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# CHURCHES OF CHRIST AND ABORTION: A SURVEY OF SELECTED PERIODICALS

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## Introduction

A wise preacher and university professor has observed that at a time when the world is saying more and more about sex, Churches of Christ are saying less and less. These sentiments are applicable to one of the most controversial moral issues facing the church today—abortion.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to highlight something of the inadequacy that has characterized responses of Churches of Christ to the problem of abortion through a sample of recent periodical literature<sup>2</sup> and to offer some proposals for the development of a more adequate response.

Adequacy here is measured by the extent to which the literature reflects these elements: (1) clear, consistent, and coherent opposition to abortion as morally unacceptable to Christians, (2) a rationale that grows out of a solid theological and philosophical framework, (3) an awareness of the broad range of issues associated with the problem, and (4) an appreciation of the need for supportive contexts from which life-affirming decisions can be promoted.

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) places the battle in the larger cultural context; see also James Mohr's, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy* (New York: Oxford, 1978). Marvin Olasky, *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992), offers a helpful corrective to Mohr.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Jackson, "Abortion—A Response," *Firm Foundation* 109 (January 1994) 8, argues, with some justification, that "a survey of the literature of our brotherhood over the past several decades will reveal that this topic, as well as others involving ethical issues, have (*sic*) been frequently addressed." I would simply note that coverage varies with different periodicals, and many authors who have addressed the issue have done so inadequately.

This study focuses on attitudes of those in Churches of Christ. Insights or practices from other traditions are included only to the extent that comparisons illumine the problem. Only periodical material is assessed in depth.<sup>3</sup> Some observations are necessarily impressionistic and point to the need for more research in this area.<sup>4</sup>

The first part of this paper develops a biblical and theological position in opposition to abortion. The second part of the paper provides an evaluation of responses within Churches of Christ in light of this "moral compass."

### Biblical Theology and the Abortion Debate<sup>5</sup>

The Christian doctrine of creation affirms that all creation is good and to be guarded from abuse. Aside from the question of "personhood," the fetus's very existence is significant. Thus Denise Lardner Carmody argues that "(t)he fact that something exists should create in us a respect that prejudices us in favor of what will support that creature's continuance

<sup>3</sup> The following periodicals were examined: *Contending for the Faith*, *The Spiritual Sword*, *The Firm Foundation*, *The Gospel Advocate*, *The Christian Chronicle*, *Integrity*, *Mission*, and *Image*. Emphasis was given to the years following *Roe v. Wade* and continuing through 1992.

Coverage preceding *Roe v. Wade* is sparse, but insights into opinion on abortion can be gleaned from the recollections of older brethren. J. D. Thomas, "Abortion and Personhood," *Firm Foundation* 99 (November 2, 1982) 700, offers the suggestive comment that "a prominent concept held by many today that is really new to some of us 'old timers' is that it is a morally good act to abort a fetus." Cf. James B. Coffman's, *Tales of Coffman: An Autobiography* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1992) 107-108. As early as 1893, a leader from the Christian Church wrote, "No excuse for (abortion) can be permitted to stand. It is murder, and only murder, and cannot be called by any other name." S. McDaniel, "The Greatest Sin of the Age," *Christian Standard* 29 (April 1893) 330.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, the role of periodicals in influencing (or even reflecting) doctrine and thought in Churches of Christ has diminished over the years. To suggest, however, that surveys of recent periodicals are without value goes too far; these must simply be supplemented with other approaches.

<sup>5</sup> Passages most frequently employed as prooftexts by those who oppose abortion from a scriptural basis include Ps 139:13-16, Isa 44:2, and Jer 1:5. Evidence from these passages is inferential and of limited value. I make no further mention of them here but develop my argument along different lines and follow Denise Lardner Carmody, *The Double Cross: Ordination, Abortion, and Catholic Feminism* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) in arranging themes under the rubrics of "Creation," "Sin," "Grace," and "Love."

in being and flourishing."<sup>6</sup> As much as any single ethical issue, the abortion controversy provides an occasion for different valuations of life to be contrasted: The doctrine of creation suggests that life is a gift from God and worthy of protection.

