

Human Personhood Begins at Conception

PETER KREEFT

Philosopher Peter Kreeft presents the arguments commonly used to explain why the unborn child is not a human person and then shows clearly and simply why each of these arguments cannot possibly be true.

Non-Christians and even Christians can take opposite positions on abortion even when they think rationally, honestly, and with good will. The continuing controversy over abortion shows that it is a truly controversial issue. It is not simple and clear-cut, but complex. Just as the choices for action are often difficult for a woman contemplating abortion, the choices for thought are often difficult for open-minded philosophers.



Peter Kreeft

Everything I have said so far is a lie, in fact a dangerous lie.

There is one and only one reason why people argue about the topic of this paper, whether human personhood begins at conception: because some people want to justify abortion. Therefore I begin with some remarks about abortion.

Abortion is a clear-cut evil. Anyone who honestly seeks “peace on earth, good will toward men” will see this if only he extends it to include women and children. Especially Christians should see this very clearly, for their faith reinforces their natural reason and conscience, a faith that declares that every human being is sacred because he or she is made in the image of God. The fact that some people controvert a position does not in itself make that position intrinsically controversial. People argued for both sides about slavery, racism and genocide too, but that did not make them complex and difficult issues. Moral issues are always terribly complex, said Chesterton — for someone without principles.

I think I have already offended every reader who is not clearly pro-life, and before I begin to argue my case I would like briefly to examine that offense. Though I shall appeal only to reason in the body of my paper, I want to appeal first to an attitude of will because it is to the argument like a frame to a picture. Our will often moves our reason, for good or for ill. “For ill” refers to rationalization, but how can will move reason for good? By the initial attitude of honesty, which is a fanatical and uncompromising love of truth, objective truth.

Objectivity does not mean abandoning or weakening our convictions. An honest conviction is one arrived at after an open-minded search for truth; a prejudice is one arrived at before. Honesty leads to conviction, not away from it.

I think we will have little hope of attaining this goal of honesty unless we first realize its difficulty and the sacrifices of self-will it demands. The most prejudiced people in the world are those who think they are unprejudiced. In my own thought life, I find this total honesty to be very demanding, very rare, and absolutely necessary.

Please turn to yourself for one moment and ask yourself this one question: Am I reading this paper because I want to be the servant of truth or because I want truth to be my servant? Do I want to win an argument or win a truth? Am I willing, even eager, to admit I was wrong if reason proves me wrong?

If Freud is right, we have no hope of being honest, for all our reasoning is rationalization. If that were true, it would be self-eliminating, for that belief too would be only rationalization. If we believe that objective truth does not exist or cannot be known, we shall cease to fight for it with words and begin to fight for domination over each other, replacing reason and justice and morality with power — as is done in abortion clinics to unborn children.

It is not easy to argue about abortion objectively. Our choice of words is already prejudicial — as mine was just now, but no more so than calling the killing of a fetus “the termination of a pregnancy.” I wonder when they will start calling it “the final solution to the pregnancy problem”?

Our passions run hot about abortion. I have repeatedly been told that I am naive to argue against abortion philosophically, not realizing that abortion is not so much about fetuses as about sex; that those who demand to live “the sexual revolution” (i.e., promiscuously) must have abortion as a backup, a trump card, when other means of birth control fail. I have been told this by both sides often enough that I begin to believe it. After all, if we obeyed the commandment against adultery, 90% of all our abortions would cease.

The issue I have been asked to argue, the personhood of the fetus, is triply crucial. It is crucial for abortion, abortion is crucial for medical ethics, and medical ethics is crucial for the future of our civilization.

First, the personhood of the fetus is clearly the crucial issue for abortion, for if the fetus is not a person, abortion is not the deliberate killing of an innocent person: if it is, it is. All other aspects of the abortion controversy are relative to this one; e.g., women have rights — over their own bodies but not over other persons’ bodies. The law must respect a “right to privacy” but killing other persons is not a private but a public deed. Persons have a “right to life” but non-persons (e.g., cells, tissues, organs, and animals) do not.

Second, abortion is a crucial issue for medical ethics because the right to life is the fundamental right. If I am not living I can have no other rights. Corpses have no rights. The two sides on this issue are more intransigently opposed to each other than on any other issue — rightly so, for if

pro-lifers are right, then abortion is murder, and if pro-choicers are right, then pro-lifers are fanatic, intolerant and repressive about nothing. We must intolerantly kill both intolerance and killing.

