

"On Abortion"  
R. G. Hamerton-Kelly  
Dean of the Chapel

27 April 1980  
Memorial Church  
Stanford University

Lessons: Psalm 77  
Galatians 5:1-6

Our text for this morning is a paraphrase of verse 6 of the 5th chapter of Galatians: "If we are in union with Christ Jesus, pro-life makes no difference at all, nor does pro-choice. The only thing that counts is faith, active in love." Today I want to ask what faith active in love means in the matter of abortion.

On Easter day, April 18, 1965, I stood in the delivery room of the Women's Hospital in New York City at the birth of our daughter, Ruth, and I remember that it was precisely 8:20 p.m. when the obstetrician handed her to me. I was right there in the delivery room. The name of that obstetrician was Bernard Nathanson. Fifteen years later I made the acquaintance of Dr. Nathanson again through his book, Aborting America (New York: Doubleday, 1979). Subsequent to 1965, Dr. Nathanson became one of the seven founders of NARAL, the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws. Between February 1971 and September 1972, he was the director of the largest abortion clinic in the world, sponsored by the Judson Memorial Church of Greenwich Village, entitled "Clinic for Reproductive and Sexual Health," acronym: CRASH. On November 28, 1974, Dr. Nathanson published in the New England Journal of Medicine a piece entitled, "Deeper into Abortion," and in that piece he wrote: 'I am deeply troubled by my own increasing certainty that I had in fact presided over 60,000 deaths.' Between February 1971 and September 1972, that clinic aborted 60,000 fetuses.

What began to change Dr. Nathanson's mind was not religious conviction. He assures us that since the age of 13 when he experienced bar mitzvah, he has never entered a place of worship of any faith. What caused him to change his mind was the series of advances in perinatology, the science of birth and conception. The increasing ability through medical technology to know the fetus. (Dr. Nathanson calls the fetus 'Alpha,' and I would like to call he, she or it 'Alpha' too.) In the womb we know, at a certain stage, Alpha responds to sounds: responds positively to pleasant sound and negatively to unpleasant sound. Alpha responds to light, Alpha cries. According to the perinatologists, the moment of birth has become a minor event as far as the obstetrician's relationship with Alpha is concerned. It was these advances in his own field that led Dr. Nathanson to conclude, and he says, 'very reluctantly': 'I reluctantly agree with Paul Ramsey (the Princeton ethicist) that every good argument for abortion is a good argument for infanticide... When the myth and the magic have finally disappeared from the birthline, then an aborting society inevitably will accept infanticide, beginning with defective infants.' Some of you remember the tenure of Professor Michael Tooley at this institution, a professor of Philosophy, who unabashedly advocated infanticide. At least he was consistent. Another ethical philosopher, from the University of San Francisco, a certain Ms. Warren, refers to Alpha as 'comparable to a guppy.'



In response to Mr. Justice Blackman's Supreme Court judgment of 1973, which withdrew 14th Amendment protection from Alpha, and which said that since medicine, philosophy and theology cannot agree on whether Alpha is a person or not, therefore 14th Amendment protection does not apply to Alpha, Nathanson writes, 'Speaking for the discipline of medicine, we know that there is an independent, self-initiating, biological entity from the point when the sperm unites with the egg, and we are able to discern its presence and activities beginning with implantation.' That is when biochemical changes begin to take place in the mother, from the moment of implantation, two or three days after conception.

Present perinatological equipment enables us, according to Nathanson, to detect an occasional heartbeat at the 18th day, and a clear beat at the 24th day, and he says the rapid advances in the last five years suggest that we may recognize Alpha as a human being even earlier in the future. Perhaps some of you remember R. D. Laing's book, The Facts of Life, approximately 1975--R. D. Laing, the British psychiatrist, who argues that our ineradicable insecurity as human beings derives from the insecurity which the zygote feels about whether it will be allowed to implant or not. Well, who knows? If in five years advances in our technology for discerning human traces in Alpha have progressed as far as they have, why should R. D. Laing not speculate like that?

