both sides.

Recognizing the destructive character of the present polarization, it appears to me that a new way of addressing the matter of abortion needs to be discovered. We need to discover a creative alternative which transcends the impasse and inadequacies of the basic ethical stances now being taken. Therefore it is to this task of identifying such an alternative approach that I want to address myself.

In pursuing this task I will first briefly review the basic approach to ethics which is employed by the "anti-abortion" and "pro-choice" sides of the abortion issue. In examining these stances I will show how the current polarization surrounding the issue of abortion is the result of a misplaced debate. That is, each side of the present polarization has seized upon a legitimate but different dimension of the process of

human fulfillment in history, and has tended to emphasize that dimension as the overriding concern for Christian ethical decision making. The result has been for both sides to tend to become reductionistic. It is my contention that an adequate alternative approach will have to take into account the legitimate emphasis of each side but see them as parts of an interdependent whole within and through which God is active in history. Such an alternative approach I suggest can be developed around the motif of “stewardship”. As Christian stewards we need to pursue those activities which work to fulfill and enhance all dimensions of life as an interdependent whole. In concluding this paper I will suggest some initial ways in which Christians might begin this task in the matter of abortion.

## BASIC ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

As human beings we are from a very early age confronted with the reality that we are finite. This reality is impressed on us in a number of ways. We anticipate the birth of our own or a friend’s child and recognize that we too had a beginning similar to theirs. We witness the death of a loved one and are made conscious of the unavoidable reality of our own death. We grow up in a family and soon discover that we must play different roles at different times. Parents must sometimes play the part of counselor or friend, and at other times the part of task master.

Because we are finite we are also faced with the fact that we can not actualize all the possibilities that we have presented to us at any particular time. We must choose in favor of some possibilities and against others. This means, if I choose to pursue my gifts in one direction I will by definition not actualize to the same degree my possibilities in other directions. In this way my choices give me a future by allowing me to focus my energies, while at the same time limiting the direction that such a future can take.

Given these observations about our finitude and our future, it can be easily seen that over time the choices one makes work together to form a pattern or a gestalt. Some people refer to this pattern as one’s character or one’s personality. Others refer to it as one’s “story”. Thus to tell one’s “story” is to tell how you have expanded or opened up your future and also how you have cut off certain possibilities. Moreover, to tell one’s story is to indicate those presuppositions and values through which one looks at the world and in terms of which one acts in the world. That is, a basic part of one’s story is those things which we hold to be most true or authentic about ourselves, in terms of which we test the authenticity of the people and the world around us, and in terms of which we act. By analogy one might say, to tell one’s story is to reveal the set of glasses through which we see ourselves and the rest of the world, and in terms of which we act.

While each of us may have a set of ethical “glasses” through which we operate, this does not mean that all sets of “glasses” are equally adequate, helpful, or fulfilling. They are not. It is for this reason that persons often become concerned about finding more fulfilling ways of encountering, living, and acting in their world. Parenthetically, this paper is itself part of such an activity.

Having come this far, we now must ask whether we can identify in some general way what basic kinds of “glasses” or basic presuppositions people have employed to pursue a more fulfilled life. At the risk of oversimplification, I believe around the issue of abortion two such basic types of “glasses” can be identified. The first type focuses on the presence of an “unconditioned standard” in terms of which ethical judgment and activity is determined. The second type employs a method of “ethical calculation” through which it is believed the most fulfilling activity can be discerned.

## UNCONDITIONAL STANDARD:

In this approach it is felt that before one can make a judgment one must be clear about the nature of the standard against which the assessment is to be made. For example, before one could assess the quality of a wine one would first have to have a benchmark against which to measure it. What is true of wine assessment is seen to be no less true of ethical judgment.

Given this need for a standard it needs to be noted that not all standards are of equal value. If the standard one employed was subject to frequent modification then the consistency of one's judgment would also suffer. Therefore, in evaluating standards one must be attentive to those things which persist through time despite the sea of change that swirls around them. The more unconditioned a standard is the more significant it is for making ethical decisions.

However, a good standard needs not only to be true for all times past, present, and future, it also needs to be universally applicable. That is, if an ethical standard is to be helpful it must be applicable to a wide range of persons in a variety of settings. Obviously, the most reliable ethical standard would be one which was true for all persons, in all settings, in every age.

Locating a standard to fit these criteria is of course the challenge. For Christians who adopt this approach, however, the task is not as difficult as it might first appear. God, as the unconditioned creator of our world, is seen to have identified a set of ethical guidelines in the Biblical material. Being revealed by a holy and perfectly unconditioned source, such standards obviously possess the qualities required for proper ethical decision making. In this approach the main ethical duty of Christians is to locate the applicable Biblical directive and to apply it to the appropriate situation.