Third, medical ethics is crucial for our civilization, for our lives are more closely touched here than by any economic, political, or military issue. For instance, artificial immortality would change mankind more radically than a nuclear war, and surrogate motherhood, which brings us to Brave New World, is a more radical development than totalitarian dictatorship, which brings us only to 1984.

Abortion is also crucial because it involves at least six other crucial background issues:

Are there objective values that must be known and obeyed, or do we create our own values like the rules of a game? If there are objective values, are any of them absolute or are all relative to changing situations, motives, needs, or desires? Is human life such an absolute, or “sacred,” or does the “quality of life” or level of ability to perform certain human acts define the value of a person? Can human reason discern the truth about moral values or not? (Curiously, Christian fideists here line up with anti-Christian skeptics and secularists against mainline Christian orthodoxy.) What is a human person? Are we made in the image of King Kong or King God or both? Why is a human person? What is the purpose, goal, or “final cause” of human life? This question is necessarily involved because the end determines the means. Finally, abortion is defended most stoutly by the new ideology of radical feminism, which is more fundamentally critical of traditional values than any merely political ideology even in our century. It raises such radically new questions as whether the idea of the sanctity of unborn human life is part of a dark patriarchal plot to suppress and control women as reproductive slaves.

All these issues are involved in abortion, but I shall argue only one: Is the fetus a person? The case for pro-life’s affirmative answer is well-known, and so are the biological facts which constitute its simplest and strongest evidence, especially the genetic identity and individuality of the unborn child from the moment of conception. How does the pro-choice position argue against this case?

To understand the controversy, we must understand the general structure of moral reasoning. A moral conclusion about the goodness or evil of a human act is deduced from two premises: a major premise, which states a general moral principle (e.g., “we ought to pay our debts”) and a minor premise, which sees a particular situation as coming under that principle (e.g., “international debts are debts”). Thus the essential pro-life argument is as follows. The major premise is: “Thou shalt not kill” — i.e., all deliberate killing of innocent human beings is forbidden. The minor premise is that abortion is the deliberate killing of innocent human beings. The conclusion is that abortion is wrong.

There are two significantly different pro-choice answers to this argument. The more radical, or “hard,” pro-choice position denies the major premise; the less radical, or “soft,” pro-choice position denies the minor. “Hard pro-choice” denies the sanctity or inviolability of all humans; “soft pro-choice” denies the humanity of the fetus.

I think no one in the Christian Medical and Dental Society will take the hard pro-choice position, for Christianity clearly teaches (1) that all of us are made in the image of God and (2) that God Himself has forbidden us to kill, i.e., to murder innocent persons. I confine myself, therefore, to refuting the soft pro-choice position. Is the fetus a person? Obviously it is biologically human, genetically human, a distinct member of the species homo sapiens. So the soft pro-choicer must distinguish between human beings and persons, must say that fetuses are human but not persons, and say that all persons, but not all humans, are sacred and inviolable.

Thus the crucial issue is: Are there any human beings who are not persons? If so, killing them might be permissible, like killing warts. But who might these human non-persons be? Jews? Blacks? Slaves? Infidels? Counterrevolutionaries? Others have said so, and justified their genocide, lynching, slavery, jihad, or gulag. But pro-choicers never include these groups as non-persons. Many pro-choicers include severely retarded or handicapped humans, or very old and sick humans, as non-persons, but this is still morally shocking to most people, and many pro-choicers avoid that morally shocking position by including only fetuses as members of this newly invented class of human non-persons, or non-personal humans. I think no one ever conceived of this category before the abortion controversy. It looks very suspiciously like the category was invented to justify the killing, for its only members are the humans we happen to be now killing and want to keep killing and want to justify killing. But the only way we can prove this dark suspicion true is to refute the category. Are there any humans who are not persons?

Soft pro-choicers give reasons for thinking there are. Their position can be fairly summarized, I think, in seven arguments. Each attacks a basic pro-life syllogism by accusing it in different ways of using an ambiguous middle term, "human being." They say a fetus is a human life but not a human person:

First, there is the linguistic fact that we can and often do make a triple distinction among a human life, a human being and a human person. Each cell in our bodies has human life, and a single cell kept alive in a laboratory could be called "a human life" but certainly not "a human being" or "a human person." "A human being" is a biologically whole individual of the species. Even a human being born with no brain is a human being, not an ape; but it is not a person because it has no brain and cannot do anything distinctively human: think, know, choose, love, feel, desire, commit, relate, aspire, know itself, know God, know its past, know its future, know its environment, or communicate — all of which have, in various combinations, been offered as the marks of a person. The pro-life position seems to confuse the sanctity of the person with the sanctity of life, which is two steps removed from it.

