

What Does Mitt Romney Really Believe About Abortion?



Photo: Gage Skidmore

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Mitt Romney: “I separate quite distinctly matters of personal faith from the leadership that one has in a political sense.”

Piers Morgan: “Can you do that?”

Romney: “Absolutely”

Morgan: “Seriously?”

Romney: “You don’t begin to apply the doctrines of a religion to responsibility for guiding a nation or for guiding a state.”¹

During his 1994 run for the Senate against Ted Kennedy, Mitt Romney revealed his allegedly deeply personal reasons for being “pro-choice”:

Many, many years ago, I had a dear, close family relative that was very close to me who passed away from an illegal abortion. It is since that time that my mother and my family have been committed to the belief that we can believe as we want, but we

¹ Mitt Romney on *Piers Morgan Tonight* (7 June 2007).

will not force our beliefs on others on that matter. And you will not see me wavering on that.²

Unlike the other claim about watching his father march with Martin Luther King,³ this sad incident apparently really happened. The victim of the tragedy was his brother-in-law Loren Keenan's sister, Ann, who died on Oct 7, 1963. Ann's death certificate lists "Subarachnoid hemorrhage following septic criminal recent abortion." She was twenty one. Mitt's description of Ann as "a dear, close family relative that was very close to me," naturally lent credibility to his then very vocal "pro-choice" position. Less clear, however, is how, in light of the ostensibly personal character of his former stand, he now just as firmly declares himself "pro-life," and affirms that "abortion should be limited to only instances of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother," and supportive of the "reversal of *Roe v. Wade*."⁴ But whichever position on abortion one might think represents Mitt's real position on the issue, if he has one, the main thing to remember is that *neither* his former, uncompromising "pro-choice" stance, nor his current, strongly stated, but so-far-untested, pro-life stance, in any way affected his standing as a fully active faithful member and leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This fact alone should give us pause as to whether the Mormon Church means the same thing as the historic, biblical Christian Church when it expresses disapproval of abortion. And in fact it does not. From the point of view of Mormon theology the act of abortion is far less grave than it is from the Christian perspective. The purpose of this brief note is not to discuss the fitness of Mitt Romney as a candidate for political office. It is, rather, to inform Christians that there is a significant difference between the historic Christian position and the Mormon Church's position on abortion, a difference Christians need to be aware of when listening to Mitt Romney articulate his position on abortion.

Mormonism itself has a somewhat ambiguous record in relation to abortion dating all the way back to its founding Prophet Joseph Smith Jr. Early historical accounts indicate that Smith's sexual exploits

² Ben Johnson, "Romney Used Polls to Determine His 1994 Abortion Position," (Jan 13, 2012) (LifeSiteNews.com).

³ Michael Levenson, "Romney Never Saw Father on King March: Defends Figurative Words; Evidence Contradicts Story," *Boston Globe* (Dec 21, 2007).

⁴ Mitt Romney, "My Pro-Life Pledge," *National Review* "The Corner," blog (June 18, 2011). (<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/269984/my-pro-life-pledge-mitt-romney>). See further, Justin Elliot, "The Abortion that Mitt Doesn't Talk About Any More" (Aug 8, 2011) (http://www.salon.com/2011/08/08/mitt_romney_abortion_ann_keenan/).

transgressed all bounds of legitimacy set at any time by official statements or prophecies of the LDS Church. Sarah Pratt, wife of early LDS Apostle Orson Pratt, who herself had occasion to rebuff the prophet's adulterous advances, remarks that "the prophet Joseph used to frequent houses of ill-fame," naming two in particular that she herself was aware of.⁵ In addition to this Joseph also engaged in sexual relations with many women both married and unmarried, resulting in occasional pregnancies, which, again according Sarah Pratt, were regularly aborted:

You hear often that Joseph had no polygamous offspring. The reason of this is very simple. *Abortion was practiced on a large scale in Nauvoo.* Dr. John C. Bennett, the evil genius of Joseph, brought this abomination into a scientific system. He showed to my husband and me the instruments with which he used to 'operate for Joseph.'⁶

Mrs. Pratt also reports telling Joseph Smith III: "Your father had mostly intercourse with married women, and as to single ones, Dr. Bennet was always on hand, when anything happened."⁷ It is certainly true that many of the women Joseph had sexual liaisons with were married,⁸ which as we said put him outside the bounds even of his own polygamy revelation (now *Doctrine & Covenant* 132), which made no provision for such behavior.⁹

