

# Ministries of Mercy to the Unborn

by John M. Frame

At first glance it might seem odd that a conference on mercy ministries should conclude with an address on abortion, but on second thought the combination is perfectly appropriate. Mercy in Scripture is directed particularly toward those like widows and orphans who cannot help themselves, who haven't the power in society effectively to advocate their own case. Who, then, are more fitting objects of mercy than the unborn? Here are innocent people (sinful in Adam, but legally blameless) who are literally helpless, who cannot speak or act in their own defense. Yet many of these are under vicious attack today by the dominant forces of society: the educational establishment, the media, the government including the courts which should be demanding justice. Even the most influential ethical thought of modern society stands against them.

And the most terrible part of this is that these children are under attack from their own mothers. The mother is the child's last line of defense. If mother forsakes her child, who will help? Who indeed? Psalm 27:10 gives the answer: "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." Isaiah speaks in horror about the possibility that a mother might forget her child. But, through Isaiah, God says, "Though she may forget, I will not forget you" (Isa. 49:15). God is the helper of the poor, the husband of the widow, the Father of the fatherless. He cares about those for whom the world has no care. And he calls his people to be his agents: "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isa. 1:17). The unborn represent humanity in its most helpless form, under merciless attack. They have, therefore, a *unique* claim upon the mercy of God's people.

Christian maturity is tested by its willingness to go against the odds, to go against intellectual and practical fashions in the service of our King. It is easy enough to be a Christian when being a Christian merely requires us to be nice people. But *love* for Jesus, that love which is motivated by his great sacrifice, requires far more. It calls upon us to renounce what Scripture calls the "wisdom of the world," the fashionable ideas and practices of our society, and to count them as rubbish for the sake of Christ. We honor those like Noah, who built his ark though the world scoffed; like Abraham, who set aside the evidence of his senses and the laughter of his own wife to believe that God would provide a miraculous son; like Moses, who stood against Pharaoh the totalitarian despot to bring him the word of God; like Daniel, who endured lions rather than worship an earthly

king; like Peter and John, who told officials that “we must obey God, rather than man.”

There are many Christians who think it sufficient to confess their faith, live as nice people in society, and go to church. With the degree of religious freedom still available in this country, it is possible to profess Christ for many years without being forced to stand against the society. But the more you grow in Christ, the more you understand the radicalism of the Christian message, the more you feel the call of God to become subversive, to reject and condemn the standards of the world. The distinctively Christian life is not at all like the life of a non-Christian nice person. The distinctively Christian life is the life of a pilgrim, of one who doesn't belong here, but seeks a home in heaven above. We are citizens of another country. We cannot comfortably acquiesce in the philosophy and morals of this planet. Rather, we seek to undermine them; not violently, but, like the great saints of old, by the almighty power of God's word and Spirit.

This is true in our intellectual life, in our worship, our business, our recreation, our family life, our sexuality, indeed in everything. For Scripture says, “Whether you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God.” In all of these areas there must be a rejection of the world's standards and faithful obedience to God's word. This must also be true of our ministry of mercy. God's word calls us to help those most despised by the world, to love the least lovely. So there must be, however much the world will despise us as religious fanatics, indeed, especially since the world despises these convictions, a special place in our hearts for the unborn.

As we seek to minister the mercy of Christ to the unborn, it is first necessary for us to be clear on the biblical principles. Initially, we may be embarrassed by the fact that the Bible provides no specific directives concerning abortion. In 1972, when I participated in a denominational study of abortion, our pro-life document was criticized on the ground of *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. Our opponents said that we must not require believers to obey principles not stated in Scripture; and since Scripture doesn't speak about killing the unborn, we must leave that question open. However, we noted, Scripture doesn't mention the killing of plumbers, either, or the killing of Scottish Presbyterian men over 43 years of age. What it says is, “Thou shalt not kill.” Typically, scriptural commands are to some extent general, and it is our responsibility to make the specific applications. Unless we are allowed, even required, to make those specific applications, the Bible becomes a dead letter. So the argument must be made: Killing people is wrong; killing unborn babies is killing people; therefore killing unborn babies is wrong.

