
Sanctity of Human Life

Including Abortion and Euthanasia

This statement on Assemblies of God perspectives on the sanctity of human life was adopted by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in 2002.

The Assemblies of God bases its understanding of the nature of human beings on the Bible, which reveals that God created the universe, the world, and all living things (Genesis 1:1; 1:11; 1:21; 1:25). Humans are the highest form of God's creative activity, and He is intentional in both their creation and destiny. "Let us make man in our image.'...So God created man in his own image, ...male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). "[T]he Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).¹

By making human beings in his own image, God set them above all other forms of life on earth. The "image of God," requiring both sexes for full expression, signifies that men and women are personal and spiritual beings, both rational and relational, intended for eternal fellowship with their personal Creator. Though marred when the first human pair fell into sin (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12), the image of God is still intrinsic to human nature (Genesis 9:6), insuring that men and women are capable of response to their Maker. Creation in the divine image is not only an expression of the incalculable value God places upon human life, it also signifies that God has sovereign power over life. He is both giver and sustainer of life; He alone has the power to determine its beginning and ending.²

The nobility of human beings is seen in the divine mandate: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). Superior to all other life forms, humans are to assume the role of responsible custodians of the earth.

Every human life, from conception through death, is therefore to be valued, respected, nurtured, and protected. Every human life is to be lived in obedience to God and His Word. The Bible describes a moral order to which all persons are responsible. At the end of life, all persons will stand before God to give account for their actions. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Therefore, human beings are responsible to bring the light of God's Word to decisions that bear on the sanctity of life. To this end, the Assemblies of God offers the following biblical perspectives:

The Beginning of Life

Contraception. The Assemblies of God, finding no clear scriptural mandate, does not take an official stand on the appropriateness of contraception within a heterosexual marriage for purposes of regulating the number of children, determining the time of their birth, or safeguarding the health of the mother. These are matters of personal conscience as godly

spouses prayerfully covenant with God about the growth of their families. While there are important ethical issues in determining to have a family, the prevention of pregnancy is understood to be qualitatively different from the termination of pregnancy since the sperm has not fertilized the ovum and human life has not yet begun. The biological processes themselves teach us that in God's creative design not every sperm or ovum is intended to survive and unite. It should be remembered, however, that some methods commonly regarded as contraception, such as the IUD and the morning-after pill, are actually abortifacients that terminate rather than prevent pregnancy.

The Bible teaches that in the institution of marriage, children are divinely ordered both to fulfill God's divine purposes for the race and for the repopulation of the earth. The mandate to the first pair was, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Throughout Scripture, children are regarded as God's gift: "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). There are certain circumstances where couples may choose not to have children for very good reasons. However, the use of contraception merely to avoid the demands of child rearing ought to be prayerfully examined in terms of the purity of one's motives and the personal implications of the divine mandate.

In Vitro Fertilization. From a study of the Scriptures, God's plan for human conception is sexual union between a man and woman in a legal marriage covenant. Children of such a covenant ought to be the result of a joyous and loving sexual relationship in which the husband and wife are responsible for birthing and rearing godly offspring. However, infertile heterosexual couples who have pursued without success all viable treatments may be confronted with a decision to utilize in vitro fertilization. There are numerous ethical issues to be evaluated in such a process, including the financial costs, the harvesting of sperms and ova, and the nurturing of multiple living human embryos, not all of which likely will be implanted in the uterus. The disposal of unused embryos is an acute ethical issue since they represent the beginning of human life. There may also be serious danger to the life of the mother in the event that multiple babies survive to full term and the abortion of one or more of them may be required. Before considering in vitro fertilization, careful and prayerful attention, with knowledgeable and godly counsel, must be given to all such issues, and believers must responsibly make decisions in good conscience with the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Reproductive Cloning. The Assemblies of God believes that reproductive cloning is immoral and a matter of grave concern. In the cloning process, the person is not conceived from the union of the father's sperm and the mother's ovum. The genetic material is drawn from only one person and manipulated in the laboratory before implantation in the "rented" womb of a cooperating female. Therefore, a cloned person cannot have both father and mother in the genetic sense. Moreover, there are serious questions about family identification, bonding, and nurture as well as personal identity for a person who is a genetic copy of another. There are also grave physical risks for persons who may be cloned. The cloning of animals has demonstrated the potential for birth defects and premature aging. Scientists have no way of knowing what type of horrors may be visited upon cloned individuals or upon humankind at large through such a process.

