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THE STATUS OF THE UNBORN AND THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST ABORTION GUIDELINES

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1. Introduction

Abortion is a sensitive moral issue that has long confronted the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. Generally, as a church, our attitude towards abortion is not very far from that of most evangelical Christians.¹

Perhaps, due to the perceived complexities involved in the abortion debate, unfortunately, even until now the SDA Church does not have an official statement on the issue of abortion; rather, the Church has formulated guidelines regarding the subject² and left it to personal conscience.³

¹ I subscribe to Paul B. Fowler's observation when he wrote that, "Most evangelical Christians agree, at least on the surface, that abortion is wrong; few would put themselves entirely in the pro-choice camp by approving abortion-on-demand. But evangelicals still disagree about circumstances under which abortion is deemed justifiable or not justifiable." Paul B. Fowler, *Abortion: Toward an Evangelical Consensus* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987), 95. Early Adventist periodicals call abortion as "murder." See J. Robert Spangler, "Reflections on Adventists and Abortion," *Ministry* 61.1 (1988): 17.

² George B. Gainer had it absolutely right when he stated that even though the Adventist Church has no official statement on abortion, it does not absolve itself with the "moral implications regarding the practice of abortion." George B. Gainer, "Abortion: History of Adventist Guidelines," *Ministry* 64.8 (1991): 11.

³ See the official statements on abortion in "Guidelines on Abortion," in *Statements, Guidelines & Other Documents*, ed. Rajmund Dabrowski, 4th expanded ed. (Review and Herald, 2010), 134-137, <http://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/Statements-2010-english.pdf>. These guidelines were approved and voted by the General Conference (GC) of SDA Executive Committee at the Annual Council session in Silver Spring, Maryland, on October 12, 1992. Adventists consider that abortion has a great moral consequence; therefore, "prenatal life must not be thoughtlessly destroyed." p. 134.

Moreover, the paucity of explicit Scriptural references that relate to abortion might have led church leaders to take a fragmented stand on the issue.

Consequently, the church's ambivalence to the issue might have led church members to hold differing views regarding the topic of abortion. If the Church truly considers that "abortion is never an action of little moral consequence,"⁴ then, more study is needed to come up to an official statement that could guide the Church on the issue of abortion.

What are the biblical principles and scientific facts that can guide the Church to arrive to a more definitive stand on the moral issue of abortion? With this question in mind, this paper attempts to revisit the Adventist guidelines on abortion in relation to the moral status of the unborn.

To attain this objective this study looks into biblical as well as scientific facts that talk about the moral value of the unborn. Moreover, this study takes the presupposition that the unborn is fully human from the point of conception.

In 1970 and 1971, the Church published "Abortion Guidelines for Adventist Medical Institutions."⁵ These guidelines were recommended for "therapeutic abortions," for the Church rejects abortion on demand. For a comparison, the 1970 and 1971 guidelines are presented below.

2. 1970 Abortion Guidelines

"It is believed that the therapeutic abortions may be performed for the following established indications:

"1. When continuation of the pregnancy may threaten the life of the woman or seriously impair her health.

"2. When continuation of the pregnancy is likely to result in the birth of a child with grave physical deformities or mental retardation.

"3. When conception has occurred as a result of rape and incest.

"When indicated therapeutic abortions are done, they should be performed during the first trimester of pregnancy."⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Gainer, "Abortion: History of Adventist Guidelines," 15. See also Michael Pearson, "Abortion: The Adventist Dilemma," *Ministry* 61.1 (1988): 5.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 15. The 1970 Abortion Guidelines—"Suggestive Guidelines for Therapeutic Abortions" was voted by the GC officers on May 13, 1970; but it was rejected by the GC in session in June 1970. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. 1971 Interruption of Pregnancy Guidelines

"1. When continuation of the pregnancy may threaten the life of the woman or impair her health.

"2. When continuation of the pregnancy is likely to result in the birth of a child with physical deformities or mental retardation.

"3. When conception has occurred as a result of rape or incest.

"4. When the case involves an unwed child under 15 years of age.

"5. When for some reason the requirements of functional human life demand the sacrifice of the lesser potential human value.

"When indicated interruptions of pregnancy are done, they should be performed as early as possible preferably during the first trimester of pregnancy."⁷

4. Comments and Analyses on Adventist Guidelines and Issues of Abortion

Not much has changed in the essence of the present SDA guidelines (1992) on abortion compared to the 1970 and 1971 guidelines. Moreover, at best these guidelines are recommendatory or suggestive in nature. Number four of the present guidelines states,

The Church does not serve as conscience for individuals; however, it should provide moral guidance. Abortions for reasons of birth control, gender selection, or convenience are not condoned by the Church. Women, at times however, may face exceptional circumstances that present serious moral or medical dilemmas, such as significant threats to the pregnant woman's life, serious jeopardy to her health, severe congenital defects carefully diagnosed in the fetus, and pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. The final decision whether to terminate the pregnancy or not should be made by the pregnant woman after appropriate consultation. She should be aided in her decision by accurate information, biblical principles, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, these decisions are best made within the context of healthy family relationships.⁸

⁷ Ibid. The 1971 "Interruption of Pregnancy Guidelines" (unpublished) was a revision of the 1970 abortion guidelines.