In addition to the Christian doctrine of creation, the Christian doctrine of sin clarifies various aspects of the abortion debate. Christian theology acknowledges the role selfishness plays in influencing human behavior, as well as our tendency to rationalize or justify sin, for example. The vast majority of abortions are matters of convenience rather than cases involving rape, incest, or endangerment to the mother's life.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, an appreciation of this cardinal Christian doctrine will restrain us from attributing blame too narrowly. Mothers, for example, often receive the brunt of what should be shared blame with husbands or (more often) boyfriends, parents, friends, or abortionists who have a vested interest in a "choice" to abort. This is not to diminish accountability for personal sin, but rather to acknowledge that "(i)ndividuals are never as immoral as the social situations in which they are involved and which they symbolize."<sup>8</sup>

Sin is, of course, never the last word for Christians. God's unconditional love for humankind and the constant extension of divine grace to all those who would receive it are overriding themes in Scripture. Thus our appreciation of the love and grace of God will remind us that God's love extends to the perpetrators of abortion and that "(a)ortion . . . is never greater than God or God's heart."<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, God's love for people is not contingent on worth or productivity. This perspective is deeply entrenched in the Judeo-Christian tradition; its earliest roots are found in the threefold concern for the "widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the gate" in the Torah (cf. Exod 22:21-23; Deut 24:19-22).<sup>10</sup> While one might argue whether "baby"

<sup>6</sup> Carmody, 85.

<sup>7</sup> David Vanderpool ("Abortion: A Look at Questions and Controversies Surrounding a Major Societal Issue," *Christian Chronicle* 50 [November 1993] 15), observes that the "rare instance cannot be used to establish the general precedent." This paper focuses on the general practice of abortion, pursued largely as a matter of convenience, rather than these "hard cases."

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner's, 1960) 248.

<sup>9</sup> Carmody, 96.

<sup>10</sup> James Thompson ("The Ethics of Jesus and the Early Church," in *Christian Social Ethics* [ed. Perry C. Cotham; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 59) writes: "We are . . . faced with questions dealing with the value of human life in our

or “fetus” is the more appropriate terminology for the unborn, this much is clear: There is one party that has no voice in the abortion debate. The unborn might rightly be described as the least of Jesus’ “least of these.”<sup>11</sup>

### Insights from Church History<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the witness of Scripture, the insights of the early church are important voices in this debate. Commenting on the early church’s position on abortion, Bruce Metzger concludes, “(I)t is really remarkable how uniform and how pronounced was the early Christian opposition to abortion.”<sup>13</sup> While texts from Christian sources could be cited *ad infinitum*, three of the most significant are mentioned here.<sup>14</sup> The *Didache* includes the assertion “You shall not murder a child by abortion nor shall you kill a newborn,” while the *Epistle of Barnabas* prescribes the same injunction. The *Apocalypse of Peter* gives the author’s vision of hell in which he saw “women . . . who produced children out of wedlock and who procured abortions.” Gorman’s commentary is significant at this point:

The *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* were extremely important in two other respects. First, the widespread use of

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dilemma over abortion, euthanasia, and genetic engineering. We are asked to determine which lives are valuable and worthy of protection. Jesus’ radical interpretation of the love command and Paul’s doctrine of the cross remind us that the value of human life does not depend on its function or its productivity. All human life stands under God’s care—even that which is, in our terms, useless.”

<sup>11</sup> Or, as Dr. Jerome Lejeune has described babies with Down’s syndrome, “the poorest of the poor.” Cited in John T. Noonan, *A Private Choice: Abortion in America in the Seventies* (New York: Free Press, 1979) 68.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Gorman’s *Abortion in the Early Church* (New York: Paulist, 1982) is the standard work on abortion and the early church, and I have used his material extensively in this section.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, foreword to *Abortion in the Early Church*; Gorman, 11. Carmody, 92, adds that despite exceptions or qualifications to the general view, the church has “put the great burden of proof on those who would kill life in the womb.”