Abortion. The Assemblies of God views the practice of abortion as an evil that has been inflicted upon millions of innocent babies and that will threaten millions more in the years

to come. Abortion is a morally unacceptable alternative for birth control, population control, sex selection, and elimination of the physically and mentally handicapped. Certain parts of the world are already experiencing serious population imbalances as a result of the systematic abortion of female babies. The advocacy and practice of so-called partial birth abortion of babies is particularly heinous.

Sexual responsibility. Contemporary demands for abortion often flow from the practice of sexual freedom without corresponding responsibility. The Scriptures speak definitively against pre-marital and extra-marital sexual intercourse and declare such activity to be sinful (Exodus 22:16; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 6:9, 13, 18; Galatians 5:19). To add abortion as an after-the-fact birth control device is to deepen and compound the sin with resultant guilt and emotional distress. The Assemblies of God affirms the biblical mandate for sexual purity and responsibility that, when obeyed, will eliminate many, if not most, situations where abortion is considered necessary or desirable.

The personhood of the unborn. The Scriptures regularly treat the unborn child as a person under the care of God.

1. The Bible recognizes that a woman is with child even in the first stages of pregnancy. When the virgin Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, an angel made this announcement to her: “[Y]ou will conceive in your womb and bear a son (huios)” (Luke 1:31, NASB). The angel then informed Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant: “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child (huios, “son”) in her old age” (Luke 1:36). Scripture makes it clear that in the prenatal phase both Jesus and John the Baptist were recognized as males well before the time of delivery. Moreover, John before birth is recognized as a “baby” (brephos) (Luke 1:41, 44). This translates a Greek word used for children both before and after birth (cf. Acts 7:19). The Bible always recognizes the prenatal phase of life as that of a child and not a mere appendage to the mother’s body to be aborted at will.

Even when pregnancy in Bible times was due to an illicit relationship, the sanctity and value of that life was not questioned. The daughters of Lot willfully became pregnant by incestuous relationships (Genesis 19:36), and Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon after an adulterous relationship initiated by King David (2 Samuel 11:5). In none of these cases are the lives of the unborn considered to be unworthy and requiring an abortion.

2. The Bible recognizes that God is active in the creative process of forming new life. Concerning Leah, the wife of Jacob, Scripture says, “When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb.... Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son” (Genesis 29:31, 32). When Job compared himself to his servants, he asked, “Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?” (Job 31:15). In pointing out God’s impartiality, Job said He “ ‘shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands’ ” (Job 34:19).

God spoke through Isaiah: “ ‘This is what the Lord says—he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant’ ” (Isaiah 44:2). And again, “ ‘This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things’ ” (v. 24).

David summed it up, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:13-16).

3. The Bible recognizes that God has plans for the unborn child. Only He knows the potential of this new life. When God called Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry, He indicated the ordination was prenatal when He said: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). When Zechariah the priest was ministering at the altar of incense, an angel announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son who should be called John. Then it was revealed that God had definite plans for this child. He was to be a forerunner of Jesus (Luke 1:11-17).

4. The Bible recognizes that God is sovereign in all things, including the quality of life of the unborn child. When people reject God, eventually they cheapen human life and make it relative. Some are considered worthy to live; others are considered expendable. Who but God knows whether someone destroyed in the holocaust might not have discovered a cure for cancer. Who but God knows what blessing millions of children killed before birth might have brought to improve the quality of life. When people set themselves up as God to determine if a life is worth living—whether before or after birth—they are usurping the sovereignty of the Creator.

There are also things finite humans cannot understand. God’s ways are above human ways. While today’s medical technology frequently makes it possible to know when impairment exists in unborn children, it is important to remember they are still in God’s love and care (Matthew 19:14-15).

The killing of innocent persons. God’s Word is very explicit concerning the taking of innocent human life. “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) is not only one of the Ten Commandments, but also a moral imperative that recurs throughout Scripture (cf. Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9).

God inspired Moses to include in the Scriptures a law that brings the sanctity of the lives of unborn children into focus. “If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Exodus 21:22-24).