⁸ See "Guidelines on Abortion," 135.

Several issues and questions have played in the discussion of abortion, like the rights and privacy of the mother, the physical and mental condition of the fetus, the cause of pregnancy such as incest, rape, and what if continued pregnancy endangers the life of the mother. However, the pivotal issue in the abortion debate is the moral status of the unborn.

There are three general views regarding the status of the unborn in the mother's womb. They are (1) fully human, (2) potentially human, and (3) subhuman.⁹ For those who adhere to the two latter views, aborting the unborn for whatever reason is not a moral issue. On the other hand, proponents of the view that the fetus is fully human, consider that terminating pregnancy for whatever reason except for when the life of the mother is endangered, is considered taking of a human life and has serious ethical and moral implications.

Simply saying, if the fetus is considered fully human, all other issues involved like the privacy of the mother, the physical and mental condition of the unborn, and even the cause of pregnancy will be viewed in a different perspective. Joseph Fletcher, well-known author of the book *Situation Ethics*, aptly sums up the point of contention when he wrote, "If every human fetal organism is a person, and if we think it is immoral to end such forms of human life unnecessarily . . . we will logically look upon abortion at will as immoral. If, on the other hand, we do not regard uterine life as human in the sense of a personal being we will not believe its termination is 'murder.'"¹⁰

Looking at the 1970 and 1971 Adventist guidelines on abortion, the procedure is allowed to be performed for certain reasons on the premise that "no Bible passage expressly condemns abortion or speaks of man as fully human before birth."¹¹ It is assumed that in the apparent absence of definitive biblical passages that deal directly with the issue of abortion, the unborn is considered not human or a person, at best only a potential human being with a lesser value.¹²

If the unborn is only a potential human being, a question then may be asked, What makes abortion immoral for the reason of birth control, gender selection, and the like? If severely defective and fetuses caused by

⁹ See Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1989), 135.

¹⁰ Joseph Fletcher, *The Ethics of Genetic Control: Ending Reproductive Roulette* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974), 134.

¹¹ See "Abortion Guidelines for Adventist Medical Institutions," *Ministry* 61.1 (1988): 19.

¹² See 1971 Abortion Guidelines, guideline #5.

rape and incest may be aborted without moral implications, there is no valid reason why any other "unwanted" babies could not be aborted.

However, I would like to propose that, in spite of the apparent paucity of clear cut biblical passages that deal with the abortion issue and the humanity of the unborn, the Bible is not totally silent on the status of the unborn. Moreover, granting that the biblical interpretation lacks a definitive answer to settle the abortion debate, it does not follow that the Bible does not consider the unborn less human.

Medical science, particularly in the field of biology and embryology, may shed light to help clarify the issues involved, particularly the value of the fetus. Furthermore, medical science may help the Church arrive at scientifically informed ethical and theological guidelines if not an official statement which may help church members resolve the issue of abortion. What follows is a discussion on the biblical support on the humanity of the unborn.

5. Biblical Support of the Humanity of the Unborn

Those who oppose abortion present biblical arguments to support their view. These biblical passages directly or indirectly mention the unborn.¹³ But the passage often discussed in relation to the issue of abortion is Exodus 21:22-25. The majority of traditional and modern interpretations of Exodus 21:22-25 suggest that if the altercation results only to the loss of pregnancy, and not to the death of the mother, it could not be meted the death penalty.¹⁴ In other words, the *lex talionis* law does not apply to a miscarriage.¹⁵ This conclusion implies that a fetus in the womb is not considered fully human or equal in status of the mother.

¹³ Texts often quoted to support the argument of the personhood of the unborn include Pss 51:5; 139:13-16; and Luke 1:41-44.

¹⁴ See Exod 21: 22-24 (NIV). The NIV footnotes "giving birth prematurely" as "miscarriage." Bible scholars are, however, divided on the interpretation of "miscarriage" whether it refers to the death of the prematurely delivered infant or to a premature birth but a live infant.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggeman, "Exodus," in *NIB*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:864. A representative of this position is also Bruce K. Waltke, "The Old Testament and Birth Control," *Christianity Today*, November 8, 1968, 3-6. "Miscarriage" in this view is considered the death of the newly delivered infant.

