



BUILDING A LIFE-AFFIRMING CHURCH CULTURE

A CHALLENGE TO PURSUE A BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE DIGNITY AND WORTH OF EVERY HUMAN LIFE BY SHARON JAMES

June 24, 2022, was a momentous day for which we should give thanks to God—wherever we live.

The biblical conviction that every human life has dignity (because all are created in the image of God) lies at the foundation of the life-affirming medical ethic which has shaped Western culture for 2,000 years.

That biblical ethic was attacked head-on when, in 1973, the US Supreme Court claimed that the US constitution provided a right to abortion. Their decision in the case of *Roe v Wade* ruled that human lives located in the womb were *not* worthy of the protection that other human lives are entitled to.

After nearly fifty years, that ruling has been overturned. The Supreme Court has now, rightly, recognized that the US

Constitution does *not* provide a right to abortion. Decisions about abortion law were handed back to state lawmakers.

Ever since 1973, those involved in the pro-life movement in the US (and in many other nations), have been educating, campaigning, caring for women with crisis pregnancies, offering post-abortion counselling and more. Their work has been driven by the conviction that the sanctity of human life does not rest on capacity or independence, which may be extinguished by sickness or age. It rests on the truth that all human life is made in the image of God. And it has been motivated by the desire to care for mothers—both lives matter!

In the US, pro-life pregnancy counselling centres serve 1.85 million people, and provide almost \$267 million in free services (including 486,000 free ultrasounds, 1.3 million packs of diapers and 2 million

baby outfits) each year. They receive little to no government funding, whereas Planned Parenthood (a leading abortion provider) receives \$618.1 million per year.

All those involved in such pro-life activity had cause to praise God on June 24. It unleashed a storm of political protest, as well as media vilification and violent attacks against pro-life centres across the US. But far from being intimidated, many in the US and beyond resolved to do *more* to provide care for mothers and their children, *more* to inform and motivate a younger generation about the need to protect unborn human life and *more* to argue the case that every person, born or unborn, should enjoy equal protection in law.

As we reflect on this historic moment, it presents an opportunity to consider how we can increasingly build a life-affirming culture in our own families and churches.

1. Praise God, the giver of life, and preach the biblical responsibility to protect life

God has given us a divinely inspired praise manual, and as we sing Psalm 139, we acknowledge that he is the giver of life. “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

Genesis 1:27 explains that human beings are distinct from the rest of creation as we bear the image of God. God’s moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments is a perfect expression of his moral character. The Sixth Commandment is “You shall not murder.” As J.R. Ling writes,

Protection of human life is a recurring theme in Scripture. Uniquely in the created order it is only the lives of human beings that enjoy this special protection. The Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13), stands out as a great beacon to protect all innocent human life. ‘Innocent’ here does not mean those ‘without sin’, but those ‘without harm’. Killing is permitted [in the Bible] in the cases of capital punishment, just wars and in self-defence, but killing of the innocent is strictly forbidden (*When Does Human Life Begin?*).

Supremely, Christians affirm the dignity of every human life because God himself, in Christ, became flesh. Christ was incarnate from the moment of conception. If Jesus Christ took on human life as a single cell, our life also begins at conception. God, the giver of life, demands that human life should be protected from conception to natural death.

Sadly, many church leaders are hesitant to preach on beginning-of-life issues. Some fear upsetting those who have undergone abortions; some see it as just a “woman’s issue”; others are uneasy that they are not fully informed on what is a complex debate.

But it’s not difficult to understand that human life begins when the mother’s egg is fertilized by the father’s sperm. Human life should be afforded protection from conception onward. There are many great resources which can be used, including stunning films depicting the wonder of fetal development. We should all be equipped to answer the misinformation put out by those who claim that abortion is a “human right.”

2. Care for mothers

Abortion harms baby *and* mother, and we are called to love our neighbours. This may involve offering care to mothers with crisis pregnancies.

