

Southern Baptists and the Sanctity of Human Life: the Pro-Life Stance of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000

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When one compares the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM63) and the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM00), the ethical directness of the 2000 statement as opposed to the 1963 statement is striking. Article XV of the BFM63 offers general guidelines for involvement with culture and encourages every Christian to oppose every form of greed, selfishness, and vice and to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of truth. While the BFM00 also includes this wording, it is much more specific as to what vices a Christian should oppose and marks out racism, adultery, homosexuality, and pornography as issues for attention. Of particular interest is that Article XV now urges Baptists to contend for the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. Beyond the touchstone issue of inerrancy, the ethical issues of human sexuality and the sanctity of human life have played a major part in the theological shift in the Southern Baptist Convention.

One of the reasons that the SBC went through such a dramatic change is that the convention bureaucracy of the 1970's and early 1980's vastly underestimated the amount of discontent among rank and file Baptists concerning the theological stance of denominational employees. For example, in 1978 Walter Shurden stated that denominational unity is more important to most Southern Baptists than theological arguments about the Bible.¹ Written from the perspective of a denominational loyalist, he demonstrates a basic inability to comprehend that the issue of inerrancy is indeed important to Southern Baptists. In a similar manner, the denominational bureaucracy failed to understand the intense convictions of most Southern Baptists concerning the ethical issues of human sexuality and the sanctity of human life. In this paper I will focus

¹ Walter Shurden, "The Problem of Authority in the Southern Baptist Convention," *Review and Expositor* 75.2 (Spring 1978): 225.

on the issue of the sanctity of human life and briefly survey some selected Southern Baptist statements that reflect the pro-choice stance of denominational loyalists prior to the theological shift in the SBC.

***Roe v. Wade* and the Baptist Faith & Message**

When the BFM63 was drafted, the major moral debate in the United States revolved around civil rights for ethnic minorities, African-Americans most significantly.² This statement of faith was drafted just prior to one of the most socially volatile eras in American history. Within ten years of the BFM63, the United States would see further violence related to civil rights issues, the sexual revolution, more widespread distribution of oral contraceptives, the Vietnam War, and legalized abortion. It is no coincidence that *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* came at the end of the ten years from 1963-1973. This decade led to the liberalization of abortion laws, which is the logical conclusion of a society that engages in widespread sexual promiscuity. Prior to and after the *Roe* decision,³ several Southern Baptists and the Convention as a whole offered comment on changes in the abortion laws. The following review will demonstrate that influential SBC ethicists and thinkers prior to the conservative resurgence favored liberalizing abortion laws.

Andrew D. Lester, who was then the Associate Director of the Department of Pastoral Care at the North Carolina Baptist Hospital, wrote one article of significance concerning abortion in the *Review and Expositor* in 1971. In "The Abortion Dilemma," Lester critiques the Roman Catholic position opposing abortion. According to Lester, "Since the Roman Catholic position sees every conception as a direct act of the will of God, it is a form of theological determinism."⁴ He then argues that most Christians, Catholics included, allow for the killing of other humans in some cases, most notably in self-defense. While he acknowledges that the conceptus has not done any deliberate wrong or acted with malice, its presence occasionally becomes a menace to the rights of others, the mother's mental and physical health, the welfare of the family, and the survival of a society, and in that sense must be dealt with as a threat.⁵ Thus, the unborn child is now a potential threat to society and may need to be eliminated.

² The 1963 statement does not have any explicit references to racism.

³ For the rest of the paper, I will refer to both the *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions as simply *Roe*. The *Roe* and the *Doe* decisions were companion verdicts handed down the same day; the latter clarified the former.

