

Brave Church/Hard Topics, 5/17/2023: Abortion – History and Religious Background

This is the chat log of the discussion. Names and identifiable information have been removed for privacy. References to slides for this session can be found in the *BC-HT Abortion Pt 2 – 05-17-23.pdf* document linked [Brave Church-Hard Topics web page](#).

Additional information added after the discussion are identified with “NOTE:”

History & Law (slides 5-12)

Discussion Qs (slide 13)

What do you think has caused a change in the church and society’s approach to abortion over history?

Does knowing more about the history change any of your understanding?

Responses:

Changes my thoughts about how available abortion was prior. History suggests it was a male-led campaign that ended the safe abortion practices for women. We can agree that abortion is tragic, but in some cases other outcomes may be more tragic. May be black/white in some instances, but for many women it is a gray area.

Seems like the rise of abortion as a crime coincided with women seeking vote.

Fascinated at attempt to suppress women - knew it was a thing but very eye-opening.

Surprised how far back abortion practices went.

Surprised by how common abortion was, the different medical options that were available and how it seemed to increase in frequency over time.

What was going on in the background as these changes came about?

Women’s voting rights in 1840s on. Also going on was rise in Women’s Temperance Movement. Early industrialization. Drinking was a common problem and brutality.

There’s a significant intersection with racism: increase in abortions to control family size in early 1800s was mostly white women. In contrast, abortions varied by race. Native Americans didn’t have access to contraceptives, abortion, but were subjected to sterilization.

A lot of early limiting population was geared toward limiting population of non-whites: forced sterilization of Native Americans, formerly-enslaved populations. A lot was related to eugenics. The laws not only who had access to abortions, but who make the choice for them.

One reason abortion is trying to be banned now is a drive to increase white population by limiting the number of abortions among white people because of concerns of growing minorities.

What Does Religion Say? (Slides 14-20)

Discussion Qs (Slide 21)

What scriptures, biblical principles, or beliefs do you find most relevant to the conversation?

How can you appeal to the Bible to find common ground with Christians who hold different views?

How should churches seek to reconcile the diversity of viewpoints within their body?

Responses:

Had a friend struggling with this because attending a conservative church that said all abortion was a sin. She had had an abortion as a student and now this church considered her a sinner. Response: Do you not think God knows how much you struggled?

Grace and forgiveness comes from God. No one but God can understand the struggles.

Question on slide 18 about male masturbation sometimes called homicide. Is this in the Bible?

The story of Onan in the Old Testament talks about masturbation being a sin. It is interpreted as forbidding males from spilling seed on ground.

If you believe most theology around the Onan passage – he was struck down because he was supposed to have relations with brother's widow (to provide her with a son who would support her in her old age) and not because of masturbation.

This relates back to a common belief in those times that the sperm was entirely responsible for the baby.

Hundreds of years ago it was considered that masturbation meant the killing of sperm that considerably was creating a human being.

Personal theological belief: opposed to inerrant scripture. However, I take an inerrant view of Genesis 2:7, in which the God-created human becomes a living being when it receives the breath of life.

People with contradictory positions on abortion believe their positions are rooted in biblical principles, and this is an issue in which we need to rely on wisdom and humility in discerning what to do. What I'm left with goes back to the greatest commandments and the rule of love: Is an outright ban on abortion the only way to reduce the number of abortions in this country? The reality is that, even when abortions were illegal, they still happened – those with money found medical ways of getting abortions; those who were poorer were often left with less sanitary/safe ways of obtaining abortions. As people of faith, are there other options we can/should promote to reduce the number/rates of abortions? This kind of builds on the questions about whether prohibitions on abortion are rooted in a failure to trust women to make their choices. In my view, lack of trust is part of it. Dualistic black/white, good/bad thinking and a lack of a broader perspective on ways to address the problem are also drivers, perhaps bigger ones.

Easy to take a position when it's theoretical. Different when it hits personally.