However, other thinkers argue that the law of retribution *lex talionis* applies to both the mother and the child.¹⁶ Umberto Cassuto, a Hebrew scholar, rendered this passage:

*And when men strive together and they hurt unintentionally a woman with child and her children come forth but no mischief happens—that is, the woman and the children do not die—the one who hurt her shall surely be punished by a fine. . . . But if any mischief happen, that is, if the woman dies or the child die, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye.*¹⁷

Jack Cottrell also does not conform to the popular interpretation. He argues that “there is absolutely no linguistic justification for translating verse 22 to refer to miscarriage.”¹⁸ He suggests that the clause translated by both the KJV and the ASV “so that her fruit depart” should be literally rendered—“and her children come out.”¹⁹

Cottrell argues his case by pointing out that the noun used here is *yeled* [in this passage it appears in the plural form]—the word commonly used for child or offspring.²⁰ Moreover, the verb used in this passage is *yatza’*, which usually means “to go or come out.”²¹ Cottrell adds that the verb *yatza’* is regularly used to refer to the ordinary or regular birth of children, as coming forth either from the loins of the father or from the womb of the mother.²² If it was a miscarriage Cottrell points out, the appropriate word *shachol* could have been used.²³ Having considered these points Cottrell concludes that “there seems to be no warrant to interpreting Exodus 21:22 to mean ‘the destruction of the fetus.’”²⁴

¹⁶ A representative of this view is James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, NIBCOT (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 204.

¹⁷ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 275. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Jack W. Cottrell, “Abortion and the Mosaic Law,” *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1973, 6-9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. The appearance of the noun in plural form is explained as for the purpose of “speaking indefinitely” for more than one fetus or child might be in the mother’s womb. See Carl F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, updated ed. (Edinburgh: T&T, 1866–91; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 409.

²¹ Francis Brown, with S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB)* (Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1980), s.v. “צא,” 422, 423.

²² Cottrell, “Abortion and the Mosaic Law,” 8.

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

Other commentators argue that the term *ason* in verse 22 means “calamity” to “some persons other than the direct victim” “and therefore refers in this verse to the fetus.”²⁵ In this case, if there is no *ason* to the fetus, even if it was prematurely²⁶ delivered, only a fine is imposed.

Ron du Preez subscribes to the idea that “miscarriage” as found in Exod 21:22 refers to a live premature birth. He observes that “whenever ‘*yatsa*’ is used of a still birth, it is always accompanied by some form of *muth*, “to die.”²⁷ The absence of such qualification made du Preez to conclude that the passage in Exod 21:22 deals with a live birth.²⁸

To sum it up, proponents of the “premature live birth” view in reference to Exod 21:22-25 are in agreement that the Bible considers the unborn or the prematurely born as equal in status with the mother. If the unborn is considered equal in value with the mother, termination of pregnancy is tantamount to murder.

However, in consideration of divergent interpretations of Exod 21:22-25, the status of the unborn can not be established based on this passage alone. One must look elsewhere for answers to try to establish the status of the unborn. The following discussion offers scientific arguments to show that the unborn is human.

6. Scientific Support That the Unborn Is Human

John Harvey Kellog, an Adventist medical doctor writing many years back on the issue of abortion, stated,

The idea held by many that the destruction of fetal life is not a crime until after ‘quickening’ has occurred is a gross and mischievous error. No change occurs in the developing human being at this period. The so-called period of ‘quickening’ is simply the period at which the movements of the little one become sufficiently active and vigorous to attract the attention of the mother. . . . From the very moment of conception, those processes have been in operation which result in the production of a fully developed human being from a mere jelly drop, a minute cell. As soon as this development begins, a new human being

²⁵ See John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 312.

²⁶ See Exod 20:22 (NKJV).

²⁷ Ron du Preez, “The Status of the Fetus in Mosaic Law,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 1.2 (1990): 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

has come into existence. . . . From this moment, it acquires the right to life, a right so sacred that in every land to violate it is to incur the penalty of death.²⁹

Modern science and embryology have made a monumental progress on the study of the status of the unborn. The intrinsic value and humanity of the fetus is now a settled debate in the field of science. Keith L. Moore is emphatic that “when the a sperm fuses with an oocyte to form a single cell, a zygote” during fertilization, human development begins.³⁰ In simple words, from the moment of fertilization, a unique individual, and a full human being exists.