Regarding the matter of abortion, many persons of this approach obtain their ethical guidance from the command found in Exodus 20:13, "You shall not kill". For others, because this command is amplified and reaffirmed in the Gospels and the letters of Paul, the standard appealed to is that of the "sanctity of life". In either case the directive is clear. Christians, as individuals, should not engage in the taking of human life, nor should they allow others to engage in such activity.

However, because the mandate focuses on the taking of "human" life, there still remains the task of demonstrating that the unborn fetus falls under the aegis of this injunction. For if it could be shown that the unborn fetus were at some point not yet "human" then clearly the injunction against killing would not apply to non-human life and abortion would in such a case be permitted. Recognizing the importance of this question of applicability, it is not surprising to find that persons and groups who take this approach, and are convinced of the "humanity" of the fetus from the moment of conception, spend by far the greatest amount of their time in the task of convincing others of this conclusion. The Syllogism is clear. If we as Christians are forbidden to take human life, and if an unborn fetus is a human life, then the abortion of a fetus is forbidden. The most recent graphic example of this activity of "convincing" is the production and showing of the movie, "The Silent Scream". While some have found this film to be offensive in particular ways, persons of this approach feel that the ethical mandate given to them permits nothing less than an all-out effort.

While there is a good deal of power in some of the insights of this approach, something I will address in more detail later in the paper, there are many Christians who find this approach less than adequate. For them the task of locating unconditioned,



universal ethical guidelines is not so easily resolved as persons of this approach would contend. They come to this conclusion for three reasons. First, while the Biblical revelation may contain infinite, unconditional truth, the meaning and application of that truth must be apprehended by finite human beings. This means that that which is infinite is always received through that which is finite. It also means that whatever ethical guidelines we have are historically conditioned. Ethical reflection therefore must be done in a world where change and proximate justice are the only universals we as mortals can possess. The fact that not all theologians understand ethics in identical ways witnesses to this.

A second reason some Christians have reservations about the “Unconditioned Standard” approach to ethics involves the emergence of ethical situations in our time which do not appear to be directly, if at all, addressed in the Biblical material. Examples of such situations would include genetic engineering and organ transplants. While ethical extrapolation from the Biblical material can be done to address these new scientific developments, it is felt that this very activity of extrapolation prior to application testifies to the need for a different approach to the ethical task.

The third source of hesitation resides in the way in which the prescription for good action in this approach appears to be determined in a fashion that requires no consideration of the particularity of the situation involved. It is felt the ethical agent of this approach is drawn to overlook the uniqueness of persons and their contexts and thereby to sacrifice the reality of such uniqueness on the altar of “universal” truth.

## ETHICAL CALCULATION:

This second approach begins from the observation that all life is growing and changing. This includes not only the individuals of society but also the social institutions within which we all must live and breath. Because of this, in many ways each ethical situation is unique. Therefore it is felt an adequate standard for ethical judgment would have to be able to take this unique variability into account and build upon it. In other words, it would need to be particularly sensitive to the context or situation within which ethical activity was to occur.

Given this emphasis on growth, change and uniqueness, one is immediately faced with the question of how one establishes an ethical standard which is simultaneously relative to the situation and capable of judging the situation. On the face of it the task seems almost impossible. However, this approach does locate such a standard through the application of an “ethical calculation”. More specifically, the good is seen to be a function of the self-fulfillment of the ethical agent. Self-fulfillment here involves the expansion of one’s future possibilities through the use of reason, as opposed to self-indulgence which through the lack of prudent foresight reduces one’s future possibilities. The application of reason in this process is done through a cost-benefit analysis.

Regarding the matter of abortion, Christians who follow this approach often locate their guidance for ethical action in the mandate to do the most loving thing possible in the situation. They derive their Biblical support for this approach from the great commandment of Jesus to love God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbor as one’s self, and from passages like II Corinthians 3:17. In trying to determine what the most loving action would be, the pregnant woman in this approach would no doubt consider a variety of factors, some related to her physical and psychological well-being, others

related to her societal context. Specific factors which have often been considered include: 1. “the welfare of the mother”, 2. “the welfare of third parties”, 3. “the welfare of the future child”.<sup>1</sup> Such a calculation may or may not result in a decision for an abortion. However, the important thing for this approach is that the woman involved, the ethical agent, retains the freedom to make the calculation and retains the freedom to act on her decision.

