

Apologia: Sanctity of Life

by Jonathan Ruehs

Introduction

My wife was beginning the second trimester of her pregnancy when we received the news. The results of the amniocentesis were in; the verdict: trisomy 21, commonly called Down Syndrome. By law her gynecologist had to ask THE question: "Do you want an abortion?" Immediately my wife responded "No!" My wife heard an audible sigh of relief come from the doctor's mouth as they spoke on the phone. The doctor then said to her, "I figured you would say that given what your husband does for a living (I was working as a parish DCE at the time), but I still needed to ask." She went on to say that having a child with Down Syndrome can be a tremendous blessing. It was in the season of advent that we received the news that our son was to be born with Down Syndrome. In April of 2003 during the season of Easter that blessed gift was born!

Societal Questions

"When is a person a person?"

This is one of the main questions behind the decision to abort or give birth. The question drives the quest to determine when "life" begins. If it can be determined (scientifically, philosophically or even theologically) that at some point in the developing process there is non-life and then there is life, it is then considered morally okay to abort that "it" in the non-life stage.

"What constitutes a 'quality' of life?"

The second question regarding whether to abort or give birth comes about when prenatal testing of one kind or another indicates that there is a potential problem with the developing child. If the child is going to be born with some deformity or disability the questions that are asked are whether it is right to bring them into the world and what quality of life that child will have? What type of life, for instance, can a person with a severe handicap have? The child whose body is curled in a deformed position, whose life is stuck in the wheelchair destined to be fed, bathed and changed by another all of their life, what kind of life is that? Again, many philosophical, scientific and theological players have jumped into the discussion in order to bring their particular answers to the questions.

Abortion and the Bible?

Many well intentioned Christians have sought to find a biblical defense for a "pro-life" stance by quoting from Exodus 21:22-25¹, which reads:

When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.²

As can be plainly seen by the context, the passage deals with premature birth not abortion. The passage is good in one sense in that it indicates that there is indeed a human person of value inside the womb. But the passage really does not address the issue of abortion. Herein lies some of the difficulties that we face when we seek to use the Scriptures like a moral encyclopedia of sorts. Again, many well intentioned Christians

¹ For instance see: <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5700>

² All quotations will come from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

view the Bible this way.³ So, of course, this leads us to the larger question of how we use Scripture as a moral guide. Martin Luther believed that Christians needed to keep the whole of Scripture in view when applying the Bible to contemporary moral situations.⁴ When we seek to look at moral situations through one part of the Bible (like the Old Testament) or one passage of Scripture (like the above referenced Exodus passage) then we miss out on what the full revelation of God has to say to us in our contemporary situation.

The Apostles' Creed

The ancient church wrote the Apostles' Creed to be a reflection of what the Apostles believed. In a short, memorable, narrative form we can see a Trinitarian overview of the primary teachings of the faith. The creed becomes an important Biblical reflection lens through which the people of God can understand their meaning and purpose in life.

First Article Foundations:

"I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."

In the Small Catechism Martin Luther comments on what the first article is all about. He states that everything that we have and everything that we are comes from God. The minutiae details of our lives from toes to noses, from running and reason is all due to our Creator.⁵ Luther also affirms that the movement of the cosmos, the motion of the planets, the flapping of wings and the beating of the heart is all continually sustained by our Father.⁶ God not only creates all things out of nothing (Gen. 1:1), but He continues to support their day to day existence (Acts 17:28). Notice how both of these components of creation come together in the creation of humans as it is written in Psalm 139:13-17:

For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

Not only does God sew us together, bringing about the very atoms that form the cells that in turn form things like eyes, ears, livers and lungs, but He also has formed time itself--the very days in which breath is breathed from our lungs and blood is pumped through our veins. God originates our very beings and sustains them through His ordained days.

³ See for instance: Elmer L. Towns, *Bible Answers for Almost All of Your Questions*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

⁴ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 30.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism with Explanation*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Second Article Story:

"And in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord..."