You can only evade this argument by showing that unborn children are not people. And back in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a serious debate over that issue which still has some repercussions in the current discussion. In those days, some evangelicals argued that Scripture does not regard unborn children as persons. Carl F. H. Henry, for example, otherwise one of my heroes, argued that the “image of God” which constitutes humanity consists of our reason; thus babies do not become fully human until they attained some level of ability to reason. Sadly, I must say that Dr. Henry still holds this position, even though it would permit infanticide to a degree unimagined even by most secularists. When do people become fully rational? I sometimes wonder if any of us has achieved that! But more seriously: the image of God is not some part of man, some human faculty. The image is everything human. The image is not something in us; rather, we are in the image. Thus the biblical teaching about the image of God may not be used to deny personhood to the unborn child.

Then there was the argument about life and breath which seems to have influenced our Southern Baptist President. Some have said that life in Scripture begins with breath, and that therefore unborn children, who don’t breathe, cannot be considered alive. Well, there is a correlation between life and breath in Scripture. You can make an even better argument connecting death with the end of breathing; for Scripture often refers to death by saying “he breathed his last.” But of course we know that that is not a clinical description of death. We know that people can sometimes be resuscitated after they stop breathing for a while. As for the beginning of life, it is true that the first man Adam’s life began with the divine inbreathing: not with his own first breath, but with God’s breathing life into him. Beyond that, there is no Scriptural correlation between breathing and the beginning of life. My own view is that unborn children do receive all the benefits of breath, obtaining oxygen through the temporary life support of their mothers’ lungs. Thus the breath of Adam is transmitted unbroken to all his descendants. There is no distinction within the human race between some who breathe and others who, because they do not breathe, are not persons.

Another argument concerned the interpretation of Exodus 21:22-24. This Old Testament case law describes a situation in which two men are fighting and one of them strikes a pregnant woman. If there is no harm, says the text, a penalty is determined by the court and the woman’s husband. If there is harm, there shall be eye for eye retaliation, indeed life for life. Some assume that the “harm” refers to the mother alone; so that damage to the unborn child comes under the “no harm” category and is punished only by a fine. Some abortion advocates then argue that in this passage there is a difference in penalty between harm to mother and harm to the unborn and that therefore here the unborn is less than a person. However, a mere difference in penalty does not entail a difference

in personhood. The killing of a slave in the same chapter (verses 20-21, 32) is subject to a lighter penalty in some cases than the killing of a free person; but no one would argue on that premise that a slave is less than a person.

Even on this interpretation of the passage, therefore, no pro-abortion consequences may be drawn. But, in fact, I believe that this interpretation itself is wrong. The “harm” in the passage is indefinite; it applies to either mother or child. If there is “no harm” to either, the punishment is a fine for the blow itself. If there is harm, the penalty may be as much as death. Since accidental killing of this sort is not usually a capital crime in Scripture, this passage actually gives special protection to unborn children and their mothers. It is a pro-life text.

Nor is that the only pro-life text in the Bible. In Psalm 139:14-16, David reflects on the wonder of how God formed *him* in his mother’s womb. It was David in the womb, David the person, the same David who was to be God’s anointed. In Psalm 51:5, David confesses that he has been a sinner, not only since his adultery, not only since his birth, but since his mother conceived him. In Luke 1:41,44 the unborn John the Baptist leaps for joy in his mother’s womb in the presence of the equally unborn Messiah. Jesus himself is God become incarnate, not through birth, but through a miraculous *conception* in the womb of the virgin.

The bottom line is, as a friend of mine once put it, that Scripture always speaks of the unborn — from conception! — as persons already born; and it never speaks of them in any other way. The Bible is a pro-life book. And if any doubt remains, Scripture speaks to that doubt as well. For surely in the light of the sixth commandment any doubt must be resolved in favor of life rather than death. The burden of proof is always upon the shoulders on those who would justify killing.

Our scientific knowledge of human reproduction confirms the teachings of Scripture. The unborn child is not a part of his mother’s body, but from conception he or she is genetically distinct from the mother. And there is no point in the gestation period where one can plausibly argue that a non-person turns into a person. The gestation period is a smooth period of development with no sharp breaks. The organism conceived is the same organism that is born.