⁴ Andrew Lester, "The Abortion Dilemma," *Review and Expositor* 67 (Spring 1971): 229.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

Lester next argues for a position of developmental personhood which would validate abortion. In response to Roman Catholic dogma that ensoulment occurs at conception, Lester says,

To believe the *potential* for human life begins at conception is necessary, but to go beyond this, and define this potential life in such a way as to make the conceptus at any stage of development equal in status and value with postnatal human beings, is to interpret the biological data and define humanness in an arbitrary and unsatisfactory manner.⁶

He later contends that we must also consider the future quality of life for the conceptus and that the most moral thing to do for children who are born into abusive families or with certain birth defects might be to abort them. Lester's article is a strong argument for the liberalization of abortion laws and uses language and logic similar to Justice Blackmun in the *Roe* decision.⁷

Prior to the conservative resurgence, perhaps the most infamous statement about abortion from a Southern Baptist perspective was the resolution adopted by the SBC in 1971 at St. Louis. While not completely clear who authored the resolution, it nonetheless was a strong call for the liberalization of abortion laws. Though it gave a perfunctory nod to the sanctity of human life, the last paragraph carried the most significant content regarding this issue's morality:

Be it further resolved, that we call upon Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.⁸

Hugo Lindquist, a pastor from Oklahoma, recognized the danger of this last paragraph and moved to amend the resolution by deleting it. His motion did not pass and James Garland of Kentucky offered another amendment that would have toned down the wording in the paragraph. This motion failed also. The previous question was moved and the resolution was adopted unedited. Timothy George accurately summarizes the moral impact of this resolution when he says, "Thus two years prior to the Supreme Court decision of 1973 . . . the Southern Baptist Convention was on record advocating the decriminalization of abortion

⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁷ Timothy George agrees with the similarity to the *Roe* language. See Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Heritage of Life," in *Life at Risk*, Land and Moore, eds. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 83.

⁸ *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 72.

and extending the discretion of this decision into the realm of personal, privatized choice.”⁹ George goes on to comment that *Roe v. Wade* did little more than place a stamp of approval on what Southern Baptists had agreed upon in their 1971 meeting.

On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court declared laws prescribing abortion to be unconstitutional in the *Roe* case. Meeting soon thereafter in Charlotte, North Carolina on March 19-21, 1973, the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention addressed the abortion issue. David Mace of the Bowman Gray School of Medicine delivered a paper titled, “Abortion on Request: Implications of the Supreme Court Decision.” In a basically favorable review of the decision, Mace said that the court “made a careful survey of the history of abortion.”¹⁰ He accepts Blackmun’s assertion that English common law was not as strictly opposed to abortion as American law had been. Accordingly, he would argue, by liberalizing abortion laws, we are not abandoning our ancient tradition but returning to it. He defends Blackmun’s famous statement that “we do not need to resolve the difficult question of when life begins.” Mace argues that abortion is now part of the legal landscape and the best we can do is to attempt to minimize it. He says, “Nobody likes abortion; most doctors hate it, my medical students are quite upset about it.” However, he then immediately makes an unqualified statement about developmental personhood: “Whatever theory we hold about unborn life, we know that the fetus has the potentiality to become a human being.”¹¹ He concludes, “We may have to tolerate abortion for a time, as a regrettable necessity. But surely we can and must find a better way.”¹²

As the abortion debate raged after 1973, key thinkers and ethicists in the SBC at that time continued to advance a pro-choice position. This is despite the fact that, after the *Roe* decision, subsequent conventions passed strongly pro-life resolutions. Perhaps no single Southern Baptist from this era represents the pro-choice position more than Paul D. Simmons, who was a professor of Christian ethics at Southern Seminary.

Simmons’ first book on bioethics was *Birth and Death: Bioethical Decision Making*, published in 1983. When he wrote this book, he claimed that no other writer had attempted to deal with bioethics in a comprehensively biblical manner. He said that those who did refer to the Bible in bioethical debates engaged in a type of “proof-texting approach that operates on the basis of unexamined assumptions and frequently

⁹ George, “Southern Baptist Heritage of Life,” *Life at Risk*, 83.

¹⁰ David Mace, “Abortion on Request: Implications of the Supreme Court Decision,” in *1973 Christian Life Commission Seminar Proceedings: A Future for the Family* (Nashville: The Christian Life Commission of the SBC, 1973), 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

fails to struggle with the context and meaning of passages being cited.”¹³ The targets of his ire were evidently pro-life advocates and he apparently believed they had read their opinions into the text instead of letting the Bible determine their beliefs. Simmons also says, “The truth of the Bible is not what is at stake, but the truth of our interpretation of the Bible.”¹⁴ While the Bible is indispensable, he says the authors were limited by the fact that they were finite creatures and that they were sinners. Therefore, their “understandings were also shaped by some of the commonly held assumptions of their day, whether social attitudes or prevailing ideas of divinity.”¹⁵

