

Abortion and Euthanasia (Part 1)

Euthanasia

In view of increasing public interest in euthanasia, and in the light of the Nigel Cox and Tony Bland cases, the House of Lords set up a Select Committee on Medical Ethics to look seriously into the issue of euthanasia in 1993. During their deliberations they took submissions from a variety of persons and parties. Of these the Department of Health, the Home Office, The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing all argued against any change in the law. The committee in its final report in February 1994, despite being earlier undecided on the issue, unanimously ruled that there should be no change in the law.[1] Lord Walton, the committee chairman, reflected on this in a speech to the House of Lords on 9 May 1994 in saying:

'We concluded that it was virtually impossible to ensure that all acts of euthanasia were truly voluntary and that any liberalisation of the law in the United Kingdom could not be abused. We were also concerned that vulnerable people - the elderly, lonely, sick or distressed - would feel pressure, whether real or imagined, to request early death.'

The result is that despite mounting pressure (most lately via the Mental Incapacity Bill) euthanasia remains illegal in Britain.

However in the Netherlands there has been a steady escalation in euthanasia since the mid 1980s. According to the Rummelink Report,ii commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Justice, there were over 3,000 deaths from euthanasia in the Netherlands in 1990. More than 1,000 of these were not voluntary. Other assessments have been far less conservative, and these figures pre-date February 1994 when euthanasia in that country was legally sanctioned.

Holland is moving rapidly down the slippery slope with the public conscience changing quickly to accept such action as acceptable. The Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG) and the 'Dutch Commission for the acceptability of life terminating Action' have recommended that the active termination of the lives of patients suffering from dementia is morally acceptable under certain conditions. Two earlier reports of the commission affirmed the acceptability of similar action for severely handicapped neonates and comatose patients.[2] Case reports include a child killed for no other reason than it possessed abnormal genitalia [3] and a woman killed at her own request for reasons of 'mental suffering'.[4]

Euthanasia was briefly legalised in the Northern Territory of Australia in July 1996, but the legislation was overturned by the Australian Federal Parliament on March 24 last year after only four patients had died.[5] The Supreme Court of the United States made unanimous rulings last June that there was no fundamental right to assistance in committing suicide. So far Oregon is the only state to succeed in making physician assisted suicide legal. In spite of this Dr Kevorkian has presided over more than 50 such deaths in Michigan without being convicted in the last few years. In its 1992 Statement of Marbella, the World Medical Association[6] confirmed that assisted suicide, like euthanasia, is unethical and must be condemned by the medical profession.

Colombia passed a law allowing euthanasia in May 1997 and the Philippines and South Africa have also been considering legislation.

Many are unaware that what ended in the 1940s in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Belsen and Treblinka had far more humble beginnings in the 1930s: in nursing homes, geriatric institutions and psychiatric hospitals all over Germany. Leo Alexander,[7] a psychiatrist who worked with the Office of the Chief of Counsel for War Crimes at Nuremberg, described the process in the New England Medical Journal in July 1949:

'The beginnings at first were merely a subtle shift in emphasis in the basic attitude of the physicians. It started with the attitude, basic in the euthanasia movement, that there is such a thing as a life not worthy to be lived. This attitude in its early stages concerned itself merely with the severely and chronically sick. Gradually the sphere of those to be included in this category was enlarged to encompass the socially unproductive, the ideologically unwanted, the racially unwanted and finally all non-Germans.'

Such a progression requires only four accelerating factors: favourable public opinion, a handful of willing doctors, economic pressure and a law allowing it. In most Western countries the first three ingredients are present already. When legislation comes into effect, and political and economic interests are brought to bear, the generated momentum can prove overwhelming.

Abortion

Although abortion has been practised at some level by most societies, legal abortion on a massive scale is a relatively recent phenomenon. Since the Soviet Union first legalised abortion in 1920, much of the rest of the world has followed suit: Scandinavia in the 30s, Asia beginning in the 40s and Western Europe from the late 60s. By 1982 only 28% of the world's population lived in countries where abortion was largely illegal - mostly in Muslim countries, parts of Africa and Latin America. There are now estimated to be 55 million legal abortions performed each year worldwide.[8]

Britain was the first non-Scandinavian Western country to liberalise its abortion laws in 1967. Since then almost 4 million abortions have been performed in England, Wales and Scotland and there is currently one 'legal' abortion for every four live births.