It should be noted that the value of the life of both the mother and the child is such that even if there is no critical and lasting harm to either, the responsible party must be fined. However, if either the mother or the premature child is seriously injured or dies, then the severe penalties of the law are to be applied, possibly in this case those having to do with manslaughter (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:22-25). It is clear that the life of the unborn child is precious, and even a non-premeditated injury inflicted on the unborn is a serious crime.

God's attitude toward the killing of innocents is clear. No one is guiltless who takes the life of another, with the possible scriptural exceptions of capital punishment administered by a system of justice (Genesis 9:6; Numbers 35:12), unintended killing in self-defense (Exodus 22:2), or deaths occasioned by duly constituted police and war powers (Romans 13:4-5).

John Calvin expressed the horror of abortion in commenting on Exodus 21:22,23: "The fetus, though enclosed in the womb of his mother, is already a human being, and it is a monstrous crime to rob it of life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. 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 fetus in the womb before it has come to light."³

Danger to the life of the mother. Those situations in which pregnancy seriously threatens the life of the mother raise a particular ethical dilemma for Christians who value the lives of both mother and child. If responsible diagnoses confirm that childbirth is likely to result in the death of the mother, historic Christian faith usually has favored the life of the mother above that of the unborn child since the mother is a mature person with established family and societal relationships and responsibilities. However, vague threats to the mother's physical or emotional health must not become an excuse to place the child at risk. Any intervention required must have the intent of saving the mother's life, not the prior intent of causing death to the child. As in any emergency, in such times God's children ought to fervently and earnestly pray for divine intervention. In doing so, the persons involved must prayerfully evaluate the medical diagnoses with the assistance of humane physicians and godly leaders and make, responsibly and with a clear conscience, what may well be a very painful decision.

The emotional and spiritual toll. The abortion industry rarely advises pregnant women of the potential impact of abortion on their spiritual and mental health. Desperate women who find themselves in an acutely embarrassing or inconvenient position because of an illicit affair or an unplanned pregnancy, and who are often coerced by selfish lovers and/or embarrassed families, are led to see abortion as a "quick fix." Nothing could be further from the truth. Women are usually unaware of the depression, guilt, and shame that may plague them for a lifetime. While God can and does forgive and heal the broken hearts of repentant sinners who come to Him for forgiveness, the actual deed can never be undone and probably will always be remembered with pain and regret.

The End of Life

Natural Death. The Scriptures recognize that death is the result of human sin (Genesis 3:2, 19; Romans 5:12) and comes eventually to all—except those believers alive at the coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Hebrews 9:27 clearly states death is an appointment. It is beyond the purview of human beings to schedule that appointment. Christians regard death as the "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26), to be finally destroyed in the eschatological reign of the resurrected Lord Jesus. It is therefore not a "friend" to be sought and embraced, but it is nonetheless to be regarded as the final passage to glorious life with God. "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Corinthians 5:1).

Families facing the impending death of a loved one and the frequent question of mechanical life support are encouraged to carry out the wishes of their loved one. However, in the absence of such knowledge, believers are encouraged to consider the guidance of Christian medical professionals and godly leaders, and prayerfully seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit for a decision that will leave them with a clear conscience. The Assemblies of God respects the conscience of individual believers in these circumstances but does not find a biblical mandate for indefinite and artificial perpetuation of life in cases of persistent vegetative state or the prolonged cessation of biological function. In the providence of God, there is a time to release persons to go to Him.

Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide .The Assemblies of God condemns as immoral the killing of the weak, the physically challenged, the mentally ill, or the aged, whether by a deliberate act or by coercing or assisting a person to commit suicide.⁴ God is both the giver of life and the arbiter of life. Fully informed and freely chosen suicide is the final usurpation of the divine prerogative. Humans are not empowered to take their own lives or the lives of others.⁵ The sick and the weak must not be made to feel that they are a burden and have a moral obligation to relieve society of that burden. Their depression and illnesses often bring severe emotional and physical pain and raise serious questions about their ability to freely choose suicide. It should be remembered that many suicides occur in times of deep depression and great physical pain, when personal judgment and responsibility are seriously impaired. The Assemblies of God does not assume that all such persons are eternally lost.