Simmons’ book is a demand to move beyond Hippocratic ethics. Prior to the 1950s, medical ethics were pervaded by a synthesis of the ethical imperatives of the Hippocratic Oath and the Christian worldview.¹⁶ Simmons directly rejects this Christian-Hippocratic synthesis. He says the Hippocratic Oath substitutes “the ethics of Hippocrates for the ethics of Jesus.”¹⁷ He claims that the principle of *primum non nocere* (“first, do no harm”) is a philosophical principle and not a biblical one. While acknowledging that the principle of “do not harm” can be seen as consistent with the norm of a/ga/ph, he finds the Hippocratic tradition to be archaic and not applicable to modern realities.

What are the implications of these assertions by Simmons? He is an advocate of the liberalization of both abortion and euthanasia laws. He believes that pro-life advocates make the mistake of equating personhood to animation or to a biological form. According to Simmons, personhood involves being “(1) alive, (2) related to others, (3) reflective, (4) able to make moral decisions, and (5) spiritual.”¹⁸ Since the unborn and the terminally ill may not meet these criteria, abortion and euthanasia should be practiced. In fact, choosing death may be morally supererogatory for Simmons says, “Choosing to die may require greater moral heroism and a more profound theology of death than succumbing to the coincidental ministrations of medical care after one’s own cognitive functions have ceased.”¹⁹

Simmons returned to this theme in a small booklet published for the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights in 1987 titled, *Personhood, the Bible, & the Abortion Debate*. In this work he argues that there are three

¹³ Paul D. Simmons, *Birth and Death: Bioethical Decision Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ Nigel Cameron has explored this synthesis in *The New Medicine: Life and Death After Hippocrates* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 1992).

¹⁷ Simmons, *Birth and Death*, 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

passages which define personhood: Genesis 2:7, Genesis 1:26-28, and Genesis 3:22. He says that Genesis 2:7 refers to the biological aspects of personhood in a metaphorical manner by using the terms “dust” or “clay.” Genesis 1:26-28 distinguishes human personhood from animal life. Specifically, humans bear the image of God. Simmons defines the *imago Dei* as similarity of powers and abilities shared by God and man. Finally, he says that Genesis 3:22 portrays a person as a moral decision maker. Commenting on the phrase, “the man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil,” Simmons says, “To be a person is to be a choice maker, reflecting God’s own ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. . . . The fact that they ‘ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil’ means that people are given the burden and responsibility of making decisions that reflect their unique place in God’s creation.”²⁰ He goes on to say that abortion is a god-like choice that reflects the moral decision making capacity of a woman: “Like the Creator, she (the woman who aborts) reflects upon what is good for the creation of which she is agent. As steward of those powers, she uses them for good and not for ill, both for herself, the fetus, and the future of humankind itself.”²¹

Noted Southern Seminary ethics professor Henlee Barnette also addressed the issues of abortion and euthanasia. Paul Simmons summarizes Barnette’s approach towards abortion as follows: “Whatever rights the fetus may have are secondary to those of the couple. Parents have a right to determine whether to abort a defective fetus. . . . They also have a responsibility not to impose upon society the burden of caring for severely defective children for whom they are either financially or emotionally able to care.”²² In his 1982 book, *Exploring Medical Ethics*, Barnette stressed the basic principles of creative love and the golden rule as foundational for his ethics.²³ Beyond the issue of abortion, he also advocated a position of euthanasia that was different from that of pro-life Southern Baptists. In *Exploring Medical Ethics* he said, “When a person becomes incurably ill, unproductive, and a victim of an intolerable quality of life, and death is the one means of relief, the individual may be morally justified to choose to self-destruct. For love wills the well-being of the other and the self is also an other.”²⁴

²⁰ Paul Simmons, *Personhood, the Bible, & the Abortion Debate* (Washington, D.C.: The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights Educational Fund, 1987), 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8. Remarks in brackets mine.

²² Paul Simmons, “Barnette: Clinical Professor, University of Louisville School of Medicine,” in *Perspectives on Christian Ethics: Essays in Honor of Henlee Barnette*, Rollin Armour, ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1991), 79.