In sharp contrast to the behavior of Mormonism's founding prophet, we find early Mormon leaders strongly repudiating abortion, even equated abortion with murder. Joseph F. Smith, for example, the son of the Prophet's brother, Hyrum, and the sixth president of the LDS Church said in 1916: "It is just as much murder to destroy life before as it is after birth."¹⁰ This position was eventually abandoned in favor of agnosticism with regard to abortion. In 1934, Mormon Apostle David O. McKay expressed the view that the Church had given no authoritative statement as to whether abortion was murder or not.¹¹ Later, in 1973, McKay, now

⁵ W. Wyl [Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing & Pub., 1886), 60.

⁶ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 59.

⁷ Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 61.

⁸ See, for example, the list in H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2005), 561.

⁹ See *Doctrine & Covenants* 132:61.

¹⁰ *The Relief Society Magazine* 3.7 (July 1916): 368 (In a selection of statements from Mormon leaders under the heading "Birth Control.").

¹¹ Lester E. Bush, "Ethical Issues in Reproductive Medicine: A Mormon Perspective" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18:2 (1985): 51.

Church president, issued a statement along with the two other members of the First Presidency indicating that:

As the matter stands today, no definite statement has been made by the Lord one way or another regarding the crime of abortion, so far as is known, he has not listed it alongside the crime of the unpardonable sin and shedding of innocent human blood. That he has not done so would suggest that it is not in that class of crime.¹²

Addressing the subject of Abortion in the 1998 General Conference the late LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley (d. 2008) stated his opposition to it, describing it first of all as “an ugly thing, a debasing thing, a thing which inevitably brings remorse and sorrow and regret.”¹³ He goes on:

While we denounce it, we make allowance in such circumstances as when pregnancy is the result of incest or rape, when the life or health of the mother is judged by competent medical authority to be in serious jeopardy, or when the fetus is known by competent medical authority to have serious defects that will not allow the baby to survive beyond birth.

Hinckley further urges those considering abortion under such circumstances to “pray in great earnestness, receiving a confirmation through prayer before proceeding.” Hinckley’s statement represents the current Mormon position. He stops short of calling it murder and allows

¹² Quoted in Lester E. Bush, “Ethical Issues,” 51.

¹³ Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking about Us?” *Ensign* (Nov 1998): 71. Hinckley’s statement here simply repeats the LDS position as it had been in place for some time, as is seen, for example, in a formal statement issued by the LDS Church on 11 January 1991: “The Church recognizes that there may be rare cases in which abortion may be justified—cases involving pregnancy by incest or rape; when the life or health of the woman is adjudged by competent medical authority to be in serious jeopardy; or when the fetus is known by competent medical authority to have severe defects that will not allow the baby to survive beyond birth. But these are not automatic reasons for abortion. Even in these cases, the couple should consider abortion only after consulting with each other, and their bishop, and receiving divine confirmation through prayer” (“Church Issues Statement on Abortion,” *Ensign* [March 1991]; Online edition at lds.org). In other words it must not be supposed that Hinckley was stating something new and unknown that might have influenced Romney to revise his position on abortion in a more conservative direction.

for exceptions for rape incest and the life or health of the mother. The same position is stated in the LDS Church published *Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010*, except that there one additional exception is mentioned, i.e., where a “competent physician determines that the fetus has severe defects that will not allow the baby to survive beyond birth.”¹⁴

The reason the present LDS Church does not regard abortion as murder, or more precisely, does not take a clear position on whether it is murder or not, is that it’s official position is that it does not have an official position. This, in turn, has led the LDS Church to adopt a default position in which it is taken for granted as a safe assumption that abortion is not murder. We find abortion explicitly distinguished from murder in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, a reference work featuring faithful Mormon scholars but not published by the Church itself. In his entry on “Murder,” W. Cole Durham states that the LDS Church “distinguishes ABORTION from murder but holds it an extremely grave action.”¹⁵

The reason that abortion is generally assumed not to be murder by Mormons is the traditional belief and commonly held assumption that the child only becomes fully human at birth, or, more precisely, when the child’s spirit and body bond at the moment of first breath. This issue comes into clearer focus when the topic of stillborns is addressed. Lester E. Bush explains:

In practice, Mormon ritual has always distinguished between miscarriages or stillborn deliveries, and neonatal deaths. The former are not formally recorded in Church records; the latter are. Vicarious ordinance work, deemed essential for all humankind in Mormon theology, is never performed in the case of a miscarriage or stillborn delivery. It always is for a deceased infant. In essence, then, whatever the doctrinal uncertainties, Church practice treats birth as though it were the time when an important spirit-body bond takes place.¹⁶

In its section on the treatment of stillborns, the LDS *Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010* states that “It is a fact that a child has life

¹⁴ *Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 195 (21.4.1).

