

The Maine Interfaith Council
for Reproductive Choices

REPRODUCTIVE CHOICES:
*An American Baptist
Perspective*

The Rev. Craig Davis-Johnson

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For most people seeking to have a child, the joyful news of pregnancy may make them want to shout like Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46-47). However, when circumstances lead a woman to consider abortion, she faces a lasting, personal decision that may wrap her in doubt and grief.

This is not a time for the church to either abandon her or pass simplistic judgments upon her and her partner. Within the American Baptist tradition, this also is not a time to provide easy answers or authoritarian rules.

This is a time for compassion. Believers and their church communities must offer their love, prayers and practical support to women and men facing problem pregnancies. And as pastors and people offer spiritual counsel, they are called to observe some of the basic principles that make American Baptists a covenanting community.

THE BELIEVER'S FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

The American Baptist Churches USA affirms that individual believers have the right to

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freedom of conscience. Our historic term for the freedom of the individual is "soul liberty," which means that each person is free to have a direct relationship with God and to govern his or her moral decisions according to the movement of the Holy Spirit upon one's conscience and one's reading of Scripture.

At the same time that one enjoys "soul liberty," each person is responsible for his or her choices and actions. We also are responsible for our relationships: for maintaining an open and lively relationship with God, a respectful and just relationship with other persons, and an association with other followers of Christ for our mutual support and guidance.

Freedom and responsibility are inseparable. This freedom for a direct relationship with God is balanced with the vital need to be responsible for all our beliefs, behaviors, and relationships.

THE CHURCH'S DIVERSITY

American Baptists are united in affirming that life is a sacred and gracious gift of God. We affirm that God is the Creator of all life, that human beings are created in the image of God, and that Christ is the Lord of life.

In regard to reproductive choices, a free and responsible affirmation of the gift of life leads us to declare that the conception of human life and our choices of birth control have vital and far-reaching consequences—for the woman, for her partner, for the potential child

who may be conceived, and for all others affected by our choices.

However, American Baptists often differ sincerely and deeply on what is at stake in abortion. A fertilized human egg is human life, certainly, but so is—say—a fingernail. Yet since even a zygote has the potential to grow into person, we surely value a human, from conception, more than we value a fingernail. However, when does that cluster of cells become a person? At what point do we declare that the growing fetus deserves the legal and moral rights we happily give to a newborn baby and its mother?

In earlier Christian centuries, opinions differed. Some thought that the "soul" was an object passed from parent to child at conception. Others argued that "ensoulment" happened at quickening, or when the baby was felt to move. Still others said the fetus became a person at birth. Science has rendered some of these answers outdated, but science has not told us—and perhaps cannot tell us—when a fetus becomes a person.

BIBLICAL VIEWPOINTS

Today many argue on biblical grounds that a human deserves full rights as a person from conception. To them, abortion is immoral and destroys a human being created in God's image (Job 31:15; Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:44).

Others point out that the Bible never dis-

cusses abortion per se. The Bible's poetic expressions of God's overflowing love never were intended or implied to be biological data. It may be added that the Hebrew tradition of the Bible has never treated the fetus as having an importance equal to the mother's (Exodus 21:22-25).

Many believe that while abortion may be a difficult or even regrettable choice, life at any cost may not be the highest priority. Abortion may be a morally acceptable choice based upon the biblical principles of compassion and justice (John 8:1-11; Matthew 7:1-5) and freedom of the will (Romans 14:10-13).

Countless gradations of opinion among these basic positions are expressed within the American Baptist fellowship.

THE PRIORITY OF LOVE

No matter what our opinions, we all stand humbly before God, lacking the wisdom to choose or to guide others perfectly, or the compassion and commitment to serve others perfectly. Therefore, while being true to our beliefs and faithful to our responsibilities, we also must witness to the reconciling love of God. This witness unites and strengthens us.

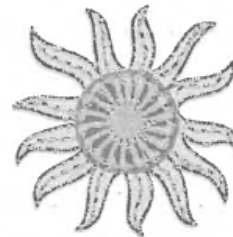
Pastors and congregations are responsible for caring compassionately for those facing problem pregnancies, whatever their final decisions. They should provide a loving community for them during and beyond either abortion or birth. The church also must help men

to take equal responsibility for pregnancy. Finally, believers must take responsibility for the spiritual guidance they offer, including providing appropriate financial and emotional support for women either ending a pregnancy or bringing a pregnancy to term.

Women and men facing a crisis pregnancy need the support and companionship of Christ's people, prayerfully committed to seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and carrying out the ministry their convictions require.

Through helping those in need express their freedom of conscience responsibly, and through persistent, prayerful, and practical compassion, American Baptists acknowledge a calling to show the love of God individually and in community.

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