As was the case with the first approach, this second approach also has much to recommend it. I will consider the positive aspects of this and the “unconditional standard” approach together later in the paper. Nevertheless, three serious inadequacies are present in this approach which should be noted. First, the norm of “love” and “self-fulfillment” employed in this approach’s ethical calculation must necessarily be left quite loose or ambiguous so as to enable full latitude for the decision maker in considering the unique characteristics of the situation. This looseness, however, is also an open temptation for the ethical agent to substitute rationalization for reason. In short, this approach provides little effective check on the pursuit of unjustified self-indulgence.

Second, when the decision maker in this approach engages in an ethical calculation regarding the matter of abortion, there is already a predilection to pay little attention to the future possibilities of the unborn fetus. This is so because if the question of obtaining an abortion arises for a woman, the fetus, by definition of the situation, is already viewed as a potential impediment to her future possibilities, rather than an enhancement of them.

Finally, this approach involves a potentially self-defeating dynamic. More specifically, the pursuit of a fully actualized life eventually requires persons to align themselves with others so as to make possible the greater realization of their potential. While groups often can be helpful in this regard, they also expose all members of a group to the risk of being sacrificed for the good of the group. Anticipated self-fulfillment can easily turn into actualized personal negation. Applying this to the question of abortion, this means that the existing social mores and laws of the land may or may not be as self-fulfilling as persons in this approach might anticipate.

## REACHING BEYOND THE POLARIZATION:

So far I have briefly outlined the ethical approach taken by persons on opposing sides of the abortion issue. I have further raised some ethical concerns regarding each of these approaches. However, the question still remains whether there exists a viable strategic alternative which will enable us to reach beyond the present polarization. I believe there does exist such an alternative for Christians, and that the foundation of that alternative can be located in the Biblical motif of the “steward”.

Genesis 1:27 declares that God created humankind in God’s image. Being so created we are called to mirror that image in our lives. This we are to do not simply as a solitary act of self-realization but more importantly through the process of mutual support and caring for one another. Through such caring we respond to the Divine image of co-humanity in which we all have been created. In such caring we become accountable to each other and to future generations. The nature of this accountability is manifest in the Biblical call to justice and inclusive community (cf. Deut. 10:18-19; 24:19-22; Isa. 1:17;

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1. Lewis B. Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 134-135.

Amos 8:4-6). In short, by virtue of our co-humanity, we are called to be fair stewards of creation for the benefit of all. This then leads to the motif of stewardship.<sup>2</sup>

In speaking of stewardship the Biblical material makes it clear that the task of the steward was to serve his/her ruler/employer. The role of the steward, however, was special for it involved being given charge over and responsibility for the affairs of the ruler (cf. Gen. 43, 44; I Chron. 27, 28). Because the steward was the virtual representative of his/her lord this position also carried with it full accountability for the exercise of one's stewardship (cf. Isa. 22:15-21; Luke 12:41-48). Building on this understanding, the New Testament further declares that Christians are called to be stewards of Christ. As such they are a part of their Lord's household, called on to manage and take responsibility for the well-being of those who dwell there, i.e. as servants of the whole family of God (cf. Ephesians 2:4-3:12). However, stewardship is not something Christians are called on to do to earn God's grace. Rather, it is into the stewardship of Christ that we are called by God's grace through faith. That is, as Christians in community we have been empowered by and entrusted with God's grace in the midst of our sin, and as such we are to be stewards of that grace — conduits of that grace — for all the household of God's creation in and through whatever particular contexts they are found. This of course means, *mutatis mutandis*, the church is also called to be a stewarding community whose aim it is to serve in and through God's grace and to be a harbinger of the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

Having drawn out this understanding of the Biblical motif of stewardship, how then does it enable us to fashion a creative alternative to the present polarization? To answer this question I would draw attention to two observations in particular. The first of these is that central to our activities as God's stewards is a call to reach beyond ourselves through mutual support and caring for one another. As stewards we are accountable to each other, to future generations, and to God for ministering to the needs of all persons in the world. This includes justice needs as well as personal needs. The second observation is that the steward is given charge over the affairs of his/her Lord, and through the free exercise of his/her responsibility is to pursue the well-being of all. This is to be done in and through the particularity of all situations.

You will notice that each of these observations in turn highlights the basic strength of each of the approaches described earlier. More specifically, the approach based on the application of an "unconditioned standard" focuses on the importance of continuity, mutual care and mutual accountability in the way we make ethical decisions. Our mutual care is to reach to all corners of creation and is to extend not only to present but future generations. It is through our stance toward the yet unborn that we already display our sense of stewardship toward the future.

In contrast to this, the second approach focuses on the content of the second observation concerning stewardship. That is, the second approach focuses on the ethical importance of accepting the God-given charge to take responsibility for and to manage through freedom the emerging well-being of creation. And this is to be done for all the household of creation being sensitive to the particular contexts in which they are found.