Abortion is usually regarded as a woman’s choice, but one study indicated that 73.8% of women who had abortions felt pressured to do so, 58.3% said they had their abortion to make someone else happy, and nearly 30% said they feared losing their partner if they did not abort their child [G. Veith, *Post Christian* (Crossway 2020)]. Is your church indicating in some way where women with a crisis pregnancy can access help?

When pastors avoid speaking out on abortion for fear of offending women who have had abortions, it can compound the tragedy for those women who carry a hidden burden of guilt and shame, sometimes for decades. Is there also clearly signposted access to confidential counselling where those who have had abortions can be offered the forgiveness, hope and healing that is found in Christ?

3. See children as a blessing

Many today assume pregnancy is something to avoid, rather like a sexually transmitted disease. Bearing children is seen as a barrier to equal rights for women. Babies become “the enemy” and some claim it’s a “human right” to kill them before they are born. Some radical environmentalists go so far as to claim that humans are a “plague” on mother earth, and we should stop having children altogether.

But children are a blessing. God made man and woman “in his image” with the wondrous capacity to create new life. As they become “one flesh” in the marital union, they, in turn, may create a child in *their* own image (Genesis 5:1–3). The conception of each child is a gift from God (Psalm 127; 128:3ff). He gives children as a heritage for their parents for succeeding generations (Psalm 127:3).

With the coming of Christ, we learn that human marriage is a temporary signpost to the eternal reality of the love of Christ for the church (Ephesians 5:31–32). As Christian believers, we are called to make disciples (Matthew 28:18–20), and whether married



Psalm 139: A Psalm of David

You, O LORD, have searched and known me,
You know when I sit or rise;
Every thought and deed lies open
To your all-perceiving eyes.
You have laid your hand upon me,
Guarded me before, behind;
Knowledge so sublime, so
towering,
Far transcends an earthly mind.

Where could I elude your Spirit,
Ever present everywhere?
In the heavens, or deep in Hades?
You are with me even there!
Eastward, westward, still you guide
me,
From your grip I cannot stray;
Nor will darkness hide me from you:
Night to you is clear as day.

For you made my inmost being,
Wove me in my mother’s womb,
God all-wise, who ordered for me
All my days until the tomb.
How profound, how vast, how
precious
All the workings of your will
Countless marvels! Endless mercies!
When I wake, I’m with you still.

God all-holy, judge the wicked,
Break their blasphemous design!
How can I not hate such evil?
LORD, your enemies are mine.
Search my heart, O God, and know
me,
Test my anxious thoughts, I pray;
Take away my sins and lead me
Into everlasting day.

PRAISE 139 © David. G. Preston
8 7 8 7 D, Blauenwern (i.e., the tune
often used for “Love Divine, All Loves
Excelling”)

or not, whether parents or not, we are to bear and nurture spiritual children. Those who are single (or married people unable to bear biological children) may be afforded *greater* capacity for such spiritual fruitfulness (1 Corinthians 7:32–35). But the New Testament *also* teaches us that parents are to bring their children up to know and honour the Lord (Ephesians 6:1–4; 1 Timothy 5:4; Titus 2:4).

So, we affirm the blessing of having children and the importance of parenthood as a calling, while also recognizing that it is not the *only* blessing. There is a shift in emphasis in the New Covenant, but the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28) is still to be fulfilled. Men and women have been made in the image of God and given stewardship of creation. Faithful family life is one means of moving creation toward its appointed end.

Understanding that life is a gift from God guards against excessive individualism, and the tendency to treat children as possessions or property. Many Christians uncritically assimilate the current “contraceptive mentality” which holds that we (not the Lord) are in control of when we have a child. It’s assumed couples can delay having children and then have a child exactly when they want. Some imbibe the thinking that we have a “right to reproduce,” and a right to access artificial reproductive technologies (ARTS) when desired. There is often little awareness of the threat to unborn human life of some contraceptive methods and most ARTS. Some church leaders are reluctant to provide teaching on these matters. But those who realize at a later stage that they have, albeit unwittingly, engaged in procedures that led to the loss of human life, may then feel betrayed and wish they had been better informed.