Under the present law, as interpreted by the Supreme Court judgment in 1973, Alpha is not entitled to the 14th Amendment protection which says, 'Nor shall any state deprive any person of life... without due process of law... nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law,' and if we follow Nathanson, that Alpha is a human being, consider what these statistics means: last year one in 3.2 Alphas was aborted. That is, of every 3.2 conceptions, only 2.2 were allowed to live. Over a million a year were killed. In 1978 in Washington, D. C., there were more abortions than live births. If Alpha is an instance of human life--and I don't see how that can conceivably be denied--at least from implantation (and the distinction that the philosophers make between a human being and a human person seems to me to be sophistry), then we are murdering a million human beings a year. You might not like the term 'murder' and you might want to refine it, but we are taking a million human lives a year. That is not my conclusion; that is Bernard Nathanson's conclusion, and Bernard Nathanson is no Right-to-Life-er. As I said, he is not even religious, and seemingly proud of the fact that his conclusion is based not on religious assumptions but on perinatology, on the response that is compelled from him by Alpha, whom he is coming to know better and better, earlier and earlier. That is Nathanson's conclusion. What is his response to it?

Here let me say that I have allowed myself to be instructed by Nathanson to this point; I see no reason to doubt his honesty, and so I must say that I agree with him, although I am no expert in this field and am not in a position to check the scientific data that he presents. But I allow myself to be convinced by him, and I have to say I allow myself to be convinced by his response. His response is not a religious response; it is a humanistic response; but if



Christianity is true, surely there is no conflict between an honest, true, human response and the Christian response. But let me now share with you his humanistic response, and then secondly, let me add what I think a specific Christian conviction might add.

Firstly, he says that this destruction of human life shows us what we have become: the society which brought you Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Cambodia now brings you the slaughter of the innocents in living color. Now, I used to think that I should preach on this because of the women whom I counseled who came in remorse and regret to confess their sins and to ask for God's forgiveness. But I have heard from Dr. Nathanson that the vast majority are delighted, that they go from the Clinic for the most part, feeling wonderful, and that depresses me even more. According to Nathanson, this reflects the kind of utilitarian ethic that talks about the greatest happiness for the greatest number, that tries rationally to plan and to make sure that nothing untoward happens--the kind of ethic that was exemplified in a recent Fortune magazine article entitled 'Fast Track to the High Ground' that I read. It tells of interviews with 1800 25-year olds who say their only interest is to get ahead, to make it to the top of their company; of that 1800 a substantial number are married couples, both professionals, both working, who are earning a mean income of \$37,500 a year, and one thing they are agreed upon is that children are a damned nuisance. This tells us what we have become.

Secondly, Nathanson says opposition to the taking of human life is not a sectarian position. He cites the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you,' and he points out that it is common to Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, and secular Greek ethics. But he says, the Hippocratic Oath, 'Do no harm' is from his point of view even more compelling. These are statements that any civilized human being can subscribe to, religious or not, Christian or not. Whatever certain Christian churches may mean by 'natural law,' whatever natural law might be, surely here the secular Dr. Nathanson is right: the cherishing of infants comes about as close to being a natural law of human nature as anything does. How else can I explain the profound melancholy that I feel after reading on this issue? It's been one of the most searching and searing experiences of my life, to spend a couple of weeks immersed in the literature on it, and I can't imagine what it does to the physicians and the nurses. I saw or read what it did to Nathanson, so I can only agree with him that 14th Amendment protection should be given to Alpha and that the Supreme Court is wrong, wrong, wrong, and if you want to know the details, read Nathanson's analysis of Blackman's frighteningly ignorant judgment, ignorant certainly on medical grounds, and ignorant on other grounds too.

For instance, the claim in that judgment that opposition to abortion is a sectarian religious point of view, and that to extent 14th Amendment protection to Alpha is to impose the views of one religious group on the nation, and that that is a violation of the First Amendment right, is baloney. The tradition that is expressed in opposition to abortion is the tradition of the dignity and worth of the individual human being, and by God, if our constitution and democracy is not based on that, then it is based on nothing. 'We hold these



truths to be self evident, ' that every individual human being is sacred, is endowed with inalienable rights and amongst these, 'the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' Historically speaking, the laws against abortion put on the books in the 19th century were put there long before the Roman Catholic church was a political force in this country. They were put there at the behest of the American Medical Association, doctors of all faiths, and of no faith, carrying out their Hippocratic Oath. That's what put those laws on the books; and 19th century feminism was united in its opposition to abortion, seeing it as one more exploitation of women by men; and to this very day, surveys show over and over again that men are in a significant majority in favor of abortion.