Biomedical Research

The Assemblies of God affirms and encourages reverent and responsible scientific research intended to enhance the health and well-being of persons created in the image of God. Christian faith is not to be interpreted in ways that needlessly hinder greater understanding of the human body and the discovery of cures for and prevention of dreaded diseases and defects. However, there are many temptations to pursue the life sciences for ignoble reasons. Therefore, all biomedical research should be monitored and regulated so as to insure respect for the sanctity of human life and the essential dignity of human beings who are created in the image of God. All researchers are finally answerable to God.

Stem Cell Research. Stem cell research shows great promise for the cure of numerous diseases and should proceed under appropriate ethical guidelines regularly reviewed and revised. There are stem cells available for research from legitimate sources that do not compromise the sanctity of human life. The practice of cultivating stem cells from the tissue of aborted fetuses perpetuates the evil of abortion and should be prohibited. Likewise, the cultivation of stem cells from the “left-over” embryos from fertility clinics raises serious ethical concerns for human life. Great care must always be exercised in the cultivation of stem cells to insure that the sanctity and dignity of human life are not compromised.

Genetic Intervention. The Assemblies of God is supportive of morally responsible genetic research and therapies. Genetic research conducted with reverence for life appears to have great potential for the health of human beings through the identification of and intervention in the genetic roots of hundreds of diseases. By the same token, used for proud and selfish ends, genetic screening and intervention also have the potential to bring great harm to the entire human race. In addition, the Assemblies of God believes legislation is necessary to

prevent intrusive genetic screening and resultant discrimination as well as misguided experimentation and termination of life.

Christian Action

Whenever abortion and other immoral life-threatening practices present themselves, Christians have an obligation to address these evils in public forums and to seek legislative and judicial redress. Among the steps Christians should take are the following:

1. Christians should pray earnestly for God's intervention and the wisdom and resolve to resist the degradation of human life, whether by abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, or questionable biomedical research and experimentation.
2. Christians should provide biblical moral instruction in their homes and all possible public forums. The church, rooted in the eternal truths of God's Word, should seek to lift the standards of society by overcoming evil with good.
3. Christians should actively support candidates who embrace the sanctity of life and should lobby on behalf of legislation to protect the unborn, the handicapped, and the aged, all of whom are endangered by a societal cheapening of life.
4. Christians should work through legislative and governmental agencies to insure appropriate ethical review of all biomedical research and to impose constraints on that which is evil or misguided.
5. Christians should counsel those with unwanted pregnancies about alternatives to abortion, such as adoption. They should generously support responsible Christian adoption agencies with their prayers, finances, and time as well as facilitate placement of unwanted babies in loving Christian homes.
6. Christians should compassionately minister to those who suffer remorse and guilt from having had abortions, or participated in abortions and other life-destroying activity or research, reminding them of these words of Jesus: "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

Renunciation of Violence

Current laws virtually permit abortion-on-demand, at least in the early trimesters of pregnancy and, in some places, provide for other practices, as assisted suicide, that destroy or endanger lives created in God's image. The Assemblies of God strongly believes such laws are immoral and contravene the law of God. Every legal means should be employed to reverse the effects of these laws and dismantle the immoral industries they spawn. At the same time, it should be remembered that the law only permits these evils. No one is required to participate in the destruction of life. Certain people freely choose to do so for reasons of their own convenience, and they possess certain legal rights that Christians may not abridge. While abhorring immoral laws that permit and protect the destruction of life, the Assemblies of God also denounces violent, lawless, and cruel actions against both the purveyors and the participants in these life-destroying acts, sometimes carried out by people

claiming to be Christians. Christians in their quest to save life must not compound evil by harming or taking life.

Conclusion

The Bible teaches that every human being is loved by the Creator, who longs to bring each one into fellowship with himself. All persons must finally give account to Him for any actions that rob others of life, health, or dignity. With these eternal issues in view, the Assemblies of God intends to be both a witness to the truth of Christ and a healing and redemptive agency to assist, through its numerous Christian ministries, those who may be caught in these dilemmas.

Notes

¹ All biblical citations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).

² The Bible does provide precedents for justly administered death sentences for capital crimes as well as for the exercise of self defense and duly constituted police and war powers (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 22:2; Numbers 35:12; Romans 13:4–5).

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, trans. Charles William Bingham, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1950), 3:41–42.

⁴ For a more extensive statement, see the Assemblies of God position paper “A Biblical Perspective on Assisted Suicide.”

⁵ See note 2.

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