

Abortion and the Christian Feminist

I — A Dilemma?

Carol Smith

It might seem that to be a Christian and at the same time a feminist involves few conflicts for the individual. In John 10:10 Christ said: "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly". Surely this is what feminism is about too—enabling women to live their lives "more abundantly", by utilising all the potential which lies within them. One of the major achievements of the women's movement has been to give women a growing consciousness of how great that potential is and the realisation that the peculiar gifts of women are not necessarily worthless because a male-orientated world sees little value in them. Women have discovered in themselves a capacity for assessing their own value and utilising their various potentialities as fully as possible. Christians, too, male and female, have a duty to be fully human and to realise their own worth. Offering ourselves unreservedly to God involves of necessity a developing awareness of what it is we are offering. It would seem, then, that the feminist Christian should see her feminism as enriching her Christianity and her Christianity as reinforcing her feminism.

Nevertheless, in practice, areas of conflict do arise. One such is the issue of abortion. Feminists have consistently campaigned for abortion on demand and the slogan "a woman's right to choose" has become one of the most familiar of the women's movement. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that one cannot be a true feminist while not supporting the notion that abortions should be freely available to all women who ask for them.

However, Christians believe that all life is a gift of God. It is not to be treated lightly or destroyed wantonly. Does this leave the feminist with an insoluble dilemma? I think not. I should like to argue, first, that we should take seriously the biblical view of the nature of womankind; second, that abortion is a masculine concept rather than a feminine one and, in fact, in the long term benefits men more than women; and third, that the campaign for "a woman's right to choose" has diverted attention away from wider and more fundamental issues.

Any consideration of "the biblical view of the nature of womankind" (for want of a better phrase) needs to take into account

that the bible contains three kinds of statements about women—those which treat of women as being part of the human race generally, those which are bound by a particular cultural environment, and those which say something about women as women. In the first category may be placed discussions of the relationship between God and people in the world. (The bible is full of statements of this kind, but examples may most readily be found in the Psalms and in the teaching of Jesus.) Then there are pieces of advice about behaviour in certain situations, such as are found in the writings of Paul. Finally, there are those statements which are specifically about women as distinguished from men. One of the first of these is in Genesis 3:20, and it has a particular relevance to the subject under discussion. This verse says: “The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living”.

There are several points which need to be made about this verse. First, it does not say that Adam gave to Eve the title “the Mother of all living”. She was given the name Eve precisely *because* that is what she was. Nor does this verse say that Eve, as the “prototype” of all women, would have it as her main role in life “to be a mother”. What it says is something far more powerful and fundamental. All women partake of the “motherhood” of Eve even if they have never physically borne children. Genesis 3:20 comes just after the two accounts of God’s creation of the cosmos, and just before we are told that Adam and Eve had intercourse and she bore a child. The writer of the first creation story has shown us God creating all things. The crowning act is the creation of male and female in God’s own image (Genesis 1:27). The second account is concerned almost exclusively with God’s relationship with the newly created earth and its inhabitants. God is portrayed not only as the creator of the world, but as concerned for its continuing well-being. God is both Creator and Sustainer. The man and the woman, as befits those made in God’s image, also have roles of creation and sustenance. It is Adam’s task to care for all things which grow on the earth and to provide the conditions in which they will prosper. Eve’s task is to bring forth new human beings to people the earth, and to nurture them, as God nurtures the world. This is why God’s blessing in Genesis 1:28 is addressed to both the man and the woman: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.

One of the results of women’s increased consciousness of who they are has been a growing awareness of the rhythms and instincts of their own bodies. We have listened to ourselves and learnt much about *the life-giving and life-sustaining forces within us*. It is no coincidence that the women’s movement and the peace movement have become so closely interwoven. But many have begun to perceive that there is an

apparent contradiction in both endeavouring to preserve the human race and an environment fit to nourish it, and deliberately destroying a foetus. For Christians, this conflict is particularly acute. The same arguments which make a Christian feel that the world must, as God's creation, be preserved from committing the ultimate blasphemy of destroying itself by a nuclear holocaust, make that same Christian balk at harming anything God has made. We have no right to take life, and this applies whether we are referring to a million victims of a nuclear bomb or a four-month foetus. It is simply not ours to take.