Thus pro-life seems to be based on a linguistic confusion. Not all human life is sacred. Not even all human beings, individual members of the human species, are sacred. But all human persons are sacred.

Second, pro-lifers seem to commit the intellectual sin of biologism, idolatry of biology, by defining persons in a merely biological, genetic, material way. Membership in a biological species is not morally relevant, not what makes persons sacred and murder wrong. Membership in the human species is no more morally relevant than membership in the subspecies, or race. If racism is wrong, so is speciesism.

Third, the very young product of conception, the zygote, has no ability to perform any of the distinctive activities that anyone associates with personhood (reasoning, choosing, loving, communicating, etc.) — not even feeling pain, for the zygote has no brain or nervous system. At first it is only a single cell. How could anyone call a single cell a person?

Fourth, it seems to be an obvious mistake for the pro-lifer to claim that personhood begins abruptly, at conception, for personhood develops gradually, as a matter of degree. Every one of the characteristics we use to identify personhood arises and grows gradually rather than suddenly. Pro-lifers seem to be victims of simplistic, black-or-white thinking, but reality is full of greys.

Fifth, pro-lifers seem to confuse potential persons with actual persons. The fetus is potentially a person, but it must grow into an actual person.

Sixth, personhood is not a clear concept. There is not universal agreement on it. Different philosophers, scientists, religionists, moralists, mothers, and observers define it differently. It is a matter of opinion where the dividing line between persons and non-persons should be located. But what is a matter of opinion should not be decided or enforced by law. Law should express social consensus, and there is no consensus in our society about personhood's beginning or, consequently, about abortion. One opinion should not be forced on all. Pro-choice is not pro-abortion but, precisely, pro-choice.

Seventh, a fetus cannot be a person because it is part of another person, the mother. Persons are wholes, not parts. Persons are not parts of other persons, but the fetus is part of another person; therefore, the fetus is not a person.

There is a common premise hidden behind all seven of these pro-choice arguments. It is the premise of Functionalism: defining a person by his or her functioning or behavior. A "behavioral definition" is proper and practical for scientific purposes of prediction and experimentation, but it is not adequate for ordinary reason and common sense, much less for good philosophy or morality, which should be based on common sense. Why? Because common sense distinguishes between what one is and what one does, between being and functioning, thus between "being a person" and "functioning as a person." One cannot function as a person without being a person, but one can surely be a person without functioning as a person. In deep sleep, in coma, and in early infancy, nearly everyone will admit there are persons, but there are no specifically human functions such as reasoning, choice, or language. Functioning as a person is a sign and an effect of being a person. It is because of what we are, because of our nature or essence or being, that we can and do function in these ways. We have human souls, and plants do not; that's why we can know ourselves and plants can't. Functionalism makes the elementary mistake of confusing the sign with the thing signified, the smoke with the fire. As a Zen master would say, "The finger is fine for pointing at the moon, but woe to him who mistakes the finger for the moon."

The Functionalist or Behaviorist would reply that he is skeptical of such talk about natures, essences, or natural species (as distinct from conventional, man-made class-groupings). But the Functionalist cannot use ordinary language without contradicting himself. He says, e.g., that there is no such thing as "river" because all rivers are different. But how then can he call them all

“rivers”? The very word “all” should be stricken from his speech. His Nominalism makes nonsense of ordinary language.

The Functionalist claims he is being simple and commonsensical by not speaking of essences. He says that traditional talk about essences is dated, dispensable, mystical, muddled, and anti-scientific. But he is wrong. Talk about essences is not dated but perennial, built into the very structure of language, for most words are universals predictable of many individuals. Essence-talk is not dispensable without dispensing with understanding itself and reducing us to an animal state of mind where brute empirical fact reigns alone. Essence-talk is not mystical but commonsensical. It is not muddled but clear to any child. It is not anti scientific, for science seeks universal laws, truths about the species, not quirks of the specimen.

Functionalism is not only theoretically weak, it is also practically destructive. Modern man is increasingly reducing his being to functions. We no longer ask “Who is he?” but “What does he do?” We think of a man as a fireman, not as a man fighting fires; of a woman as a teacher, not as a woman teaching.