In England and Wales the annual total has stabilised at about 170,000. The majority (98.6%) are performed on the grounds of risk of injury to the mental or physical health of the pregnant woman or her existing children. Only 1.1% are done because of fetal handicap and 0.013% to save the life of the mother. For 58% of women it is their first pregnancy and 67% have never been married. Most abortions (61%) are carried out in the private sector.

The typical woman having an abortion in the UK today is single, under 25, in her first pregnancy and having the procedure performed in a private institution for reasons of 'risk of injury to the physical or mental health of the mother'.[9]

The dramatic increase in abortion worldwide this century has run counter to historically accepted codes of medical ethics. The Hippocratic Oath includes the resolution 'I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion'. [10] The Declaration of Geneva (1948) states 'I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception even against threat... [11] and the International Code of Medical Ethics (1949) affirms that 'a doctor must always bear in mind the importance of preserving human life from the time of conception until death'. [12] In the same spirit the UN Declaration of Human Life (1948) asserts that 'everyone has the right to life' [13] and the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) that the child deserves 'legal protection before as well as after birth'. [14]

When the legal abortion rate soared world-wide in the second half of this century the World Medical Association responded in 1970 by adopting the Declaration of Oslo. [15] This allowed 'therapeutic' abortion in circumstances 'where the vital interests of the mother conflict with those of the unborn child'. Although the 'utmost respect for human life from the time of conception' as laid out in the Declaration of Geneva was affirmed, it was recognised that there was a 'diversity of attitudes towards the life of the unborn child'. Accordingly it was allowed that 'where the law allows therapeutic abortion to be performed... and this is not against the policy of the national medical association' then 'abortion should be performed' under certain provisos. This declaration thus laid the framework for doctors to perform abortions if their 'individual conviction and conscience' allowed it and the law and the national medical association were not in disagreement.

The change appears minor but it represented a fundamental shift in the whole framework of medical ethics. The Judeo-Christian ethic with its concept of absolute right and wrong was discarded and 'individual conscience' enthroned as absolute in its place. 'Individual conviction and conscience' which 'must be respected' has replaced God as the arbiter of truth. The doctor is no longer obliged not to kill. Instead, by a strange twist he is now obliged not to stop other doctors killing if their 'consciences' dictate that they should.

As the abortion rate rocketed world-wide consistency of belief and practice were achieved by further amending the ethical codes. At the 35th World Medical Assembly held in Venice in October 1983 the WMA changed the Declaration of Geneva as follows: the words 'from the time of conception' were amended to 'from its beginning'. The result is that now the medical profession are among the major facilitators of abortion.

What does the Bible say about euthanasia and abortion?

The sixth commandment

There are only two instances of voluntary euthanasia in the Bible.

In the first, Abimelech, believing himself to be fatally wounded with a fractured skull after being hit on the head by a millstone, asks his armour-bearer to kill him. His request is granted and the Israelite leader is thus spared the 'indignity' of being killed by a woman. The death is seen as just retribution for Abimelech's own murder of his seventy brothers, and we are not told what happened, if anything, to the armour-bearer (Jdg 9:52-55).

In the second, an Amalekite despatches the mortally injured Saul, still alive after a failed attempt at suicide.

'I happened to be on Mount Gilboa' the young man said 'and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and riders almost upon him. When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me and I said, 'What can I do?'... Then he said to me 'Stand over me and kill me. I am in the throes of death but I am still alive. So I stood over him and killed him because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive' (2 Sa 1:6-9).

Whether the story is true (it varies from the account of Saul's death at the end of 1 Samuel 31) or the Amalekites fabrication in order to win favour in David's eyes for despatching Saul and delivering him the crown, the new king's reaction is interesting.

'Why were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?' (2 Sa 1:14) he asks, and then apparently before receiving a reply, as if the confession in itself were sufficient grounds for a verdict to be made, orders the Amalekite's execution.

In the mind of David at least, the compassionate killing of Saul constituted a capital offence, despite him being in great pain (presumably with peritonitis) and close to death without the possibility of analgesia, and most significantly of all, despite Saul's own request to be killed.

There are no accounts of abortion in Scripture. Although 'ripping open pregnant women' is described as an evil practice deserving of judgment (Am 1:13; 2 Ki 8:12) it was clear that this was without the women's consent or approval. However child sacrifice was a capital offence in ancient Israel (Lv 20:2).

Old Testament foundations

The sixth commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'(AV) (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17) has its roots in the creation narrative's 'Let us make man in our image' (Gn 1:26) and in the Noachic Covenant's 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed' (Gn 9:6). Man, being made in the image of God, is not to be killed.