Now, finally, Nathanson avers that only when it is a matter of life against life should Alpha be killed, and in the present state of medical science and art, that is a very small percentage of the time. What would I add as a Christian to this universal moral position? Firstly, it is our tradition, is it not, that the weak especially are entitled to protection. We are those whose creed proclaims that we care for the defenseless, the oppressed, or those for whom nobody else cares, especially those who cannot care for themselves. Nathanson rather sardonically reflects on the zeal of the Rev. Howard Moody, founder of CRASH. He says he was always puzzled as to how a Christian clergyman could be so zealous on the abortion issue. Well, some of you may enlighten me on how that can be afterwards.

We are concerned about the impact of this on the poor, the weak, the defenseless; of course, Alpha is the most obvious victim, but consider: I have looked at the positions of the major churches on the issue of abortion--they're listed in an appendix--I have to say that I am ashamed of the position of my own church, the United Methodist Church. There is only one other church whose position is weaker and that is the United Presbyterian Church, as far as I could tell. The Episcopalians are probably just about as weak--that represents all of the clergy on this staff. But the African Methodist-Episcopal Church is strong as a rock. I wonder if they would let me in? Do the blacks know something that we don't know? Do you know why welfare roles are more or less under control now? Do you know that sickle cell anemia can now be detected in the womb and Tay Sachs disease too, so let the Jews beware. Maybe that's one of the factors operating in Dr. Nathanson's consciousness. It is worth reflecting that the black churches are so solidly against abortion.

In the time of Adolf Hitler--you must understand me, I know that arguments by historical analogy are very difficult--we do not ask of a church of that time, how was your singles program? We do not ask of the church of that time, what was the quality, what was the intellectual quality of your preaching, many books did your clergy produce? We ask only one thing: where did you stand when they led away your brothers and sisters? Where did you stand? Well, it is in those terms I'm afraid that I have come, like Dr. Nathanson, rather reluctantly to see this issue.

Thirdly, it is our Christian way, is it not, to believe that by faith in God life's difficulties can be borne. Life's difficulties, by the grace of God, can



even become sources of great joy. A certain Dr. Koop of Philadelphia, who specializes in the pediatrics of disabled and malformed children, writes of how the happiest children he's known have been deformed and deprived, and some of the unhappiest children he's known have been beautifully endowed. Surely we Christians can see beneath the surface to God and the mystery of God; surely we of all people should stand against a certain superficial utilitarianism, which seeks always the broad and easy way. The way to life is narrow. I don't know anything that has shaken my faith in God quite as much as this abortion situation, and in a profound melancholy I have been tempted to give up and go off to a mountain somewhere and mourn. Well, there's a great tradition of that, all the way down through Nietzsche's Zarathustra, to feel ourselves better than the human race. Of course, that's no real option because we're all in this together; but only God knows whether this sermon is not just so much wasted time, whether the great steamroller of the spirit of the age will just roll on and on.

It seems to me that the Christian way is never death; if it can possibly be avoided, one does not solve one's problems by simply running away from them, by pushing them away. Our solution is not less love, but more love, which means, of course, that we as a church, even this congregation, must make it clear to every unwed mother who would listen that we are here to help, without reserve, financially, emotionally, spiritually. That we will cherish her and her child; that we rejoice with her in the prospect of a child; that there is no judgment or judgmentalism in our hearts; that our way is the way of more love and more love. Bring us your children; we want them and we want you. The Christian way is to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, to give, to give, to serve, to serve--never the calculating morality of the utilitarian. And of course, nothing of what I have said--I hope you understand--have I said from a heart that believes itself to be somehow righteous. 'Who made me a judge and the divider over you?'--even our Lord Jesus said that. But these things I feel, I believe, must be said, not just for the sake of our own souls--they may be important to us but God knows what will become of them--but also for the sake of our physicians, our nurses, for the sake of our society; for ours is the most brutal century in the history of the human race, and our church, anyway, is the organization that came into the world picking up the discarded babies of the ancient world off the garbage heaps. Our fellow Christians in those days sold themselves into slavery in order to raise the money to buy others free from slavery. Our fellow Christians in those days raised money, they bankrupted themselves to purchase the freedom of slaves, and they picked up the discarded children. And we are their descendants, therefore let us stand for the weak and helpless. Let us work for laws to protect the life of Alpha, and let us provide the compassionate environment in which unwed mothers may find support and joy. Amen.

Transcribed from a tape

Hi. Thought you might be interested  
in this. Share it with your pastor,  
too, if you like.

Love,

Bruce