Functionalism arises with the modern erosion of the family. Our civilization is dying primarily because the family is dying. Half of our families commit suicide, for divorce is the family committing suicide qua family. But the family is the place where you learn that you are loved not because of what you do, your function, but because of who you are. What is replacing the family, where we are valued for our being? The workplace, where we are valued for our functioning.

This replacement in society is mirrored by the replacement in philosophy of the old “Sanctity of Life Ethic” by the new “Quality of Life Ethic.” In this new ethic, a human life is judged as valuable and worth living if and only if the judges decide that it performs at a certain level — e.g., a functional I.Q. of 60 or 40; or an ability to relate to other people (it would logically follow that a severely autistic person does not have enough “quality” in his life to deserve to live); or the prospect of a fairly normal, healthy and pain-free life (thus active euthanasia, or assisted suicide, is justified). If someone lacks the functional criteria of a “quality” life, he lacks personhood and the right to life.

I find this ethic more terrifying than the ethic of the Mafia, for the Mafia at least do not rationalize their assassinations by inventing a new ethic which pretends that the people they want to kill are not people. I would feel more comfortable conversing with a hired killer than with an abortionist, for an abortionist is also a hired killer, but pretends not to be.

The Functionalism that is the basis of the “Quality of Life Ethic” is morally reprehensible for at least three reasons. First, it is degrading, demeaning and destructive to human dignity; it treats persons like trained seals. Second, it is elitist; it discriminates against less perfect performers. Third, it takes advantage, it is power play, it is might over right rationalized. To see this point, let us dare to ask a very naive and simple question, a question a child might ask, especially a child like the one in “The Emperor’s New Clothes”: Why do doctors kill fetuses rather than fetuses killing doctors? Fetuses do not want to die. They struggle to live. (I hope you have all seen “The Silent Scream” and its sequel.) The answer is power. Doctors have power, fetuses do not. If

fetuses came equipped with suction tubes, poisons, and scalpels to use to defend themselves against their killers, there would be no abortions.

The eventual are George Bernard Shaw's utopia of the future in which each citizen would have to appear annually before a Central Planning Committee to justify the social utility of his or her (or its) existence, or else be painlessly "terminated." That is the crotch of the Functionalist camel whose nose is already under our tent. The nose is abortion. The camel is all one piece. Let the nose in and the rest will follow. To keep the camel out you must hit it on the nose.

Returning to our logical analysis, let us now refute the seven pro-choice arguments. First, the pro-choicers are correct to claim that the "person" and "human being" are not identical, but wrong to claim that the "human being" is the broader category and "person" the narrower subset. It is the other way round. There are persons who are not human persons: the three Persons of the Trinity, angels, and any rational and moral extraterrestrials who may exist, such as the E.T., Martians, and someone who has never heard of the Boston Red Sox. But though not all persons are human, all humans are persons. Old humans are persons, very young humans are persons, and unborn humans, fetal humans, are persons too.

How is a person to be defined? The crucial point for our argument is not which acts are to count as defining a person (is it speaking, or reasoning, or loving?) but the relation of these personal acts to the person-actor.

Is a person one who is consciously performing personal acts? If so, people who are asleep are not people, and we may kill them. Is it one with a present capacity to perform personal acts? That would include sleepers, but not people in coma. How about one with a history of performing personal acts? That would mean that a 17-year-old who was born in a coma 17 years ago and is just now coming out of it is not a person. Also, by this definition there can be no first personal act, no personal acts without a history of past personal acts. What about one with a future capacity for performing personal acts? That would mean that dying persons are not persons. Surely the correct answer is that a person is one with a natural, inherent capacity for performing personal acts. Why is one able to perform personal acts, under proper conditions? Only because one is a person. One grows into the ability to perform personal acts only because one already is the kind of thing that grows into the ability to perform personal acts, i.e., a person.

The **first** argument — that some human beings are not persons — is to say that only achievers, only successful functioners, only sufficiently intelligent performers, qualify as persons and have a right to life. And who is to say what "sufficient" is? The line can be drawn at will—the will of the stronger. Nature, reason, and justice are then replaced by artifice, prejudice, and power. When it is in the self-interest of certain people to kill certain other people, whether fetuses, or the dying, or enemies of the state, or Jews, or Armenians, or Cambodians, or heretics, or prophets, the killers will simply define their victims as non-persons by pointing out that they do not meet certain criteria. Who determines the criteria? Those in power, of course. Whenever personhood is defined functionally, the dividing line between persons and non-persons will be based on a decision by those in power, a decision of will. Such a decision, given the fallenness of human nature, will inevitably be based on self-interest. Where there is an interest in killing persons, they will be defined as non-persons.