The English language has created for us a confusion that is not present in the original text. There are in fact ten Hebrew words translated 'kill' in the authorized version of the Bible, all with different shades of meaning, but only one of them is implicated in the sixth commandment, the word 'ratsach'. Its Greek equivalent is 'phoneuo' and it is most accurately translated 'murder'(NIV). The meaning of the word is further defined in four main passages in the Pentateuch (Ex 21:12-14; Lv 24:17-21; Nu 35:16-31; Dt 19:4-13).

This resolves the ambiguity for us as we are left with a precise definition of what is prohibited, namely the 'intentional killing of an innocent human being'. Let us consider this in more detail.

First, the commandment forbids 'intentional' killing. Anyone killing another human being unintentionally was able to flee to a city of refuge where he would gain some protection from the 'avenger of blood'. The natural death of the high priest would later atone for the killing and the guilty party would be freed (Nu 35:28). However this 'manslaughter' provision applied only in very limited circumstances:

'For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbour to cut wood, and as he swings his axe to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbour and kill him' (Dt 19:5).

Killing resulting from negligence was not excused as unintentional (Ex 21:29). Neither was killing 'in hostility' even if not necessarily premeditated (Nu 35:21).

Second, the commandment forbids the killing of an 'innocent human being'. Under the Old Covenant God authorised or permitted killing in three situations: in the context of holy war, for capital offences and in self defence (Ex 22:2). The holy war conditions are clearly spelt out by Moses (Dt 20:10-18). In cities within the promised land everybody was to be killed, in cities at a distance the men only were to be killed and only if a preliminary offer of peace was not accepted.

There were over twenty capital offences ranging from murder to contempt of court. In these situations the Israelites had the obligation of carrying out the judicial killing as God's representatives. The self defence provision only operated if someone who had broken into a house after dark intending to commit a crime was killed by the owner while protecting his family and property.

God authorised only the killing of the guilty. 'Innocent' blood could not be shed intentionally under any circumstances and is in fact uniformly condemned throughout Scripture (Ex 23:7; 2 Ki 21:16; Ps 106:37,38; Je 19:4).

We must not become confused here with legal, psychological or social definitions of murder. The Bible does not support the conclusions of others that murder is 'the killing of a human being unlawfully with malice aforethought'[16] or killing with 'a feeling of ill-will'[17],[18] or 'illegal killing inimical to the community'. [19] It is rather 'the intentional killing of an innocent human being'.

So in summary, the Old Testament teaching is that the intentional killing of any innocent human being is wrong. There is no provision for diminished responsibility on the basis of age or illness and there is no provision for compassionate killing even at the person's request. Similarly there is no recognition of a 'right to die' as human life belongs to God (Ps 24:1) and is not the personal possession of any human being. Suicide is equally a breach of the sixth commandment. Only God has the authority to take human life. Man can only do so under God's delegated authority.

New Testament principles

What of the New Testament? In Old Testament prophecy concerning the New Covenant we read that God's spirit is to be put in believers in order to enable them to obey his laws and decrees (Ezk 36:24-27). God's law instead of being written on tablets of stone is to be put in men's minds and written on their hearts (Je 31:31-34). Law is not dispensed with. Rather the purpose of the Spirit is to enable the moral law to be properly obeyed.

This high view of Old Testament moral law is also evident in the teaching of Christ himself, who commanded his disciples to obey the teachers of the law in so far as they were faithful to the Law of Moses (Mt 23:2-3), and said that anyone who broke one of the least of the Law's commandments and taught others to do the same would be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven. According to Christ not 'the least stroke of a pen' is to disappear from the Law until 'heaven and earth disappear'. In fact his disciples are expected to go beyond mere observance of the letter of the Law to fulfilment of the very principle of love upon which it is based (Mt 5:17-20). So for example, in the eyes of Christ, hate and lust are to be regarded as seriously as murder and adultery (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28).

In apostolic teaching, while it is asserted that we are now 'not under law but under grace' (Rom 6:14) this statement refers not to our ethical obligations under the New Covenant but rather to the basis of our justification. Indeed we now have a much more exacting ethical obligation than mere observance of the letter of the Old Testament moral law, namely to live 'according to the Spirit'. In other words, while our goodness or righteousness is 'by faith' (Rom 1:17) the evidence of the genuineness of our faith is that we perform good works (Jas 2:26) by living 'according to the Spirit'.