<sup>14</sup> The *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* were all composed during the late first or early second century. Gorman notes that they would contain even earlier Jewish traditions and were widely read in the early Christian churches. The translations provided here are from Gorman, “Why the New Testament Is Silent about Abortion,” *Christianity Today* 37 (January 11, 1993) 29.

their "two ways" teachings among early Christians assured the disseminating of their position on abortion. Second, later writings appropriated the murder definition, the commandment form, the elevation of the status of the fetus, and the context of personal and social evils found in these two early works.<sup>15</sup>

The church's opposition to abortion continued through the influence of the Apologists<sup>16</sup> and remained constant through the Middle Ages and the Reformation.<sup>17</sup> Her basic stance toward abortion did not waver until the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Although these insights from church history are not authoritative, they nevertheless represent an important stream of thought and the unified witness of the church through the ages.

### Modern Medicine and the Abortion Debate<sup>19</sup>

Research in biological science and medicine likewise enriches the abortion debate. This research has typically been appropriated more often

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<sup>15</sup> Gorman, *Abortion*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Gorman, 54, cites Athenagoras's defense before Marcus Aurelius, written ca. 177, in which the former asks, "What reason would we have to commit murder when we say that women who induce abortions are murderers, and will have to give account of it to God? For the same person would not regard the fetus in the womb as a living thing and therefore an object of God's care [and then kill it]. . . . But we are altogether consistent in our conduct. We obey reason and do not override it."

<sup>17</sup> Due to the limitations of medieval science, contraception was viewed as homicide during this period. While the theme was subordinated to other concerns during the Reformation, the reformers were not silent on abortion. John Calvin, (*Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. 3; trans. Charles W. Bingham [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] 42) reasoned, "If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy an unborn child in the womb before it has come to light."

<sup>18</sup> Olasky, *Abortion Rites*, 161–65, however, demonstrates that the churches often lagged behind both antiabortion doctors and the media in opposing abortion in the nineteenth century.

<sup>19</sup> The most vocal major institutional opponent of abortion in nineteenth-century America was *JAMA*. Mohr, *Abortion*, 157, asserts, "The vigorous efforts of America's regular physicians would prove in the long run to be the single most important factor in altering the legal policies toward abortion in this country."

in Churches of Christ than insights from church history. These developments will not be emphasized here except to point out that innovations in medical technology continue to push the age of viability for the fetus backward. Furthermore,

Medical science and geneticists say that life begins at conception. Proabortion journals and medical journals say the same. In fact, there is no authority in medicine that refutes this concept. . . . Humanity is not a process.<sup>20</sup>

### A Summary of Antiabortion Rationale

In short, insights from biblical theology and Christian ethics, church history, and the medical sciences offer strong support for opposing abortion as an intrusion upon the sovereign domain of God. Opposition to abortion should grow out of careful reflection on Scriptures and Christian tradition, and in conversation with modern science.

Effective Christian witness must go beyond opposing abortion, however. We must articulate and live out "our deepest convictions that make our rejection of abortion intelligible."<sup>21</sup> However, a review of the literature calls into question how well these objectives are being accomplished.

### "Tolerating the Tolerable": Silence or Opposition?

When Hoy Ledbetter, the editorial advisor of *Integrity* magazine, opined that issues over abortion "should never be allowed to disrupt brotherly relations," John Loftus lovingly drew a line in the form of a response entitled "Tolerating the Tolerable."<sup>22</sup> Loftus argued, in part, that abortion is a moral issue and that the apostle Paul (Ledbetter

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<sup>20</sup> Editorial, "Common Ground on Abortion Is Still Shaky," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 15 June 1991, 3B. The editor adds geneticist Jerome Lejeune's assertion, "(I)f the fertilized egg is not in itself a complete human being, it will never become man . . ." One pro-choice legal scholar observes that abortion rights in the future must be based on "an approach that allows abortion even if the fetus is human. . . ." Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) 257.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981) 212.