Many of those who are adamantly antiabortion don't want to support prenatal care, postnatal care social network safeguards [at least supported by taxes].

Its important that we remember that it takes 2 people to make a baby. We focus a lot on what's going on with women and what they should/shouldn't be doing. We don't focus on the other side of the equation. One of the other things that might reduce abortion could be dealing with societal expectations about sex, what's appropriate and what's not. Abortion is not the place where the problem begins. It begins much further back.

With the end of Roe and abortions getting more difficult to obtain, I hear there has been an increase in men getting vasectomies.

What Does the Presbyterian Church Say? (Slides 22-33)

Discussion Qs (Slide 34)

Were you aware of the changes in the tenets of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) regarding the issue of abortion since 1962?

How do you interpret the various statements of PCUSA over the last 65 years?

What do you see as the major changes to policy recommendations throughout the years?

Responses:

Was not aware of it - appreciate hearing it.

PCUSA didn't form until 1983. Earlier actions happened before PCUSA formed.

I appreciate that the Presbyterian position wasn't an easy one to make and evolved with a lot of tension among different perspectives (perhaps representing a way in which people of faith can wrestle with hard topics). I personally don't think an outright ban on abortion accomplishes what people think it does and I don't think it's the best or only way to reduce the number of abortions in this country. As PCUSA indicates, it should be a last resort but it should be available.

While I'm strongly pro-choice and think decision should be by the woman, also appreciate PC holding up adoption as an alternative to abortion.

Appreciate that statements of PC give full autonomy to woman's ability to determine what's best for her. Acknowledging full agency of womanhood, which seems to be missing in some of the debate about this topic.

With reference to the development of advances in genetics, it is possible to know the baby's gender by 10 weeks gestation. There is no way to know the number of pregnancies aborted because the baby would not be the desired gender. However, this reality is never mentioned.

Look at the present situation in this country, where the state is sticking their oars into something where they have no medical knowledge, trying to make decisions for women. This is a moral issue and agree there is a role for the church.

There's an article in today's Washington Post about medical complications from abortion bans.

It's not a black/white situation. Only 6 countries in world allow abortion up to full term, US is one of them. Believe there needs to be some limitations. Maybe some parameters. Point made that when you're in that situation, your thinking can change. It's not one way or the other.

Thought Roe v Wade had 20-week limit on abortion?

Some states have 0 limits. More states have adopted recent limits.

No term limit – believe it relates only to when life of the mother is involved.

Very strongly pro-adoption

Most on pro-choice side do not discount adoption as a viable alternative

At some point as daughter approached early teens, was in discussion with a friend – held to principle that what teenage daughter could do (her body, her decision). Have a problem with that. Somewhere in there, both parties need to be part of conversation.

Respectfully disagree that male involved always has say in the matter. If woman has been raped, victim of incest, or of abuse, male should not have say. In order for human beings to be whole human beings, they have to have agency to make these medical decisions.

Appreciate that PC church as an organization is looking at the nuance in situation that calls for the decision. Also appreciate the nuance within this group. I don't know if we're ready as a society to deal with abortion in anything but in broad terms. We can't figure out how to deal with children, love them, feed them, deal with them as a society. As a church, helping individuals in this situation is important – how to work it through in their own lives, but give them the tools/support to go forward. We need to love them no matter what they do. Don't think the state should not force a person to have a child. We need to compromise in the meantime.

Compromise, options are way to go. The problem is if the law forces one thing, then compromise/options aren't possible.

Strongly support planned parenthood so people can obtain birth control so they don't have to face unwanted pregnancy and decision of abortion. One of things we can encourage is making sure people have access to birth control so there isn't the conception of a child who is not wanted and can be provided for.

My bias is toward children. If you're going to have a child, you need to be able to take care of them. Need to have the time as well. And if you have a child with a significant disability, then it's even worse. Important to commit to children so they can have a chance in the world.

The FDA is considering approving an over the counter oral contraceptive. This would go very far in improving access to contraception. And the fact is in many countries birth control pills are available without prescription.