For completeness I should comment about 'holy war' and capital punishment in a New Testament context. In the church age both the nature of our opposition and the mode of our victory have changed from that of Israel. Our opposition is no longer 'flesh and blood' but rather 'spiritual forces of evil' (Eph 6:12). Accordingly the mode of our victory is not by killing but in recognizing that Jesus has already triumphed over our enemies through the cross, and that by virtue of being 'seated with him' we share his position of authority over them (Eph 1:20-22, 2:6). This leaves aside the far more complex issue of whether Christians should submit to secular governing authorities to the extent of fighting for one country against another. This issue is outside the scope of this seminar.

With regard to capital punishment, or any judicial sentencing for that matter, this function has passed entirely to the state which is God's instituted authority, his 'servant' and 'agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (Rom 13:1-5). The church has no authority to carry out Old Testament punishments on its members. In fact the very most it can do is to excommunicate those who repeatedly refuse to respond to correction (1 Cor 5:12-13).

So in summary the New Testament gives us an even higher view of law than the Old and the absolute prohibition against intentional killing of innocent human beings remains in place.

Attacks on biblical law

As I mentioned in the previous seminar biblical law is under attack from within the church from three distinct ideologies which we called for convenience *antinomianism*, *situationism* and *legalism*. All of these have a major bearing on the euthanasia debate. Let us consider them in turn.

Antinomianism dispenses with law altogether. The antinomian argues that since we are under grace, and not law, and since the death of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness, we are no longer under any obligation to obey the moral law. This flies in the face of Paul's own rhetorical question 'Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?' to which he supplies his own answer 'By no means!' and goes on to point out that our freedom from the condemnation of the law means that we are now 'slaves of righteousness' and thereby obliged to obey God's commands (Rom 6:15-18).

Situationism retains the law but claims that in certain situations the commandments may be suspended in favour of the higher principle of 'love to one's neighbour' (Mt 22:39-40). The situationist argues that one may intentionally kill in certain situations and yet be acting 'in love'. There are two main problems with this. Firstly, it clearly contravenes Christ's own teaching that obedience to the greater commandments of the law does not in any way excuse disobedience to the lesser (Mt 5:17-20, 23:23). In the mind of Christ these 'conflicts of duty' simply do not occur. Secondly, it begs the question of what a 'loving' action is. The reality is that 'individual conviction or conscience' is made the arbiter of right and wrong, a return to ancient heresy of each doing 'as he sees fit' (Dt 12:8). This has tremendous dangers as we have already seen with our forgoing historical outline.

Legalism substitutes human oral tradition for God's law and introduces a nonbiblical hierarchy of sins (Mk 7:8-13). God's true commandments are distorted such that they become impractical and in fact impossible for all but a select group to obey. Thus the prohibition against 'intentional killing of the innocent' may become a directive to 'strive officiously to sustain life at all costs'. The result is that the most important principles of love, justice and mercy are ultimately lost sight of and a new law is imposed (Mt 23:23). A tragic consequence can be that in the case of terminal care the attainable goals of caring, consoling and comforting are forgotten as the doctor driven more by guilt than compassion feels he must do everything technologically possible for the patient.

Antinomianism, Situationism and Legalism are all distortions of Christian teaching, in short they are heresies with dangerous consequences and need to be recognised as such and rejected. However we need to recognise that each is in part an overreaction to mistakes of the past: antinomianism to joyless obedience, situationism to obedience without compassion and pharisaism to lawless indulgence. In rejecting these false 'isms' we need to recognise that the best argument against them is the practical demonstration of joyful, compassionate, obedient Christian service.

This analysis will help us see that however appealing euthanasia may seem in any given situation; it can never be justified biblically. It is only God who can take innocent life. But it may not convince us in the issue of abortion. Is abortion the intentional killing of an innocent human being? Abortion is undoubtedly 'intentional'. It is also 'killing' because the fetus is alive before and dead after the event. The fetus is 'innocent', not being guilty of any capital offence. Abortion then is certainly not manslaughter (as has been suggested[20]) because manslaughter is unintentional. Nor is it 'justifiable homicide',[21] [22] because homicide was only ever justifiable for *guilty* human beings.

But is the fetus a human being? This has become the key issue in the debate.

The status of life before birth

The fundamental issue in the abortion debate is whether life before birth is viewed in the same way by God as life after birth. If it is, then we must be obliged to treat human life in the womb with the same respect with which we would treat human life at any other stage of development. If it isn't then we could argue that we are justified in employing some sort of sliding scale of value.[23] What does the Bible say?