Dr. Micheline M. Matthews-Roth testifying before a U. S. congressional hearing in 1981 stated that “in biology and in medicine, it is an accepted fact that the life of any individual organism reproducing by sexual reproduction begins at conception, or fertilization.”³¹ Jerome L. LeJeune, a French pediatrician and geneticist, before the same body also clarified that “to accept the fact that after fertilization has taken place a new human has come into being is no longer a matter of taste or opinion. The human nature of the human being from conception to old age is not a metaphysical contention, it is plain experimental evidence.”³² Furthermore, Dr. Hymie Gordon, affirmed before the same body that

now we can say, unequivocally, that the question of when life begins is no longer a question for theological or philosophical dispute. It is an established scientific fact. Theologians and philosophers may go on to debate the meaning of life or the purpose of life, but it is an established fact that all life, including human life, begins at the moment of conception.³³

The position that human life begins at conception is supported by studies on the human embryo. Patrick Lee explains that from the point of conception no change in the essence of the embryo takes place hence could be considered as the starting point of a new human life. He wrote,

The humanity of the embryo is shown by the fact that its sources are two humans, it has a genetic structure that is typical of members of the

²⁹ John Harvey Kellog, *Man, the Masterpiece* (Battle Creek, MI: Modern Medicine, 1894), 424-425.

³⁰ Keith L. Moore, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*, 9th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Saunders, 2013), 13.

³¹ Subcommittee on Separation of Powers, report to Senate Judiciary Committee S-158, 97th Congress, 1st Session, 1981, quoted in Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 149.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

human species, and its development, barring accidents, ends in a recognizable human individual. It comes from the union of a human sperm and a human ovum. All of its cells are identifiably human, having the typical chromosomal structure. Moreover, the direction of its integrated growth indicates that it is human. It is actively developing itself to the next stage along the maturation process of a human organism.³⁴

Even Lisa Cahill, a pro-choice proponent, concedes that the embryo is human. She writes, "It is no doubt that human embryos and fetuses are human and are alive, thus constituting 'human life.'"³⁵ But in spite of Cahill's affirmation, she expresses ambivalence to the "moral status" or personhood of the unborn during its early stage of development.³⁶

Likewise, Peter Singer, a scientist and bioethicist, like many well-informed avowed pro-abortionists, concedes that the fetus is a human being. Nonetheless, he argues that abortion is permissible for the reason that the fetus is not yet a person.³⁷ The idea proposed by Cahill and Singer, is based on the view of empirical functionalism³⁸ which is based on a secular or material world view of human life.

On the other hand, I argue for the ontological personalism³⁹ which considers the inherent value of the human being from the moment of conception. Humanness is intrinsic though it is a fact that there is a development in the anatomy and physiology of the fetus. The ontological personalism view is aptly summarized by E. Blechschmidt:

A human being does not *become* a human being but rather *is* such from the instant of the fertilization. During the entire ontogenesis, no single break can be demonstrated, either in the sense of a leap of from the life-

³⁴ Patrick Lee, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 4.

³⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Theological Bio-Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 178.

³⁶ Ibid. I strongly disagree with the opinion of Cahill that at conception the fetus is "human" but not a "person." However, to refute this view is reserved for another study.

³⁷ See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 110.

³⁸ Empirical functionalism is a "view that human personhood may be defined by a set of functions or abilities present in actual, not potential form." See the notes on personhood, Dennis M. Sullivan, "Personhood: Philosophical Aspects," 2013, <https://www.cedarville.edu/personal/sullivan/bio4710/notes/06.pdf>.

³⁹ Ontological personalism considers all human beings as inherently human persons. See Dennis M. Sullivan, "The Conception View of Personhood: A Review," *Ethics and Medicine* 19.1 (2003): 18-19.

less to the live, or a transition from the vegetative to the instinctive or to characteristically human behavior. It may be considered today fundamental law of human ontogenesis . . . that only the appearance of the individual being changes in the course of ontogenesis.⁴⁰

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that divergent biblical interpretations on the issue of the value of the unborn have left unsettled many questions on abortion. However, if the scientific data is to be accepted, which affirm that human life begins at fertilization, then this has serious implications on the SDA guidelines on abortion. Since the moral value of a human being is inherent and in no way dependent upon his or her ability to function or even even to the circumstances in which the unborn was conceived, it is recommended that the current SDA guidelines on abortion need to be re-examined in the light of Scripture and scientific data.

I am persuaded that SDA ethics must be absolute and not situational. Christian ethics upholds the sanctity of human life. Therefore, even a fetus may have severe physical and mental abnormalities or conceived as a result of incest or rape, it does not in any way make him or her less human. If the unborn is just a potential human being, termination of pregnancy for any reason should not be a moral issue. However, if the unborn from the point of conception is fully human which I believe it is, then it follows that abortion regardless of the cause of pregnancy reason has moral and ethical culpability.

⁴⁰ E. Blechschmidt, "Human From the First," in *New Perspectives on Human Abortion*, ed. Thomas, W. Hilgers, Denis J. Horan, and David Mall (Frederick, MD: University Publishers of America, 1981), quoted in Peter S. Wenz, "The Law and Fetal Personhood: Religious and Secular Determinations," in *Abortion: A Reader*, ed. Lloyd Steffen (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1996), 401.