<sup>22</sup> Hoy Ledbetter, "Tolerance in Tradition and Testament," *Integrity* 21 (November/December 1990) 100; and John W. Loftus, "Tolerating the Tolerable in the Church Today," *Integrity* 22 (April 1991) 21-25.

notwithstanding) was intolerant of immorality among Christians.<sup>23</sup> Loftus's position is consistent with the best impulses of Christian faith and tradition.

At least a few contributors to *Mission* held similar views to Ledbetter. *Mission* devoted two entire issues to the controversy; the first appeared in July 1973, the second in January 1986. The format in each issue provided positions both in support of and in opposition to abortion so that readers could reach their own conclusions. John Scott was the keynote proponent of choice in the early issue, while Roy Bowen Ward carried the banner more recently. At the very least, Editor-in-Chief Victor Hunter shared these proponents' sympathies.<sup>24</sup>

More significant than the presence of those favoring diversity on the issue was the relative ambivalence with which these views were received. Abortion opponents who examine Scott's article will be alarmed at the editor's subsequent assessment that opinion was split 50–50 among readers of the 1973 issue. Furthermore, editors of more conservative magazines typically did not criticize *Mission* for countenancing diversity here (though *Mission* was criticized for its positions on numerous other issues). A case in point is Ira Rice's vitriolic *Contending for the Faith*.

Rice took pride in recognizing what he perceived to be *Mission's* doctrinal falsehood early on,<sup>25</sup> but despite his normal vigilance in trumpeting perceived error, one will look in vain for criticism of *Mission* for its softness on abortion in the four years immediately following *Roe v. Wade*. The neglect illustrates a tendency to lose sight of major concerns while majoring in minors.

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<sup>23</sup> Loftus, 23. Loftus pointed out the differences in our society and that of Thomas and Alexander Campbell's day and concluded, "We must apply the Christian worldview to . . . issues of nuclear war, abortions, euthanasia, . . . and so forth."

<sup>24</sup> See John Scott, "The Morality of Abortion," *Mission* 7 (July 1973) 3–10; Roy Bowen Ward, "Is the Fetus a Person—According to the Bible?" *Mission* 19 (Jan. 1986) 6–9; and Victor Hunter, "What and So What," *Mission* 7 (July 1973) 22, where Hunter asks readers to reflect on the *quality* of life, as well as the "global population crisis" in their deliberations.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. "Axe on the Root – Volume II" *Contending for the Faith* 4 (October 1973) 4, where Rice points out that he had "sounded the warning against a new publication to be called *Mission*—the selfsame '*Mission*' that Reuel Lemmons and the *Firm Foundation* did not get around to warning our brethren against until just *this year*, by which time '*Mission*' had been poisoning the doctrinal wells of this brotherhood, virtually unimpeded, for *SIX WHOLE YEARS!*"



Vocal proponents of choice have been a minority in our movement; more common are the silent majority who have avoided the issue altogether. Reasons for the silence are difficult to ascertain, but some suggestions of an impressionistic nature are offered here.

First, while a growing laxity among Protestant churches could already be discerned by the late nineteenth century,<sup>26</sup> the Catholic Church remained constant in its opposition to abortion. Thus in some circles it was not altogether uncommon to regard the abortion problem as a Catholic issue.<sup>27</sup> Strong antipathy among members of Churches of Christ towards Catholics may well have resulted in diminished interest in the abortion debate. Second, many in Churches of Christ have had as much distaste for social or political problems as for Catholic issues; abortion would be seen in this light by some. Third, some may avoid speaking out against abortion for fear of either causing division or of being perceived as legalists, while being linked with extremists in the broader Christian community. Fourth, the delicate nature of the subject has likely contributed to our silence. In this connection, Gary Keener argues, "We must stop treating sexuality as a less-than-honorable topic of discussion, shying away from a frank treatment of what we view as an embarrassing and private matter."<sup>28</sup>

These four factors have contributed, in varying degrees, to ambivalence regarding abortion. One additional factor, however, deserves a more expansive treatment here—the hermeneutic concerning the silence of Scripture.

