However you word it, abortion is taking a life.

In the English-speaking world, abortion has been allowed, virtually on demand, for about 40 years now. This has been so in Britain since 1967; in the USA since 1973; and in Australia since two court decisions – the Menhennit decision in Victoria in 1969 and the Levine decision in NSW in 1971.

These decisions have led to an horrendous number of killings of unborn children. In the USA the annual figure has usually been about 1,500,000, although it has dropped in recent years. In Britain it is about 190,000, and in Australia about 100,000, although only South Australia keeps accurate records. If unborn children are simply children who are unborn, this amounts to a wholesale slaughter of the innocents on a scale that far outweighs any barbarity perpetrated by Pharaoh and Herod (Ex. 1; Mt. 2).

We human beings, however, only do evil after first convincing ourselves that we are doing good – or at least doing something that is morally defensible. In the 1960s and 1970s it was common to hear desperate abortionists and feminists refer to the unborn child as a “protoplasmic mass”, “just a clump of cells”, “contents of the uterus”, or “foetal tissue”.

Abortion itself went by any number of euphemisms, and was called “a method of post-conceptive fertility control” or, more simply but just as deceptively, “the termination of a pregnancy”. Just as Americans through the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court in 1857 were encouraged to view slaves as chattels, so Westerners were encouraged to view unborn children as somehow not quite human. We were even treated to the verbal gymnastics whereby the unborn child was said to be human life but not a human person.

Such a conflict with reality was not destined to last, and the 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing ambiguity in the way even many so called pro-choice people came to view abortion. In 1979 Linda Bird Francke was one of the first to express some misgivings. She had aborted one of her children, but felt obliged to admit that “there was no doubt that life was right there, in my womb”. Yet she did not turn her against the practice of abortion, and she simply shrugged her shoulders with regard to the expectant mother: “Who is to say what she should or should not do?”
Australian bioethicist Leslie Cannold has also admitted that “any attempt to place a wedge somewhere in this gradual process and declare that before the wedge the foetus doesn’t matter, while after the wedge it does, is a decision that is as much a part of the sea of subjective values around abortion as any other”. Yet she too wants to continue to support the right to abortion on the somewhat bizarre-sounding ground that it is an exercise in the responsible decision to “kill from care”. Another pro-abortion writer, Janet Hadley, has said that she wants abortion to become more humanitarian.

At the same time a number of celebrities have spoken on the issue in rather confused tones. In 1995 two well-known literary figures, Naomi Wolf and Peter Carey – one female and one male – publicly expressed their regret over being involved in abortion, with Naomi Wolf even speaking of the need for some kind of atonement. In 2007 rock singer Suzi Quatro published her racy memoirs, entitled Unzipped. Here she records that in the 1960s she had an affair with a married man, and this led to her having an abortion. Her own words, both poignant and tragic, are: “When I get to those golden gates (hopefully) this is the sin I will pay for. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about who that baby would be now. Children are a gift.” Yet, she still proclaims a woman’s right to abort her child.

In recent times there have been some spectacular changes of mind on the part of some of those most involved in the abortion issue. One such example is Dr Bernard Nathanson, the New York gynaecologist who in 1969 helped to form the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws and who himself performed or supervised some 75,000 abortions. An ardent atheist at the time, he nevertheless soon came to the conclusion that the foetus is, in fact, a tiny human being, and worthy of all protection.

He has also denounced the culture of lying associated with the abortion industry. It made a habit of falsely inflating the figures for the number of illegal abortions in past ages and the number of maternal deaths resulting from abortion. In the USA it was routinely claimed that before abortion was legalised, there were about 5000 to 10,000 deaths a year due to illegal abortions. Since his change of heart on the issue, Nathanson has written: “I confess that I knew the figures were totally false, and I suppose the others did too if they stopped to think of it.” It is incontestable that the number of maternal deaths fell during the 20th century in the West not because abortion was legalised but because penicillin was discovered.

The story of Carol Everett is somewhat similar. She was involved in selling 35,000 abortions in the United States, and had one herself, and felt the pain of depression, guilt, and shame – even a sense of being raped – as well as the breakdown of her marriage. Finally, she was converted to Christ, and faced her sin honestly. Norma McCorvey too has swapped sides. She was the
Jane Roe in the Roe v. Wade case that led to the United States Supreme Court decision of January 1973 when it struck down all abortion laws in the country, and legalised the practice of killing children right up to birth.

Ms McCorvey was supposedly gang raped – but that was untrue – and in fact she never had an abortion. She was used and manipulated by celebrity proabortionists, and came to work for the Jane Roe Women’s Center in Dallas, Texas. Her experience is the human one that “it’s not an easy thing trying to confuse a conscience that will not stay dead”.

The issue of sex selection in abortion has thrown the pro-abortion movement into disarray. In India and China it has become common to abort female foetuses. If abortion is like removing a toenail, this should present no moral problem, but the fact that it kills baby girls has landed feminists in a quandary – when they think about it. Most have denounced the practice, and have been embarrassed at the implications this has for their icon, the right to abortion.

Advances in medical science have shown what Scripture always maintained, that the child in the womb is human from the day of conception. All 46 chromosomes are normally present at conception. The heart beat can be measured at about 20 days, and at six weeks brain waves can be detected. The child has all vital organs by eight weeks, and by about 12 or 13 weeks can be seen to recoil from pain or to suck his or her thumb.

The Bible views conception as a precious gift from God, the giver of life (for example Gen. 4:1, 25; 21:1ff; 25:21; 29:31-35; 30:17-24; 33:5; Deut. 7:13; 28:4; Judges 13:2-7; Ruth 4:13; 1 Sam. 1:1-20; Psa. 113:9; 127:3-5; 128:1-6; Isa. 54:1; Luke 1:24; 1 Tim. 2:15). The unborn are always treated in Scripture as human – they can move, even leap (Gen. 25: 22, Luke 1:41, 44), be consecrated in God’s service (Jer. 1: 5, Gal. 1: 15), filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1: 15), and blessed (Luke 1: 42). Furthermore, the same Greek word is used to describe the unborn John the Baptist (Luke 1: 41, 44), the newborn baby Jesus (Luke 2: 12, 16) and the young children who were brought to Jesus (Luke 18: 15). If the unborn child is not a human being, it is difficult to see how these statements could have any meaning. And it is surely significant that when the eternal Son of God became Man, He entered Mary’s womb. The incarnation, the union of the divine with the human, must be dated from the conception, not the birth, of our Lord.

That is why John Calvin wrote so vigorously against abortion: “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 a foetus in the womb before it has come
to light.” Ultimately, we are all, in the graphic words of Paul Ramsey, “fellow foetuses”.

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