¹⁵ W. Cole Durham, “Murder,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:971.

¹⁶ Lester E. Bush, “Ethical Issues in Reproductive Medicine: A Mormon Perspective” *Dialogue* 18:2 (1985): 51.

before birth. However, there is no direct revelation on when the spirit enters the body.”¹⁷

The Sept 1987 “I Have a Question” section of the official LDS Church magazine *Ensign* featured a query about the status of miscarriages and stillborns in the eyes of the LDS Church. It was responded to by Val D. Greenwood, at the time manager of special services, Temple Department. He explained that:

It is not clear exactly at what point of development that “certain stage” of quickening—when the spirit makes eternal claim to the body—occurs. Even though quickening occurs before birth, we still do not know definitely when a living soul comes into existence. In fact, some Church leaders have suggested that a living soul does not exist until three essential elements—the body, the spirit, and the breath of life—are all present.¹⁸

Despite frequent assertions of agnosticism regarding the moment the spirit bonds with the body, LDS Church policies and practices, take for granted that abortion is not murder. This is seen, for example, in assurances given in authoritative literature that abortion does not represent the unpardonable sin of shedding innocent blood. We see this, for example, in *Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010*, which concludes its entry on abortion by saying that “As far as has been revealed, a person may repent and be forgiven for the sin of abortion.”¹⁹ If in fact the LDS leadership thought there was any real possibility that abortion *might* represent the shedding of innocent blood, one would surely expect that they would avoid offering such assurances.

A second and very unusual reason why abortion is not murder is the strongly dualistic idea of the human person in Mormonism. In Mormonism the bonding of the body and spirit represents the entry of a wholly independent, already pre-existing spirit person, into a newly formed physical body. “Man, as a spirit,” wrote Joseph F. Smith, “was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal [physical] body.”²⁰ This has led in popular Mormonism to the

¹⁷ *Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 194 (21.3.10).

¹⁸ Online Edition at lds.org

¹⁹ *Handbook 2*, 195 (21.4.1).

²⁰ Quoted in *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 9. Brackets in *Gospel Principles*’s quotation.

concept that if a child dies before taking a breath the spirit intended for that body will simply get back in line and enter another body later on. I learned of this view anecdotally while living in Utah. The former Mormon who is my informant, relates how her oldest sibling came to full term, but was stillborn, and, never having taken its first breath, was not named. Further, no funeral was performed for him. Later, another sibling, a girl, went to full term, did take a breath and died shortly after. The latter child was named, and given a funeral. My informant tells me that as far as the stillborn was concerned, the family understood by this that the male spirit that was intended for the body of the stillborn, would instead enter another body later on, either in the informant's own family or someone else's. As for the child that did take a breath, given the fact that the Mormons view this life as a time of testing, it was assumed that the little girl had been so righteous and worthy in the pre-existence that she only had to take a single breath in order to get the body necessary to go on to eventual glorification.

How widespread this idea of the first breath being the dividing line between ensouled human and non-ensouled human is in Mormonism is, I cannot tell, but it does flow nicely from Mormon theology as well as the way in which the policies of the LDS church basically treat the stillborn as a non-entity. Still the LDS Church occasionally comforts parents that their stillborns *might* be resurrected with the rest of their celestial families. We see this, for example, in a sidebar to a 2006 *Ensign* article in which Joseph Fielding Smith is quoted under the heading "Reason to Hope":

There is no information given by revelation in regard to the status of stillborn children. However, I will express my personal opinion that we should have hope that these little ones will receive a resurrection and then belong to us. I cannot help feeling that this will be the case.²¹

Such sentiments are expressed to give comfort to Mormon women who have lost pre-born children, but are at the same time assumed not to be true in all matters of policy in relation to the church's relation to those

²¹ See, Melinda E. Jennings, "Our Stillborn Baby," *Ensign* (Feb. 2006): 9-10: "As Jody and I sat in the celestial room, my emotions ran over. We hoped McKay would be sealed to us even though he was stillborn, and that if we were worthy, we would be able to raise him during the Millennium. However, I wanted to know it for certain. I knew that at the present time there is no revealed answer to these concerns, and I also knew that temple ordinances are not currently performed for stillborn children. This bothered me, for my faith at times was weak."

children, as is most significantly illustrated by the fact that Temple ordinances are not performed for them.