Fundamental to the Bible's teaching on the status of human life is the principle that God himself is completely just and impartial (2 Ch 19:7). It is therefore not surprising that Jesus and the apostles warned against partiality on the basis of wealth (Jas 2:3,4), sex, race, social standing (Gal 3:28) and age (Mt 19:14). Furthermore Old Testament teaching enjoined special respect and protection for easily exploited groups such as the poor (Pr 22:22-23), widows and orphans (Ex 22:22-24), aliens (Ex 22:21), the handicapped (Lv 19:14), slaves (Ex 21:2-6) and the elderly (Lv 19:32). It must follow that devaluing any human life, let alone vulnerable human life, is inconsistent with God's justice. The heart of Christian ethical teaching is that we must love as Christ himself loved (Jn 13:34), that the strong should lay down their lives for the weak (Phil 2:5-8, Rom 5:6-8). To suggest that the weak may be sacrificed in the interests of the strong is not biblical morality.

Furthermore there are many specific references to life before birth in Scripture. Psalm 139:13-16 affirms God's *creation* of, and *communion* with, the unborn child as well as implying the *continuity* between life before and after birth:

'For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.'

I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful...

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place...

your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.'

God calls Isaiah and Jeremiah before birth (Is 49:1, Je 1:5) and forms Job 'in the womb' as well as bringing him out of it (Jb 10:8-9, 18-19). The Isaiah reference is particularly noteworthy because it comes from one of the so-called Servant Songs and therefore speaks prophetically of Christ himself.

Many other references to life before birth in the Bible reinforce these principles (eg. Gn 25:22-23, Ps 22:9,10, 51:5, 71:6, 119:73, Ec 11:5, Is 44:2,24, 49:5, Ho 12:3, Mt 1:18, Lk 1:15, 41-44) and there are over 60 references which mention the event of conception explicitly. In the Luke reference we see Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, prophesying over Christ in his first week of gestation, and the baby John leaping in the womb. The Psalm 22 and the Genesis 25 references are also prophetic of Christ, so when we consider that he was 'made like his brothers in every way' (Heb 2:17) this must speak clearly of our status before birth as well.

In the face of the weight of this biblical testimony however, some Christians have justified attributing a lesser value to life before birth on the basis of Exodus 21:22-25. This argument dominated the literature of the Christian Medical Fellowship for decades [24] [25] [26] [27] [28] [29] [30] and perhaps accounts for the CMF's silence at the time of the Abortion Act being passed. In reality the interpretation is flawed. Let us consider it in some detail.

'If two men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye ... bruise for bruise.' (Ex 21:22-25)

The argument put forward is that fetal life must be of less value to God or 'miscarriage' would have been punishable by the death penalty. It is easier to understand how people come to this conclusion when the RSV version of the translation is considered:

'...If men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows...'

It is essential to stress first that this cannot be construed as a reference to abortion. There is no intention to hurt the unborn child and the woman is an innocent bystander to a fight who suffers accidental injury. However there are three key questions raised by the passage which have a bearing on the status of life before birth: Is this a premature live birth or a miscarriage? Does the fine apply to causing the death or the premature delivery of the baby? Does the set of punishments apply to injury of the child or mother or both?

The varied interpretations made by English translators virtually all add to the meaning of the original Hebrew text. Whereas the NIV reading implies a premature live birth, the RSV suggests that the baby is dead. The Hebrew doesn't rule out either possibility but simply states that 'her child' (*yeled*) - or more correctly her offspring since the form of the noun is a generic plural - 'goes out' (*yatsa*). *Yeled* in most biblical contexts means simply child (see for example Gn 21:8, Ru 4:16, 1 Ki 3:25) and *yatsa* elsewhere simply describes going forth (Gn 12:4, Ex 35:20). Because there is no indication in the Hebrew text that death of the baby has necessarily occurred it is therefore not justified to assume (as many authors do) that causing a miscarriage was punishable only by a fine. Equally, the Hebrew does not specify whether the 'serious injury' referred to is suffered by the mother or the child. Both readings are possible. If, as some commentators have argued,^[31] the lex talionis (life for life etc) applies equally to the child, causing a stillbirth or miscarriage would have been punishable by death. This reading would be far more consistent with the rest of the biblical testimony about the status of life before birth. If the Hebrew leaves room for doubt then surely we are obliged to give the fetus the benefit of that doubt. It is extremely dangerous in any area of biblical interpretation to base our whole practice on an unwarranted deduction from a single verse.