### Abortion and the Silence of Scripture

Churches of Christ have rightly accorded the witness of Scripture primary value in matters of faith. The Bible, however, does not explicitly

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<sup>26</sup> Olasky, *Abortion Rites*, 165. Olasky cites the encroachments of liberalism and the trend of accepting sin in the name of "compassion" as reasons for the demise.

<sup>27</sup> Pro-choice author Marian Faux points out that proponents of choice capitalized on anti-Catholic sentiment in Texas during the *Roe v. Wade* years. She writes, "The women were not above trading on the anti-Catholic feeling that seemed indigenous to Texas. . . . They emphasized, for example, that restrictive abortion laws seemed to support the view of one particular (unnamed) religion." *Roe v. Wade* (New York: Penguin/Mentor, 1988, 1993) 211. See also John T. Noonan, *A Private Choice: Abortion in America in the Seventies* (New York: Free Press, 1979) 54–63.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Keener, "The Abortion Ethic," *Gospel Advocate* 34 (November 1988) 19–20.

discuss the practice of abortion in any depth.<sup>29</sup> The dearth of scriptural references condemning abortion is troubling for many whose motto has been "Speak where the Bible speaks, be silent where the Bible is silent." This discomfort has promoted poor scholarship when the hermeneutic has failed to support what the instincts affirm. The result has been careless proof-texting and, on occasion, historical revisionism. For example, one writer observes:

Some might comment, "Can we really consult the Bible on such an issue? There weren't any abortions performed back in Bible days." True, *abortions were unheard of at the time* [emphasis mine, BE], yet with any relevant aspect of life, there is only one source of truth, and that is the Bible, and there is much to be said in the pages of the Holy Scriptures on this highly controverted subject.<sup>30</sup>

Abortion was, in fact, commonly practiced from the earliest days of antiquity. Assertions to the contrary stand not only in marked contrast to the historical evidence, but call into question the philosophical foundation upon which many of our arguments against abortion have been built.<sup>31</sup>

### Foundations for Opposition: Solid Rock or Sand?

The example cited above suggests that the theological and philosophical bedrock on which our opposition to abortion rests has been

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<sup>29</sup> Noonan, a prominent opponent of abortion rights, claims that "the Old Testament has nothing to say on abortion." Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History," in *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives* (ed. John T. Noonan; Cambridge: Harvard, 1970) 6. Gorman, "Why Is the New Testament Silent about Abortion?" 27-29, adds, "The 27 books of the New Testament are indisputably silent on the subject of abortion," 27. The New Testament does, however, reject evil drugs or potions (Gal 5:20; Rev 9:21; 18:23, 21:8; 22:5), which may have included abortifacients. See Lisa S. Cahill, "Abortion," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie; London: SCM, 1986) 2, and Gorman, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Bill Everett, "Abortion: What Does the Bible Say?" *Gospel Advocate* 125 (August 4, 1983) 466.

<sup>31</sup> The practice of abortion in antiquity is well documented. See John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1992) 7-10, 16-65; and Gorman, *Abortion*, 13-32, for evaluations of collected sources. Cf. Frederick W. Norris, "Abortion," in *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (ed. Everett Ferguson; New York: Garland, 1990) 4, for an overview of early Christian responses within the Greco-Roman cultural matrix.

fragile at points. These cracks in the foundation are due largely to our misuse of Scripture.