²³ This summary of Barnette’s method comes from E. Earl Joiner, “Barnette’s Ethical Agenda: Issues That Engaged Barnette,” in *Perspectives on Christian Ethics*, 54.

²⁴ Henlee Barnette, *Exploring Medical Ethics* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1982), 122.

In summary, the 1971 resolution, Andrew Lester, David Mace, Paul Simmons, and Henlee Barnette share some common presuppositions and conclusions. First, each of them seems to affirm a developmental view of personhood to some degree. Second, the Christian-Hippocratic synthesis is seen as unrealistic or insufficient for current medical issues. As a result, each one affirms the liberalization of abortion laws and, to some degree, euthanasia laws as well. As the conservative resurgence moved forward, it became evident that these prior denominational leaders failed to recognize the passion that Southern Baptists had for sanctity of life issues. An essay by Bobby Adams in 1984 illustrates the failure of old-line Southern Baptist ethicists to grasp the importance of the sanctity of life issue. He contributed an article titled, "Baptists in Wonderland: Current Ethical Issues for Southern Baptists," to an edition of *Faith and Mission*, the journal of Southeastern Seminary, dedicated to current issues in Southern Baptist life. Adams spoke of problems relating to the family, state, and economics while failing to mention the sanctity of human life or human sexuality. However, he did express great concern over the dangers involved with prayer in schools.²⁵ Even if Adams did not agree with the pro-life position, one thinks that he should at least acknowledge that it was a major issue of moral debate in 1984.

Pro-Life Southern Baptists and the Baptist Faith and Message 2000

Why have current Southern Baptists taken a pro-life position completely opposite to the pro-choice position of denominational ethicists in the 1970s? I contend that it is primarily because pro-choice Southern Baptists emphasized developmental personhood, misinterpreted the effects of the fall, and divorced their concept of love from moral absolutes. Thankfully, ethicists outside of the denomination influenced some conservative Southern Baptists in that day who later helped lead in the conservative resurgence.

The pro-abortion positions outlined in the first section of this paper are based on the assumption that it is possible to have biological human life without having a person. Therefore, when pre-born humans who do not meet the threshold for personhood are aborted, no sin has been committed. However, one should note that "personhood" can become a very slippery term. To imply that someone is a "non-person" dehumanizes them and removes the moral stigma attached with ending their lives. When the description of some humans as "non-persons" is accepted, then it becomes easier to expand the category of undesirable defects and for more people to be candidates for death. In contrast, the

²⁵ Bobby Adams, "Baptists in Wonderland: Current Ethical Issues for Southern Baptists," *Faith and Mission* 1:2 (Spring 1984): 21-22.

sixth commandment provides categorical protection for innocent human life. With this in mind, notice that Lester resorted to the tactic of calling an unborn human child a “menace” in order to justify abortion. He vilifies the unborn in order to advocate their death. While the Bible does not offer a detailed account of the “personhood” of the unborn, it does confirm a fundamental continuity between the human in the womb and the human who is born (Genesis 4:1, Psalm 139, Jeremiah 1:5, etc.). Pro-abortion Southern Baptists phrased the moral debate around contested matters of personhood while pro-life Southern Baptists maintained that the more fundamental issue is protection of innocent human life. Thus, the BFM00 states, “We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death.”²⁶

Another flaw in the arguments of pro-abortion Southern Baptists is found in Paul Simmons’ positive interpretation of Genesis 3:22. Simmons does not properly understand the nature of the temptation involved in Genesis 3 or the terrible effects of the fall. Commenting on proper hermeneutics, Simmons said, “The historical and textual context, the nature of the material, the meanings of terms, and other factors will all need to be assessed in coming to a clear understanding of the meaning of the passage.”²⁷ With Simmons’ statements in mind, consider the context in which Genesis 3:22 is found. Genesis 3 is the record of the fall and Genesis 3:22 is part of the post-lapsarian curse. While Simmons quotes the first half of Genesis 3:22 as a positive statement about human ability (“The Man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”), he does not refer to the surrounding verses which cast a negative image on the effects of the fall. In fact, in the following verses man is cast from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). Keil and Delitzsch offer helpful commentary when they say,

For the knowledge of good and evil, which man obtains by going into evil, is as far removed from the true likeness of God, which he would have attained by avoiding it, as the imaginary liberty of a sinner, which leads into bondage to sin and ends in death, is from the true liberty of a life of fellowship with God.²⁸

While Simmons interprets Genesis 3:22 as a good reflection upon man’s ability to make moral choices, a more careful reading reveals that this passage is *not* a positive statement of anthropology. The statement, “man has become like one of us,” more likely refers to man’s self-

²⁶ *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article XV: The Christian and the Social Order.