2. In preparing this treatment of the motif of "responsible co-humanity" I found Richard Niebanck, *Economic Justice*, Division for Mission in North America, Lutheran Church in America, 1980, very helpful.
3. In preparing this treatment of the motif of "stewardship" I found Douglas Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, Friendship Press, New York, 1982, very helpful.



In light of these parallels the conclusion recommends itself that each of the approaches has focused on a different half of the motif of stewardship. The first focused on continuity and the second on change. Thus it is not surprising that neither approach is adequate, for no ethical stance can be sufficient which does not keep the dynamics of continuity and change in balance. Moreover, these parallels also suggest that a more adequate alternative would emerge as this balance is recovered.

How might this be accomplished in the matter of abortion? I believe actions which reflect the balanced concerns of the motif of stewardship would be the place to begin.

## **BEGINNING STEPS:**

In reviewing the approach of those who centre their ethical decision making on an “unconditional standard” we saw that this approach properly affirms the concern for and preservation of unborn life. However, because of the preoccupation of persons who take this stand with this concern, this approach fails to do justice to the task of addressing the particular contexts which place women in destructive situations that foster and result from pregnancy. Persons are hypocritical if they see “sanctity of life” as a concern for the unborn but do not carry a similar concern for the contexts which thrust women and men into situations where they desire or feel the need for an abortion.

Concomitantly, the ethical approach of “ethical calculation” properly tries to address the concern for the destructive dynamics bearing on pregnant women in their particular contexts. It recognizes that the pregnant woman as an insider is closer to her own situation than are outsiders, and quite rightly affirms the ethical mandate for men and women alike to take responsibility for eliminating the dehumanizing dynamics in the post-natal and pre-natal world. Nevertheless, this approach fails to take seriously enough the future of the unborn child and the implications which this has for how one understands the role of parenting, the hope for one’s community, and the place of children in one’s lived world. How one feels about the question of abortion reflects how one views the nature and importance of community, parenting and children. As Christians we are called to be stewards of creation in all three of these areas.

The motif of “stewardship” indicates that we must reach beyond the approaches described above. However, we must do this while preserving the strengths of each of these approaches. I believe the present destructive polarization on the matter of abortion will be transcended and transformed only to the degree to which Canadians in their particular communities, and Canadians nationally, work to correct the conditions of injustice which precipitate the felt need for abortion. This should be our working agenda, an agenda that is constantly thrust before our eyes by the tragic nature of all abortion. How then do we get from here to there? In 1976 a fellow classmate of mine sketched out a set of beginning steps. I believe they are still a good place to start and deserve to be quoted at length. He writes:

The kind of change needed is complex and costly. In order that the judicial processing of abortion requests be able to recognize the legitimacy of claims of a pregnant woman whose request for an abortion is denied, the process must be tied directly to institutions which can offer that woman various kinds of compensatory support, so that a [possible] ‘no’ to a request for abortion would lead directly to institutions which can



offer that woman various kinds of compensatory support, so that a [possible] 'no' to a request for abortion would lead directly to a 'yes' in response to the problems of that pregnancy. Only in this way can the operation of the law be seen as widening the sphere of free decision. The various public policies necessary to greater justice in abortion would include intensified research for non-abortifacient methods of birth control which would not injure their users' health, further development of agencies to aid adoption, provision of special facilities for prenatal and postnatal care, establishment of maternity allowances (perhaps along the lines of family allotments), legislation and labour union action to secure greater variability in work patterns for both men and women, legislation requiring the provision of maternity leave with pay, and a vastly improved and expanded program of day care.<sup>4</sup>

Progress has already begun on some of these steps but much more needs to be done. Greater attention must also be given to more universal access to effective birth control knowledge and methods. Ignorance, injustice and poverty need to be removed as dynamics which foster the felt need for abortion. It will take time and effort to implement these changes but this should not deter us from the task. To the extent that success is achieved in implementing these and similar steps the felt need for abortion will be displaced. It is to this end that we should dedicate ourselves.

In the meantime, however, it must be recognized that to the extent that we fail to address the destructive dynamics which generate the felt need for abortion the presence of abortion will continue to be a tragic reality for which we all must share responsibility. As such it is also our interim task to provide full ministerial support to those persons who find themselves faced with the question of abortion, both before and after a decision has been reached. This we do in the firm expectation and hope as "Christian Stewards" that this interim task will increasingly prove to be truly only an interim matter. God asks nothing less of us.

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4. John Badertscher, "Religious Dimensions of the Abortion Debate," *Studies in Religion* (Vol. 6, No. 2, 1976-1977), p. 182.

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