The desire to search the Scriptures for answers to life's problems honors God. Consider the case, however, of one writer who asserted that though the word *abortion* does not occur in the Bible, the Bible "has a lot to say about this subject."<sup>32</sup> Then, rather than developing the types of themes identified by Carmody and others—and from these constructing a framework from which a responsible ethic could follow—he poses a number of questions to biblical texts that would no doubt have surprised the original authors. Thus, when David declared, "Before I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me," he (was) saying that he was a person when he was conceived.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, another author reasoned:

When does a human baby receive his immortal soul (Genesis 35:18; Psalm 103:1), his undying spirit (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 12:9)? Since a baby's body is alive nine months before he is born, and since "the body without the spirit is dead" (James 2:26), it would follow that "the Lord forms the spirit in man" (Zechariah 12:1) the day he begins to live, nine months before birth.<sup>34</sup>

Opponents of choice are not the only ones who have sought too much from specific texts. John Scott argued that "the Scriptures indicate that man receives a soul when he breathes at birth," and Roy B. Ward suggested that babies are subject to protection only after birth, because the biblical definition for humanness was the ability to breathe.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Sattenfield, "Abortion—Legalized Murder," *Firm Foundation* 117 (July 29, 1975) 467.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Hugo McCord, *Gospel Advocate* 120 (March 9, 1978) 147. Likewise, Robert Redden, "Another Look at Abortion," *Firm Foundation* 92 (June 3, 1975) 342, is confident that when James 2:26 is given "due consideration, abortion will not be considered as an option for the Christian." Contrast this with the well-reasoned judgment of one physician who acknowledged that "the fact is that one cannot find a clear unequivocal indication in the scripture as to when God endows the individual with a soul." Roy Willingham, "Abortion: A Reaction," *Mission* 7 (July 1973) 14.

<sup>35</sup> For the former reference see Scott, "The Morality of Abortion," 7. The second assertion was rightly challenged by John Hannah in "The Fetus, Personhood, and the Biblical Witness," *Mission* 19 (January 1986) 13. Hannah noted that it seemed "hermeneutically illegitimate to use texts with ordinary nonscientific

One approach to Scripture which some pro-life advocates *would* appear to have something of a corner on is the ability to elevate the use of logic and syllogisms in such a way that the method of interpretation demands more attention than the content of the message. David O'Connell sets up his approach to the problem with the statement "(T)he following syllogism will prove the humanity of the fetus. . . ." After arranging his major and minor premises, he makes this observation:

(T)he above syllogism is in the logical form of *modus ponens*. Since it is in a valid form, if the premises are shown to be true, then the argument is sound. The major premise is true because the law of excluded middle for things states that everything is either H or non-H. . . . Proof will now be given for the minor premise.<sup>36</sup>

While the approaches mentioned here do not represent all writers among Churches of Christ, they have been more common than one would like to believe. As a whole, one observes the absence of prominent biblical themes, solid exegesis and careful applications to contemporary contexts. At our best, we have surfaced some Scriptures which (though taken out of context) may, by the grace of God and the power of His Spirit, provide instruction *despite* ourselves. At our worst, we have offered our people the pottage of *modus ponens* in exchange for the birthright of "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the gate."<sup>37</sup>

### An Appreciation for Complexity

Any discussion involving abortion must avoid oversimplification. Such tendencies yield superficial answers and alienate people who might be reached with more sensitive approaches.

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observations about postnatal life as the basis for judging the prenatal life in relation to the scientific details of its physiological development." Ward would be among the first to object if the Bible were pressed into scientific service on other issues.

<sup>36</sup> David O'Connell, "Abortion," *Spiritual Sword* 9 (July 1978) 20-21. See also Thomas B. Warren, "Does the Poverty of the Parents Morally Justify the Killing of Unborn Children?" *Gospel Advocate* 124 (September 1982) 517.

<sup>37</sup> Quinton Dickerson ("Abortion: Justice for the Unborn?" *Mission* 15 [April 1982] 9-15), is an exception to the rule. He reminds his readers that "in all of Scripture God is depicted as the protector of the weak, helpless, ill and poor," and he makes a reference to the early church's focus in this regard.

Some articles on complicated aspects of the abortion issue have been helpful,<sup>38</sup> while other articles have not been so helpful. Rather than examining the treatment of any one of several complicated aspects, this paper will focus on one significant subject: How do the mothers experiencing abortion figure into our literature?