²⁷ Simmons, *Personhood, the Bible, & the Abortion Debate*, 8.

²⁸ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 1, The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1991), 95.

centered sphere of activity.²⁹ Simmons fails to recognize the full extent to which the *imago Dei* has been sullied. Carl F. H. Henry has said,

Man as sinner knows the *imago* only from the perspective of revolt. He is one who distorts it in the handling. And he cannot by his own initiative reconstruct from within moral rebellion what the *imago* is really like.³⁰

How does this affect Simmons' pro-abortion argument? He overestimates the ability of people to make the right choice when faced with moral dilemmas. Furthermore, he ignores the fact that, after the fall, God gave the Decalogue to protect people from the dangerous effects of sin. Notice that the Ten Commandments are addressed to mankind in rebellion, thus the recurring refrain of "Thou shalt not." The heart of human sin is that we indeed choose to do what we want do instead of what God desires. While Simmons may argue that women are "joining with the Creator" when they choose to abort for eugenic reasons, the reality is that eugenic abortions are but one more aspect of the radical autonomy that was at the heart of original sin.

Barnette's concept of love is weak in that it is divorced from concepts of moral absolutes. While he did affirm that the Decalogue represented eternal, universal values indispensable for the fulfillment of the individual and society,³¹ he seemed reluctant to say that any form of medical killing is always bad. Instead, he argued that medical killing may or may not be bad dependent upon the circumstances. This is not to imply that Barnette was not a person of compassion or kindness. However, his form of love leads to a pro-abortion and pro-euthanasia position. In reality, it is a love devoid of the ethical imperative of the sanctity of human life. Barnette seems to be overly optimistic and downplays the potential for people to harm other people if medical killing becomes acceptable.

While the pre-resurgence denominational bureaucracy advocated a pro-abortion position, many of the Southern Baptists who were more conservative listened to different voices—specifically, Francis Schaeffer and Paul Ramsey, neither of whom were Baptist. With C. Everett Koop, in 1979 Schaeffer authored, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* The premise of this work was that the *Roe* decision was opening the floodgates for other forms of medical killing. At the same time, Paul Ramsey advocated protection for the weakest in *Ethics at the Edges of Life* (1978). By and large, Southern Baptists were not convinced by their

²⁹ See A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, reprint 1942), 585.

³⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 155. The description of the *imago* as "sullied" is also Henry's term.

³¹ This is Barnette's description of the Decalogue in *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), 19.

own ethicists and were more influenced by conservatives from non-SBC institutions or ministries.

This phenomenon deeply affected the way pro-life Southern Baptists approached the *Roe* decision. While Mace offered a positive review of the historical survey that Blackmun undertook in *Roe*, most pro-life activists realized that Blackmun was not appealing to English common law as much as he was appealing to the pre-Christian pagan practices of Rome and Greece to justify abortion on demand. For example, Blackmun reiterated that the Hippocratic Oath's proscription of abortion was a minority position in Greece. From this and other historical references, he inferred certain conclusions about the morality of abortion. Pro-life Southern Baptists rejected these inferences. Instead, they appealed to the concept of absolute truth as revealed in the Bible and among those absolutes is a categorical protection of innocent human life.

The issue of the sanctity of human life illustrates one area in which the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* would have needed revision even if the Convention had not undergone theological drift. Most likely, Southern Baptists in 1963 could not have imagined that the taboo issue of abortion would become a national debate. Furthermore, they would have been equally surprised to know that many of their denominational leaders would be in favor of liberalizing abortion laws. Instead, pro-life Southern Baptists found themselves more influenced by thinkers from other denominations who may not have shared Baptist distinctives (for example, believer's baptism by immersion), but who did share a higher view of scriptural authority and pro-life convictions. The BFM00's strong pro-life stance reflects the widespread evangelical concern for the sanctity of human life in the national debate surrounding the abortion issue.