Any contraceptive method which can act as abortifacients should be avoided (which includes most, if not all, types of hormonal contraception). Many Christians in good conscience believe that other means of contraception (eg. barrier methods) may be used at some seasons to space out their family size. Others disagree, believing that every act of conjugal union should be open to God’s gift of life. Such believers may use natural family planning (NFP), which *never* *conceals* an act of marital union. Modern NFP methods (fertility awareness) are very different from what used to be known as the rhythm method. When used carefully they can be effective in spacing out family size.

The same fertility awareness methods are also helpful in dealing with infertility and they are “life-friendly” in contrast to in vitro fertilization (IVF), which involves

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the production of, and then the destruction of, “spare” embryos.

Procreative stewardship “requires that children should be received as gifts from God that are entrusted into the care of parents” (B. Waters) either by procreation or adoption. Today, the medicalization of procreation means that conception, gestation, birth and parenting can be separated. This divides what God designed to go together. The global trade in gametes (sperm, eggs, embryos), as well as the availability of surrogacy, exploits many, and treats babies like products to be bought and sold. People are not property.

But there is dignity afforded to adoption. Throughout the Bible, we see God’s heart for orphans, as well as examples of adoption. Throughout church history, Christians have been at the forefront of those willing to open hearts and homes to needy children. When considering adoption, it should be the needs and interest of the child that are paramount.

In our fallen world families break, but we should not deliberately create situations where children are deprived of a father or a mother. All too often, decisions related to artificial reproductive technologies are all about what are assumed to be adult rights. They minimize the child’s need to know and be cared for by their own parents.

4. Pray about the need to defend life

This is a spiritual battle. We look to God for help. As we pray, individually, in families and as local churches, we lament for those lives lost to abortion. In 2017, it was reckoned that there had been one billion babies killed by abortion worldwide in the past 100 years. When we reflect that every human life from conception is priceless in worth, because made in the image of God, we tremble at the magnitude of that number.

We grieve for those mothers (and fathers and other family members) who have been hurt. We pray for those considering abortion. We pray for those involved in performing abortions (and we can be encouraged by testimonies of those who have seen the horror of what they were doing). We intercede for those involved in the health services who may be put under pressure to engage in abortions, even against their own conscience. We ask God to help lawmakers to do justice and protect

the vulnerable. We pray for God to bring repentance.

As we pray, we may be moved to act.

- Do we know a mother who needs practical help?
- Is there a local pro-life group we could support? If not, pray about the possibility of initiating one.
- Is there a life-affirming pregnancy advice/support centre in our area? If not, pray about whether one could be established.
- Is there access to abortion recovery counselling in our area? Is there a way of making this more widely known to those who may need it? If not, pray about how this could be facilitated.
- Are we well informed about policy decisions being made where we live? Do we use our rights as citizens to engage in the democratic process to protect life? Are we aware that a Western global elite has been pushing a radical pro-abortion agenda onto many nations?

5. Ensure all are treated with dignity

God is the giver of life. As followers of Christ, we know we are indeed “our brother’s keeper,” called to care for and defend fellow human beings. As well as the unborn, that includes those who are sick, elderly, frail and have special needs. In Canada, we are to resist efforts to promote assisted suicide or euthanasia and actively oppose the expansion of this law (legalized in 2016, expanded in 2022). See *Barnabas* (Summer 2021) for more on this issue.

Respect for every human life did not arise from the other world religions, or from secularism. It arose from the biblical conviction that God created man and woman in his own image, and that Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection, forever confirmed the *dignity, value and worth* of the human condition.

Today the *uniqueness and dignity of human life* is often either openly denied or subtly undermined. We are to bear witness to that foundational and wonderful biblical truth, and as God enables, live it out in practice. **B**

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