The upshot of all this for discerning what Mitt Romney really thinks about abortion is that in addition to the relatively straight forward problem raised by the issue of his credibility in making his pro-life claim—he was just as earnest remember about presenting himself as a pro-choice supporter of *Roe v. Wade*, when he wanted to become Governor of Massachusetts, as he now is in presenting himself as a pro-life supporter of its repeal (fig. 1)—we must also be ready to cope with potential differences in the definitions of the words Romney uses in articulating his pro-life claims. Consider for example the following statement he made back on February 18, 2007:

Abortion is taking a human life. There is no question but that human life begins when all the DNA is there necessary for cells to divide and become a human being. Is it alive? Yes. Is it human? Yes. And, therefore, when we abort a fetus we are taking a life at its infancy, at its very, very beginning roots, and a civilized society, I believe, respects the sanctity of human life.²²

Contrast this with a similar statement made by the Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed on this nascent life. To raise the question whether we are here concerned already with a human being or not is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And that is nothing but murder.²³

So what's the difference between the two statements? As we read Romney's remark we need to keep in mind as something relevant the line from the *LDS Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010*, stating: "It is a fact that a child has life before birth. However, there is no direct

²² Mitt Romney in *His Own Words* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2012), 13-14.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; trans. Neville Horton Smith; New York: Macmillan, 1962), 130-31.

revelation on when the spirit enters the body.”²⁴ Bonhoeffer calls abortion murder, Romney does not.

Given the Mormon unofficial/official assumption that the soul does not enter, or perhaps more precisely does not become permanently bonded to the body prior to birth, it is not enough to take for granted that when Romney identifies the developing fetus as human that he means by that an ensouled human, with the corollary that actively killing it would amount to murder, or at least the taking of real ensouled human life. Given his own background and convictions as a Mormon we cannot simply take for granted that he means what Christians, or anyone else in the society means, when he says that the fetus is human. We must press him for further clarification with further questions like:

- (1) When, in your view, does the soul of a forming child enter the body?
- (2) At what stage, if any, during pregnancy are you willing to describe abortion as murder?

Romney 1994	Romney 2011.
I believe that abortion should be safe and legal in this country; I have since the time that my mom took that position when she ran in 1970 as a U.S. Senate candidate...I believe that since <i>Roe v. Wade</i> has been the law for 20 years, that we should sustain and support it and I sustain and support that law and the right of a woman to make that choice...And you will not see me wavering on that. ²⁵	I am pro-life and I believe that abortion should be limited to only instances of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother. I support the reversal of <i>Roe v. Wade</i> , because it is bad law and bad medicine. <i>Roe</i> was a misguided ruling that was a result of a small group of activists federal judges legislating from the bench. ²⁶
Figure 1	

²⁴ *Handbook 2: Administering the Church 2010* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 194 (21.3.10).

²⁵ Massachusetts Senatorial Debate (10/25/94). Does this statement contradict Romney's earlier cited claim that he became pro-choice when his brother-in-law Loren Keenan's sister, Ann, died? That took place on 7 October 1963. Seven years before the date he gives here. In fairness, he may simply be speaking in terms of active political support.

²⁶ *Romney in His Own Words*, 15. Notice that here Romney's description of his position is that of the LDS Church.

When entering into political relationships with Mormons, even conservative ones, in the cause of life it is essential to remember that, quite apart from the credibility of any particular Mormon candidate, the Mormon position on abortion is itself morally evasive: There is no way to know if the soul is there, therefore we may safely assume that it is not. Let me illustrate this with a parable. Suppose you fall heir to the estate of a wealthy relative and while you are going through his stuff, you find a handsome little chest with several remarkable stones that look very much like diamonds. In order not to become too hopeful you remind yourself that there is a possibility that the stones are not real, that they are, say, cut glass or paste. As you start to plan how to find out which they are, it occurs to you that the discovery of something as potentially valuable as the stones might significantly complicate the settlement of the estate, in terms of taxes and so on. So you reason with yourself, "Well, since I don't know for *certain* that these stones are real diamonds, I may safely assume they are not, lay them aside until the estate is settled, give it a couple of years, and then make some discreet inquiries into the their real value."