Recently, some people, including some who are generally pro-life, have argued that the personhood of the child begins not at conception but at the implantation of the fertilized egg in the womb. This would allow the destruction of such eggs, for example, in *in vitro* fertilization (“test tube conception”) or immediately following intercourse as in cases of rape and incest. Their argument

is that before implantation one fertilized egg can divide into two, creating twins. Thus, they believe, personhood is not established until after implantation.

Much as I sympathize with the victims of rape and incest, and with those who need the help of *in vitro* fertilization, I cannot accept this argument. Twinning is a kind of reproduction analogous to cloning. That this can occur at the earliest point in human life, but not later, says nothing about the personhood of the reproducer. The only conclusion we can draw from this interesting fact is that at one point in human life, one person can become two. But personhood itself still must be said to begin at conception.

I said this debate occurred primarily in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, at that time, many evangelical scholars took what we today would consider fairly liberal views of abortion. My senior colleague at Westminster in Philadelphia, Dr. Paul Woolley, maintained to his last day that abortion is legitimate in some cases; and I mentioned that Dr. Carl Henry is even today of the same mind. Others, however, such as Drs. Bruce Waltke and Meredith G. Kline changed their position radically, from a moderately pro-abortion stance to a strongly pro-life stance. This is encouraging, for it shows that Scripture still speaks in the church, that the word of God is still able to change people's minds, amazingly enough! And after *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, a consensus rapidly developed among evangelicals, joining the already existing Roman Catholic consensus, to condemn abortion. Even secular thinkers, indeed pro-abortion thinkers, came more and more to acknowledge the fact that abortion was the taking of human life.

Indeed it seemed until the late 1980s as though a few changes in the Supreme Court would return this nation rapidly to its historic legal prohibition of abortion. The pro-life movement sensed victory within its grasp, after a hard struggle. But something happened, roughly during the period of the Bush administration (though I do not at all blame it on President Bush) to take the victory out of our hands, and it is important that we understand what it was that happened.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, paradoxically, Marxism (perhaps out of self-defense) entrenched itself even more firmly than before in American universities and intellectual circles. In Marxist thought, amid its ethical relativism, there is one evil which is presented in absolute ethical terms: the "oppression" of one group by another. In our time, the dominant application of this ideology is to condemn the oppression (by white male Christians) of people on the basis of race, nationality, gender, religion, sexual orientation, height, weight, intelligence, habits, and so on. Thus we hear of "political correctness:" the attempt of various institutions, especially universities which once made plausible claims to be defenders of

intellectual freedom, to police the words, thoughts, behavior of people so that not one of these oppressed people will endure the slightest offense.

I don't mean to ridicule a genuine concern with injustice; such concern is biblical. But in our society today, the single issue of group oppression is presented in a highly distorted way which in effect multiplies injustice by gratuitously condemning white Christian males, and which blinds us to other kinds of evil.

My main point, however, is that for the past five years the pro-abortion movement has linked itself tightly to the Marxist movement for political correctness. The present argument is not that unborn children are less than persons. The present dominant argument is that to restrict abortion is to oppress women by limiting their choices. That argument has been made, of course, since the seventies, when the term "pro-choice" was born. But in the last five years it has really caught fire.

In passing I would point out how pervasive the very word "choice" has become in our time. I carry a "Choice Visa" card. I listen to a radio station which calls itself "the classical choice." AT&T for some years described itself as "the right choice." Nutrition gurus tell us now, not what foods we should eat, but what foods are "the best choices." I generally don't fuss about terminology, and I don't like to hear others doing so. But I must say I am coming to hate the very sound of that word, because its popularity is, I am convinced, largely the result of an ungodly and murderous mentality.

This explains why the pro-abortion movement has become so very extreme. Most Americans, polls indicate, favor legal abortions but oppose abortion on demand; they want restraints, restrictions. But the pro-choice *movement* will tolerate no restrictions at all. A teenage girl must have parental permission to miss three days of high school; but the abortion advocate will tolerate no involvement of parents in a girl's decision to abort a child. There can be no requirement of parental consent or even notification. President Clinton campaigned on the slogan that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare"; but his governmental appointees and his support for the Freedom of Choice Act may well increase the number of abortions beyond our worst imaginings. To the pro-choice ideologue, any restriction on abortion is oppression of women, denial of their autonomy.

