

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
26 May 2012

Abortion and the Ethical Slippery Slope

Several years ago (2001), Robert P. George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, published his important work, *The Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion, and Morality in Crisis*. He argues that on every issue of law pertaining to public morality, from abortion and stem cell research to pornography and gay marriage, reason itself is on the side of the Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. He writes: “If we lay aside all of the rhetorical grandstanding and obviously fallacious arguments, questions of abortion, infanticide, suicide, and euthanasia turn on the question of whether life is intrinsically good, as Judaism and Christianity teach, or merely instrumentally good, as orthodox secularists believe.” The value of human beings does not hinge on what they are capable of or what the “quality” of those lives might be. What George also demonstrates is the slippery slope nature of the abortion issue. If we devalue life in the womb, it leads to the broader devaluing of life outside the womb. Abortion also has profound implications for so many other things in our culture. Joel Belz has pointed out that the [now 50]-million people who have been killed through abortion since *Roe v. Wade* (1973) is related to the Social Security crisis in America and the steady stream of immigrants pouring into America to meet our job needs. Several important thoughts on abortion and the slippery slope of unintended consequences:

- First, consider the matter of genetic testing. Prenatal testing makes it now possible to identify children in the womb who will have mental retardation, deafness, early-onset Alzheimer’s disease and a range of other conditions. Once the testing is complete, women are then given the opportunity to decide: If the quality of life is not what the parents want, abortion gives them the opportunity to kill that child in the womb. In an important article on the connection between genetic testing and abortion, Amy Harmon writes: “Abortion rights supporters who believe that a woman has the right to make decisions about her own body—have had to grapple with the reality that the right to choose may well be used selectively to abort fetuses deemed genetically undesirable. And many are finding that, while they support a woman’s right to have an abortion if she does not want to have a baby, they are less comfortable when abortion is used by women who don’t want to have a particular baby.” As a civilization, how much choice do we give women? For those who are pro-abortion, this matter of choice is posing profound ethical challenges. For the intellectually honest, the growing use of prenatal testing and the availability of abortion push civilization to conclude that we are really talking about a form of eugenics. Children in the womb are being selectively targeted for death because of some defect that prenatal testing has discovered. Further, those who lead the American Association of People With Disabilities (AAPWD) are upset with the ethical tension prenatal testing is producing. Listen to Andrew Imperato, President of the AAPWD: “If the response is simply, ‘You all are just anti-women’s-right-to-choose,’ I

think that misses some of the important disabilities rights issues that are being raised.” Ethically, the issue is now how does American civilization reconcile protecting abortion rights “with a democratic imperative to embrace human diversity.” Indeed, Planned Parenthood often lobbies state legislatures that seek to restrict abortion rights to insure that women must always be able to have abortions if they learn that their child will have a disability. Modern pluralism embraces the virtue of the tolerance of human differences. Diversity is the core value of this postmodern, pluralistic culture. But prenatal testing combined with abortion is challenging the tolerance of human diversity. Two core values of modern day liberalism and postmodernism are on a massive collision course—human diversity and the autonomy of the individual; in this case the right of a woman to have an abortion. But when push comes to shove, women choose abortions once they know of a disability in their children. For example, as Harmon points out in her article, “about 90% of women who learn they are carrying a fetus with the extra 21st chromosome that causes Down syndrome choose an abortion. Studies have shown that many women choose to abort for diagnoses of less serious conditions. And a greater number of fertile couples are using in vitro fertilization to gain greater control over the genetic makeup of their children. Under a procedure known as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, doctors screen embryos for a high risk of developing breast cancer or arthritis, and implant only embryos with the desired genetic makeup.” No matter how you consider this, such practices are close to eugenics. If this kind of testing extends to intelligence, gender selection or to sexuality, what will the civilization do then? Will we actually empower parents to select their children even at these levels? Consumer rights now extend to how we select our children!! It is becoming, potentially, the ultimate shopping experience! How will we draw the line as a civilization? Permit some prenatal tests but not others? Even pro-abortion reproductive health clinics are finding it impossible to decide where the line is. Indeed, Kirsten Moore, president of one of these groups, recently said that “when members of [her] staff recently discussed whether to recommend that any prenatal tests be banned, they found it impossible to draw the line—even at sex selection, which almost all found morally repugnant.” The rhetoric of “choice” is posing increasingly difficult ethical tension for the pro-abortion movement. Are there no limits to “choice?” Is the individual totally autonomous? Quite honestly, is it not much easier and wiser to embrace the ethical standard of the sanctity of human life, at all stages of development? The sanctity of life begins with the proposition that life bears God’s image and is of worth and value no matter what the quality of life. When you combine prenatal, genetic testing with abortion, we are dangerously close, as a civilization, to embracing a form of eugenics. This is ethically offensive and repugnant and it must be rejected. The only safe and ethically sound standard is to affirm the infinite worth and value of all human life, even the life in the womb, no matter what its “quality.”

- Second, consider a 2007 episode on the popular medical drama, *House*. Dr. House, the lead figure of the drama, is an avowed atheist and an abrasive one at that. The scene was of a pregnant woman, fighting for her life. One female doctor on the program keeps using the term “baby” to describe her unborn child, while House insists on using the term “fetus.” The mother refused to have an abortion, even though many of the medical professionals on the program urged her to do so. Only the female doctor who used the term “baby,” resisted. Dr. House performed the surgery to save her life and as he worked

on her uterus, a tiny hand emerged and took his finger. House saved her life and that of her child. Chuck Colson wrote of the program: “Even pro-choicers have marveled over the powerful moment on *House*. People who never thought twice about abortion will remember Dr. House telling his patient, ‘Don’t thank me, I would have killed the kid’—the word ‘fetus’ now disappearing from his vocabulary. People who would never listen to a sermon will remember the image of the unsentimental, rationalist, pro-choice doctor sitting alone, thoughtfully rubbing his fingers together where the little hand had touched them.” The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians (5:7-14) that we are to be “children of the light” exposing the darkness that is all around us. Well, the light of truth is exposing the evil darkness of abortion.

See “Breakpoint” (11 April 2007); Amy Harmon, “Week in Review” in the *New York Times* (13 May 2007); and Joel Belz, *World* (21 April 2007), p. 6.