To the **second** argument, it must be said that “human being” is not a merely biological term because the reality it designates is not a merely biological reality, though it is a biological reality. To identify human beings and persons is not biologism; in fact, it is just the opposite: it is the implicit claim that persons, i.e., human beings, have a human biological body and a human spiritual soul; that human souls inhabit human bodies.

The reason we should love, respect, and not kill human beings is because they are persons, i.e., subjects, souls, “I’s,” made in the image of God Who is I AM. We revere the person, not the functioning; the doer, not the doing. If robots could do all that persons can do behaviorally, they would still not be persons. Mere machines cannot be persons. They may function as persons, but they do not understand that they do not have freedom, or free will to choose what they do. They obey their programming without free choice. They are artifacts, and artifacts are not persons. Persons are natural, not artificial. They develop from within (like fetuses!); artifacts are made from without.

The connection between the two errors of (1) reducing persons to functions and (2) reducing “human being” to a merely biological category is obvious: the first is the root cause of the second. Once a person is defined in terms of functioning, then zygotes, fetuses and even normal newborns are no longer fully persons. What are they, then? Only members of a biological species, “human being.”

This justifies abortion, of course-and infanticide. The camel is a one-piece camel. I know of no argument justifying abortion that does not also justify infanticide.

To the **third** argument: the zygote has no brain, true, but it does have what will grow into a brain, just as an infant does not have speech but has what will grow into speech. Within the zygote is an already fully programmed individuality, from sex and aging to eye color and aversion to spinach. The personhood of the person is already there, like the tuliphood of the tulip bulb. One must actually be a human being, after all, to grow a human brain.

The **fourth** argument is right, of course, to say that development is gradual-after conception. Conception is the break, the clear dividing line, and the only one. I am the same being from conception on. Otherwise we would not speak of the growth and development and unfolding of that being, of me. I was once an infant. I was born. I was once in my mother’s womb. My functioning develops only gradually, but my me has a sudden beginning. Once again, the pro-choice objection confuses being a person with functioning as a person.

Furthermore, if personhood is only a developing, gradual thing, then we are never fully persons, because we continue to grow, at least intellectually and emotionally and spiritually. Albert Schweitzer said, at 70, “I still don’t know what I want to do when I grow up.” But if we are only partial persons, then murder is only partially wrong, and it is less wrong to kill younger, lesser persons than older ones. If it is more permissible to kill a fetus than to kill an infant because the fetus is less of a person, then it is for exactly the same reason more permissible to kill a seven-year-old, who has not yet developed his reproductive system or many of his educational and communications skills, than to kill a 27-year-old. The absurd conclusion follows from defining a person functionally.

No other line than conception can be drawn between pre-personhood and personhood. Birth and viability are the two most frequently suggested. But birth is only a change of place and relationship to the mother and to the surrounding world (air and food); how could these things create personhood? As for viability, it varies with accidental and external factors like available technology (incubators). What I am in the womb—a person or a non-person cannot be determined by what machines exist outside the womb! But viability is determined by such things. Therefore personhood cannot be determined by viability.

Fifth, if the fetus is only a potential person, it must be an actual something in order to be a potential person. What is it? An ape?

There are no “potential persons” any more than there are potential apes. All persons are actual, as all apes are actual. Actual apes are potential swimmers, and actual persons are potential philosophers. The being is actual, the functioning is potential. The objection confuses “a potential person” with “a potentially functioning person”—Functionalism again.

Sixth, is personhood an unclear concept? If it were a matter of degree, determined by degree of functioning, then it would indeed be unclear, and a matter of opinion, who is a person and who is not. Refuting objection four undercuts objection six.

Personhood is indeed unclear-for Functionalism. Such questions as the following are not clearly answerable: Which features count as proof of personhood? Why? How do we decide? Who decides? What gives them that right? And how much of each feature is necessary for personhood? And who decides that, and why? Also, all the performance-qualifications adduced for personhood are difficult to measure objectively and with certainty. To use the unclear, not universally accepted, hard-to-measure functionalist concept of personhood to decide the sharply controversial issue of who is a person and who may be killed is to try to clarify the obscure by the more obscure, *obscuram per obscurius*.