That word "autonomy" gets us to the heart of the matter. It locates precisely the contradiction between the pro-choice ideology and the Christian message. The Bible teaches that we are not autonomous, that we belong body and soul to

another, and that we are at his disposal. A human being demanding autonomy is like a fish demanding freedom from water, freedom to live on land. Such freedom is destructive to his nature; and the autonomy of modern secular thought is equally destructive to human nature. It is not the way to self-fulfillment; it is the way of death. The way to self-fulfillment is, paradoxically, the way of death to self, death with Christ, and eternal life through faith in Him. The way to life abundant is the way of the servant of God. This is God's word to the pro-choice movement today. This is the message we must bring in our ministry of mercy.

The message is a judgment on our time, to be sure. We bring to our age a prophetic accusation, that our society has broken God's covenant. But our message is also one of mercy. The element of mercy, I think, needs to be stressed far more in the pro-life movement, and this brings us back to our main theme. When we deal with women who are facing this awful choice, we must come to them as ministers of mercy; and therefore we must make our message *sound* merciful — far more than we have in the past. The world rightly resents our shrillness and over-stridency, our quickness to condemn. Jesus was harsh with the Pharisees, but not with the woman of Samaria — though to be sure his gentle words convicted her of sin.

The gospel brings mercy to unborn children of course. But it also speaks mercy to women with their “problem pregnancies.” Never before have these women in all their heartache, fear and often despair, been so subject to ideological manipulation. The self-appointed feminist spokespersons do not want women with problem pregnancies to know all the relevant facts. They do not want these women to know that their fetus is a baby, that there are dangers in abortion, that there are alternatives. A recent National Review article reports that the fashionable ideologues are now trying to discredit adoption, raising images of wicked stepfathers and child molestation, even though most adoptions work out well. They fear that if adoption becomes more widely accepted, abortion may be discouraged. In the face of such manipulation, the Christian brings mercy. We say, no, you don't have to kill your baby. Yes, there are alternatives; yes, there is help; yes, indeed, there is abundant life in the family of God. And it is our job to make sure this help is available.

Does mercy include rescuing babies from abortionists' knives through civil disobedience? I support Operation Rescue by my prayers and letters to editors; but I do not participate in rescues. Let me tell you why. I do accept the Rescuers' argument that we have a biblical responsibility to save innocent people from destruction (Prov. 24:11). And sometimes in our society, after all legal remedies are exhausted, the only way to save a particular child is by breaking the law. I do, then, believe that the rescuers are justified in blocking entrances to abortion

clinics, and I support them over against the police who carry them away to prison. On the other hand, not all morally justified acts are expedient, and I cannot ignore the fact that these rescues (including their unfortunate side effects such as the recent murder of Dr. Gunn) have created a sharp backlash in public opinion against the pro-life movement. I am convinced that we have not at all exhausted the peaceful and legal means available to us of changing the situation: writing, teaching, counseling, lobbying, suing, boycotting, political campaigning. Our bottom-line concern, as the rescuers themselves tell us, is saving lives; and I believe the legal methods, rather than illegal “rescues,” will save more lives in the long run.

But wherever you stand on these tactical questions, do something. None of us alone can do the job that needs to be done, but we can all do something. Support your local pro-life crisis pregnancy center. These organizations are under legal and moral attack from planned parenthood and the pro-choice establishment. Volunteer as a counselor if you are gifted for that. Preach sermons on this subject if you are a pastor; for many in our churches are confused as to what the Bible teaches, and like wayward sheep they are getting their moral standards from talk shows and Newsweek. Demonstrate; carry the sign “Abortion Kills Children,” for that sign tells the simple truth. Write to newspaper editors and government officials. Support pro-life candidates for office. Use legal means to harass abortionists and make it difficult for them to practice. Abortion may be legal, but we don’t have to have it in our communities if we don’t want it, any more than we have to have landfills or peepshows.

Be principled and flexible at the same time. If a bill is proposed which restricts abortion in only some cases, support it. Don’t take the position that you will support only a total ban. An army takes territory an inch at a time. The important thing is to make progress.

But even more important is to be faithful. In Christ, God has shown us incalculable mercy. We cannot measure the depth, and width, and breadth, and height of his love. Surely love so amazing, so divine, demands our souls, our lives, our all. Let us therefore go forth aggressively (!) to love others as Christ has loved us.