If God himself does not discriminate between individuals and affirms the humanity of life before birth recognising conception as a strategic event, dare we act differently? How can we justifiably claim that unborn children are not neighbours to whom we owe responsibility? The burden of proof must certainly be with those who are trying to justify abortion.

If, as we have argued, life before birth has the same status as life after birth in the eyes of God, it must follow that if we wouldn't approve of infanticide in a given situation, neither should we approve of abortion. We would not sanction the destruction of a newborn baby who was grossly deformed, or conceived as a result of rape or the child of a minor. We would rather look for some way to make the best of a bad situation, to work the evil for good - by using our medical skills, or helping practically or financially or perhaps by arranging adoption. Shouldn't we then treat the fetus in the same way?

Most arguments that have been put forward to devalue life before birth are based more on human feeling and intuition than divine revelation. For example, some^[32] assume that being made in God's image involves possessing a certain level of rationality, consciousness or capacity for relationship and then argue that this is impossible without a certain level of neurological function. Scripture simply tells us that man is made in God's image (Gn 1:27; 9:6). A human being not yet born has value not because she knows God but because God knows her! (Ps 139:13-16) Human status is bestowed from above, given by grace, rather than being earned.

Others^[33] assign human value on the basis of how we feel. It is argued that because we mourn miscarriages less than stillbirths, early life is less important. However to imagine that our status depends on how much we are valued by other people is again to undermine the Bible's teaching that it is ultimately what God thinks of us that really matters.

Some^[34] presuppose lack of value by repeatedly referring to the fetus as 'a potential human being'. But it is surely more correct to call it a potential infant or adult or even a human being with potential. Speculation about whether or not the fetus possesses a soul also involves presuppositions. Whilst we must admit to some sort of dualism at the time of death (something after all survives death to be judged) the Bible gives no support to the notion that 'the soul enters the body' at some point after conception. To argue from the special case of Christ^[35] using Hebrews 10:5 'a body you prepared for me' is not justified. Christ was pre-existent. We are not. If we want to argue from the special case of Christ then we have the Holy Spirit's own testimony (Lk 1:42) that Christ was present in Mary's womb at about 14 days' gestation (see vv 36,56-8). Can we really support with any conviction that he wasn't present at conception given Gabriel's visit and prophecy at this time? (Lk 1:26,36)

In Bishop Ryle's words, 'If the thing is not in the Bible, cannot be deduced from the Bible, or is not in manifest harmony with the Bible, we should have none of it.' There is no biblical basis whatsoever for assuming that human life before birth has any less status in the eyes of God than life after birth. The Scriptures rather support the conclusion that God values both equally.

The Cross

Both euthanasia and abortion raise many difficult questions and we'll look at some of them in the time remaining but I want first to say something about the relevance of the cross to this whole discussion. If we do make a stand as Christians in any area of medicine (and particularly in the areas of abortion and euthanasia) we need to be working for better alternatives. This will be different for each person depending on their gifts and position of influence but for abortion it may mean being engaged in counselling, helping to set up support networks, lobbying to introduce legislation which will give more protection to the unborn, giving financially to those involved in all these sorts of work - as well as being firm in our resolve not to be a party to the shedding of innocent blood ourselves - be it intentional or by default. Part of carrying the cross too involves using our time, talents and money in searching for compassionate Christian alternatives where the world offers diabolical quick-fix solutions - and if necessary, putting our careers, reputations and lives on the line.

Jesus' approach to the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11) was not to condemn but to forgive, to call her on to a better lifestyle and ultimately to make it possible for her by dying on the cross in her place. There are many similarities between this situation and that of abortion: The sexual sin that so often leads to an unplanned pregnancy, the absent but equally guilty male partner and the condemning crowds.

In both abortion and euthanasia we often seem to have only two equally undesirable alternatives to choose from. For the patient dying in pain it is seen as either living hell or the euthanasia needle. For the woman with an unplanned pregnancy, it is seen as either a life worse than death for an unloved child or the abortionist's curette.

In both scenarios, as for the woman caught in adultery there is a third way. For the dying patient it finds its shape in the hospice movement and good palliative care. Thankfully that safety net is already in place and was one of the major planks in the argument leading the House of Lords to rule against euthanasia.

For the unplanned pregnancy there was no similar safety net in place when the Abortion Act was passed in Britain in 1967. But now we are seeing the rise of crisis pregnancy counselling services (such as those run by CARE for Life) tending to the needs of women and helping them either in keeping their babies or in the adoption process.

In both cases the third way is the way of the cross. It calls us to expend our time, money and energy in finding compassionate solutions to bad situations.