The creed quickly transitions from a declaration of the Father's work as Creator to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Why did the ancients seek to spend so much time on Jesus? Part one of that answer is found in the problem faced by the world...sin. God's good creation quickly goes sour as we read in Genesis 3 of how the sinister serpentine plan of Satan finds success in the falling into sin by Adam and Eve. All of the world's sin can be traced back to this historic tragic fall. Yet, a solution was already pre-planned by God as He pronounced specifically to Satan, within ear shot of Adam and Eve, that one day a Savior would come (Gen. 3:15). The second answer to why the ancients focused so much on Jesus is that He was the pre-planned solution, the Savior to come! God Himself, in Christ, would enter into the world in a very peculiar way. He would take on the cursed flesh of humanity. Although He took on human flesh, Jesus' Godhead did not disappear. As Luther points out in his comments on the second article, Jesus is both true God and true man.⁷ Luther goes on to give the reason behind Jesus' incarnational action was so that He might redeem us from the powers of sin, death and the devil all through his shed blood on Calvary's cross.⁸ Paul exclaims in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that the sinless perfect Jesus became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. The fallen creation experiences a new creation in Christ Jesus.⁹

Third Article Faith:

"I believe in the Holy Spirit..."

The ability for the second article story to become a third article faith is all due to the work of the Holy Spirit. As Paul exclaims, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit."¹⁰ As Christians we embrace the gospel story as our own when that proclaimed story is embraced by faith by the power of the Spirit. Proclamation and conversion, therefore, are works of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Through Baptism we are born anew into God's story in Christ Jesus. The gospel story becomes our own when our old story is drowned in the baptismal waters and a new story comes into our lives through the power of the indwelling Spirit.¹¹ The transformation that began in conversion and in Baptism is an ongoing transformation that continues through eternity. As Luther remarks, the Holy Spirit continually works to keep us in the one true faith.¹²

Application

"When is a person a person?"

Does life begin at conception? From a biblical perspective we can say an emphatic "Yes!" When we look at God's creation we can see that life comes in all different forms. Although plants don't have eyes, ears, can talk or breathe like we do, we still state that they are living organisms. Of course the nature of this life is indeed of a significant difference than the life of a human. Yet we can affirm with the first article of the creed that God is the Creator of all life!

In many respects, maybe the question, especially when the non-Christian is involved, should not be when life begins, but what does that cellular development, which begins at conception, produce? Sure, at an earlier cellular stage that fertilized egg might not look like much, but in a short period of time we can begin to see the person grow and develop more easily recognizable features. Even from an experiential point of view, parents who have a miscarriage (even in the earliest stages of the pregnancy) still feel a sense of loss over a life that was never to come about through birth. Although the Christian answer concerning when life begins may not satisfy the non-believer, it is still important to point out that anything that is made by God is

⁷ Luther, 14

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:3

¹¹ Romans 6:1-11

¹² Luther, 15

good and therefore should not be considered as something to throw away. Even through the second article story we should view the womb differently. In order to become fully human Jesus went through the prenatal stages of development on through the process of birth. Although we see the climax of the redemption story in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we need to understand that you cannot have either a Good Friday or Easter Sunday without a Christmas day. In this respect, all of Jesus' life, even his prenatal journey, can be viewed as being redemptive in nature ultimately culminating in the new birth from the womb of the tomb on Easter morning.

"What constitutes a 'quality' of life?"

When it comes to answering the "quality of life" question for most people the answer is subjective in nature. Although they believe they are making some sort of objective argument, and quite possibly appealing to some universal law, the reality is that the answer they give is born out of their own personal belief. The answer they give usually focuses on whether the person with the handicap will be able to support themselves financially, physically, emotionally and the like. Why is it that the "quality of life" answer is based upon whether that person can support themselves in the various ways mentioned above? Again the arbiter of truth in this matter is not some sort of outside source or authority; rather the arbiter is the individual. What needs to be gently pointed out to people is that what they determine as a "quality of life" is not necessarily what others agree to. Who am I to say that an adult with a severe handicap does not have a quality of life even if they don't have much mobility, don't have much in the way of mental faculties or who will always need someone to take care of them?

It is through a third article perspective that an objective answer to the "quality of life" question is given. The image of infant Baptism can be of great help in this matter. We know that God does all the work in our Baptism. The tiny baby brought to the font is helpless in their actions. Working through the water and the Word of God the Holy Spirit creates a new life of grace. The Old Adam story of sin, suffering and death is replaced with the New Adam story of forgiveness, hope and eternal life. Even a severely disabled infant who may never be able to profess with their lips--as an adult for instance--a confession of faith in Christ is not doomed to eternal damnation. Again it is God's work, God's grace that is creating a new creature in the birthing waters of Baptism and continues to sustain that new life until they are brought to their eternal home.