Some 120 years ago a "Mrs. Burleigh" wrote an article entitled "Lost Women," which appeared in Lipscomb's *Gospel Advocate*.<sup>39</sup> Her concern for wayward women was impassioned:

A little child strays. . . . What rejoicing when it is found. . . .  
But let the child be grown to woman, let her be led by the  
scourge of want—what happens then? Do Christian men and  
women go in quest of her? . . . do they receive her with such  
kindness and delicacy as to secure her against wandering  
again? Far from it. At the first step she is denounced as lost—  
lost! echo friends and relatives—we disown you; don't ever  
come to us to disgrace us! Lost! says society, indifferently.  
How bad these girls are! . . . Ah, will not these lost ones be  
required at our hands . . . ?

What Mrs. Burleigh expressed so eloquently was the communal nature of our pilgrimage through life: We are, in some sense, our sister's keeper. An awareness of the broad range of issues associated with the abortion dilemma will not allow us to relegate the mother to secondary status. Adequate responses will address the negative effects of abortion (physical, psychological, and spiritual) on mothers and acknowledge the role others also play in decision making.

Samples from the literature concerning sensitivity towards mothers are mixed. None of the five articles which appeared in the *Spiritual Sword* from 1973 to 1986 addressed this group in any constructive way. Eighteen of the twenty-one articles on abortion which appeared in *Firm Foundation* from 1973 to 1986 showed no sensitivity to this broader issue. The plight of mothers was a peripheral issue in the three articles where any mention was made: None of the articles addressed the turmoil of mothers as a major focus.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Rubel Shelly's "A Confused View of Fetal Life" (*Firm Foundation* 98 [September 1, 1981] 552) is an excellent example.

<sup>39</sup> Burleigh, "Lost Women," *Gospel Advocate* 14 (May 9, 1872) 459–60.

<sup>40</sup> Delbert Goins, "Who Murdered Daniel?" *Firm Foundation* 96 (November 6, 1979) 712, speaks to this broader issue more than anyone else. He writes, "Another deplorable note in this pensive recrudescence is (the mother)

Articles appearing in the *Gospel Advocate* during this time period were much more balanced than those previously cited (Cf. also *Image* magazine). Five of the seventeen pieces referred to the mother with some empathy, with four of these showing more than peripheral interest (John Waddey wrote two of the five). Keener wrote passionately of our responsibility to these women:

Perhaps we have been guilty of a legalistic approach to abortion by only denouncing its immorality while failing to offer forgiveness and compassion to its victims. The church must not only stand against the violence of abortion by statement but also must minister to and stand with those who are victimized by abortion, condemning the sin while loving the sinner.<sup>41</sup>

### Supportive Contexts for Pro-Life Decisions

Keener's thoughts raise the question of how well Christians are speaking to the need for supportive contexts from which life-affirming decisions can be made. Preliminary findings indicate that the more conservative periodicals neglect this aspect, while moderates offer a healthy corrective.<sup>42</sup>

Keener builds upon the strategy of ministry touched upon previously:

Our ministry of compassion should encompass four areas, including the provision of counseling to women considering abortion, supporting and caring for those women who choose to carry their babies, providing for the support of both mother and child after delivery, and assisting parents who suffer the psychological trauma of abortion to find forgiveness and peace in Christ. . . . Our ministries have tended to focus too

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planned to carry the pregnancy full term but her reasoning became blurred by emotional pressures advanced through ungodly friends, relatives, and the unmarried father." Goins does not develop this aspect further other than to note that a preacher offered different advice which the woman did not follow, and sin "won the debate."