Seventh, if the fetus is only a part of the mother, a hilariously absurd consequence follows. The relation of part to whole is what logicians call a transitive relation: If A is part of B and B is part of C, then A must be part of C. If a wall is part of a room and the room is part of a building, then the wall must be part of that building. If a toe is part of a foot and a foot is part of a body, then the toe is part of the body. Now if the fetus is a part of the mother, then the parts of the fetus must be parts of the mother. But in that case, every pregnant woman has four eyes and four feet, and half of all pregnant women have penises! Clearly, the absurd conclusion came from the false premise that the fetus is only part of the mother.

I have refuted the pro-choice position (1) in general, by the basic pro-life syllogism, (2) foundationally, by identifying and refuting Functionalism as the root pro-choice error, and (3) specifically, by refuting each of the seven pro-choice arguments against fetal personhood. But just suppose all of my arguments are somehow inconclusive. Suppose I was wrong in my very first point, that abortion is a clear evil. Suppose abortion is a difficult, obscure, uncertain issue. Even if you take this “softest pro-choice” position, which we can call “abortion agnosticism,” you stand refuted by the following quadrilemma.

Either the fetus is a person, or not; and either we know what it is, or not. Thus there are four and only four possibilities:

that it is not a person and we know that, that it is a person and we know that, that it is a person but we do not know that, and that it is not a person and we do not know that.

Now what is abortion in each of these four cases?

In case (1), abortion is perfectly permissible. We do no wrong if we kill what is not a person and we know it is not a person—e.g., if we fry a fish. But no one has ever proved with certainty that a fetus is not a person. If there exists anywhere such a proof, please show it to me and I shall convert to pro-choice on the spot if I cannot refute it. If we do not have case (1) we have either (2) or (3) or (4). What is abortion in each of these cases? It is either murder, or manslaughter, or criminal negligence.

In case (2), where the fetus is a person and we know that, abortion is murder. For killing an innocent person knowing it is an innocent person is murder.

In case (3), abortion is manslaughter, for it is killing an innocent person not knowing and intending the full, deliberate extent of murder. It is like driving over a man-shaped overcoat in the street, which may be a drunk or may only be an old coat. It is like shooting at a sudden movement in a bush which may be your hunting companion or may be only a pheasant. It is like fumigating an apartment building with a highly toxic chemical not knowing whether everyone is safely evacuated. If the victim is a person, you have committed manslaughter. And if not?

Even in case (4), even if abortion kills what is not in fact a person, but the killer does not know for sure that it is not a person, we have criminal negligence, as in the above three cases if there happened to be no one in the coat, the bush, or the building, but the driver, the hunter, or the fumigator did not know that, and nevertheless drove, shot or fumigated. Such negligence is instinctively and universally condemned by all reasonable individuals and societies as personally immoral and socially criminal; and cases (2) and (3), murder and manslaughter, are of course condemned even more strongly. We do not argue politely over whether such behavior is right or wrong. We wholeheartedly condemn it, even when we do not know whether there is a person there, because the killer did not know that a person was not there. Why do we not do the same with abortion?

The answer to that question is not an easy one to admit. It is this: If we do not see the awfulness of abortion, that is not because the facts and arguments are unclear but because our own consciences are unclear. Mother Teresa says, “Abortion kills twice. It kills the body of the baby and it kills the conscience of the mother.” Abortion is profoundly anti-women. Three quarters of its victims are women: half the babies and all the mothers.

If Mother Teresa is right, the second killing that abortion does is even worse than the first, if souls are more important than bodies. If abortion kills consciences, it kills souls. To the extent that conscience is killed, repentance is killed, and without repentance and faith we simply cannot be saved — unless Jesus was a liar or a fool when he told us that.

This is not to condemn the personal motives or integrity of all who abort. We must distinguish the sin from the sinner and hate and judge the sin but not the sinner. Both aborters and justifiers of abortion may be victims as much as victimizers: victims of propaganda, prejudice and passion. Before they victimize their babies' bodies, their own souls are victimized — their thoughts, their consciences. But the victimization must start somewhere, the buck stops somewhere, and not in safe abstractions like “society” but in the choices of individuals.

All of us are implicated in some way, for “the only thing that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that the good do nothing.” What should we do? For one thing, we must put up one hell of a stink, for abortion is, precisely, one hell of a stink.

There is a time to be polite and scholarly and a time to tell the truth plain and prickly. Plainly put, abortion comes from Hell and it can lead us to Hell if not repented. Any unrepented sin can, and we all need repentance, whether we abort or hate or lust or despair or coldly condemn. But abortion is more likely than most sins to be unrepented because there are so many pro-choice voices justifying it. The justification of abortion can be more lethal than abortion itself.

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