<sup>41</sup> Keener, "Abortion Ethic," 20. Cf. John Waddey, "Victims of Abortion," *Gospel Advocate* 130 (February 1988) 43-44, and "This I Know about Abortion," *Gospel Advocate* 122 (May 1, 1980) 272.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Chadwell, "Alternatives for Pregnant Teenagers," *Gospel Advocate* 132 (June 1990) 52-53, provides a step in the right direction.

much on increasing our numbers and not enough on helping people in need, and we must develop new . . . approaches to compassionately serve the victims of abortion. . . . A balanced approach that emphasizes support and assistance adds credibility to our statement of opposition.<sup>43</sup>

The model is well thought out and proactive, and the spirit behind it is congruent with that reflected by Mrs. Burleigh over a century ago. Our churches would do well to develop similar strategies in an effort to deal more effectively with the problem of abortion.<sup>44</sup>

### Voices of Protest

While numerous leaders have protested our silence on the abortion issue, the loudest voice may well have been that of Reuel Lemmons. Shortly after the 1973 Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, Lemmons began one of his editorial pieces in the *Firm Foundation* with the following thoughts: "While we have fought over petty little issues in the church, a moral crisis of overwhelming proportions has engulfed us. . . . We speak of abortion."<sup>45</sup> Four years after Lemmons's first editorial, he wrote a second in which he argued, "The church is not taking the strong stand that it should take" on abortion.<sup>46</sup> Three years later he asked in desperation, "How can the church be silent and live with its conscience?"<sup>47</sup>

From Lemmons's 1973 editorial down to a recent reference in the *Christian Chronicle*, several leaders have condemned our refusal to address such issues from the pulpit or in classes.<sup>48</sup> In the face of such

<sup>43</sup> Keener, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Reuel Lemmons, "To Kill or Care for," *Firm Foundation* 97 (November 25, 1980) observed that Churches of Christ "are probably doing more than most to take care of unwanted and neglected children." He was discouraged, however, by the lack of protest against the act of abortion.

<sup>45</sup> Reuel Lemmons, "Abortion and the Moral Crisis," *Firm Foundation* 97 (February 27, 1973) 130.

<sup>46</sup> Lemmons, "The Death Penalty," *Firm Foundation* 94 (November 1, 1977) 690.

<sup>47</sup> Lemmons, "Abortion," *Firm Foundation* 97 (January 15, 1980) 34. See also Lemmons's editorial, "Life Is Precious," *Image* 2 (February 15, 1986) 4.

<sup>48</sup> In "Schindler's List Delivers Message on 'Ambiguity of Good,'" *Christian Chronicle* (February 1994) 18, Ted Thomas observes that "(u)nspeakable horrors continue to plague the world, even around Christians who remain silent—silent about abortion, pornography, violence, . . ." Harley Pinon, "The

ambivalence, Keener rightly argues that the church's witness is critical. He observes, "(W)e no longer have the luxury of noninvolvement . . . our witness against abortion must be bold and definitive, . . ."<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

The findings concerning Churches of Christ and abortion, drawn from selected periodicals, demonstrate that the topic has been a matter for discussion in diverse pockets of influence. However, the treatment of this topic has been inadequate for two reasons. In the first place, the sensitivity of the subject and the understandable distaste for controversy among many have led to widespread silence on the issue. In the second place, despite the commendable attempts by others to write on the topic, most treatments have been marked by either an inadequate theological basis or the failure to acknowledge the complexity of the issue. One may hope that future studies will treat the topic with the seriousness that it deserves.

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Problem of Abortion," *Firm Foundation* 92 (July 1, 1975) 406, asks "As members of the Lord's church, where do we stand? Isn't it time that we take an open and active stand against the slaughter of the innocent unborn of our nation?" John Waddey, "Hands That Shed Innocent Blood," *Firm Foundation* 92 (December 9, 1975) 771, found it "depressing, that so few voices are heard in defense of the unborn victims of abortion . . . we see Catholics protesting. Some Baptists have begun a right-to-life movement. . . I am distressed that so few members of the Lord's church are speaking out. Are there no prophets to protest this evil?"

<sup>49</sup> Gary Keener, "The Abortion Ethic," *Gospel Advocate* 130 (November 1988) 18-19. One example of the kind of work that needs to be done involved a gathering of Abilene area Church of Christ leaders on January 16, 1986, to discuss the problem of abortion. See Lora Postelwait, "Church Leaders Discuss Abortion Issue," *Christian Chronicle* 43 (February 1986) 4, who highlights the gathering, along with activities in other parts of the country.