There is also another argument, which says that if the Christian faith requires that people "have life and have it more abundantly", abortion is not the way to achieve that aim, since it does not, in fact, enable more women to lead fulfilled lives. Events have shown that the growing number of abortions which have taken place in Britain since the 1967 Act came into force has not meant that women have made significant progress in terms of employment and educational opportunities. What has gone wrong? I should like to suggest that part of the problem arises because women have attempted to apply masculine solutions to what are essentially feminine problems. The idea that one human being should hold the power of life and death over another human being is basically a masculine one (and one from which women have suffered over the centuries). Men have traditionally quite ruthlessly disposed of those things or people which have got in their way. This attitude has been the cause of several wars over the years. Not only is persuading someone to have an abortion the taking of a "masculine" view, but when one comes to look at what actually occurs when pregnancies are terminated one realises that in fact most abortions are operations performed on women by men. A woman, when she has an abortion for any other reason than to avoid death or grave damage to her own health, is in effect endeavouring to cope better with the world. She fears that by failing to terminate her pregnancy she will damage her career, be exposed to censure, be labelled in a particular way, or be unable to care adequately for the child that will be born. However, the world in which a woman makes the decision to have an abortion is essentially a male-dominated one. By the act of agreeing to an abortion she is also acquiescing in the values which hold in that world, thereby giving credibility to them. In other words, women are making the decision whether or not to have an abortion on the criteria of a society specifically geared to operate for the benefit of those who can never bear children, that is to say, men. Can this really be regarded as a choice?

As Christians, we believe in free will, and that, in the end, each one of us will be accountable for the decisions we have taken in our lives. It seems to follow that we have a duty to create an environment in which we have genuine freedom to make a choice in accordance

with our personal religious beliefs and instincts, and that our choices should not be influenced in any way by the threat of financial or social penalties or a feeling that the burden of a child will be ours alone to bear. (In practice, it often is, but we might well ask how Christians, or indeed feminists, can in all conscience allow this to be the case.) It seems to me that to say to a woman "You will suffer if you exercise the one function which is unique to women" is to say to her: "You must pay a price for being a woman". What are Christians about if they allow such statements to be made? What are feminists about?

I have affirmed a woman's right to choice in all areas of her life, but this campaign slogan was specifically directed at abortion—in other words, it really demanded "a woman's right to choose what she does with her own body". This raises a further question: *is* a foetus part of a woman's body and nothing more? It is true that until a certain stage of pregnancy the foetus cannot exist without the woman's body, but that does not mean that it should necessarily be identified with it. There is clearly a difference between a foetus and, say, a liver or a lung. Removing a foetus does not (usually) involve the loss of life or dismemberment of the mother. Even though it is not a part of a woman's body in that sense, however, it clearly has a strong association with it. Women who have had abortions have spoken of the sense of loss and deprivation they have felt afterwards, even though those abortions were carried out at their own request. We must not dismiss these feelings lightly. Feminism has taught women to listen to what their bodies say to them. We cannot then ignore what they hear. It is possible that what these women are feeling is not just the loss of an opportunity to give life to a new human being, but something integral to themselves. The ability to give life in this way is confined to women. Although men have a part to play in "planting the seed", it is the woman's body which nurtures it until it becomes viable, and then sustains it when it becomes a living, independent creature, especially at first. This capacity does not, however, confer on women absolute rights of existence and non-existence over the lives they play such a large part in creating. We are not God. Neither should we try to be like those men who have in the past desired to acquire such rights. Throughout history, men have attempted to harness women's life-giving capacity and treat it as something which **may** be utilised for their own benefit. They have also tried to use it as a means of controlling and confining women's aspirations so that they conformed to what masculine ideas thought appropriate for them.

The women's movement partly came into being to return their bodies to the domain and control of women themselves. Nevertheless, feminists made a fundamental mistake (although an understandable one in the circumstances) when they tried to deny their life-giving potential at a time when they should have affirmed it, as many women

are now doing. We should build upon our heritage as daughters of Eve, the Mother of all living, taking pride in it and taking every opportunity to develop those parts of ourselves that make us women. All this has a particular priority for those Christians who are also feminists. The unconditional offering of ourselves to God (and the Christian faith demands no less of us) can only be achieved by our not denying any aspects of our essential character. To take life is against God's whole design for the earth and its inhabitants. It is particularly abhorrent for women, the life-givers and life-sustainers in God's own image. To rid ourselves of the consequences of being women by abortion is to make a denial of ourselves as women and as human beings.

I now turn to the third and final strand of my argument. The pro-abortion lobby in the women's movement rightly emphasised that it should be a *woman's* right to choose. Nevertheless, as I have tried to demonstrate above, it is questionable whether women have had a real choice. Their options have been limited to those permitted them by the system under which we live. Christians will have to answer for the fact that we have coerced many women into the predicament of having to decide between a life bereft of expressions of certain aspects of their personalities because they have borne a child, and submitting to having their pregnancies terminated and thus denying life to the child that was forming inside them. The question should not be whether this particular woman should have an abortion or not, but how we may so organise our world that all women who give birth will find it an enriching and fulfilling experience and one which does not force them to pay a price in terms of other facets of their lives. How can we contrive that all children will be born into an environment which offers them peace, love and security, as well as their material needs?

To undertake such a task requires that we ask searching questions about our own commitment to such ideals. Why, for example, do so many women say that they find it easier to cope emotionally with the prospect of terminating their pregnancies than with giving their children to other women who may have a deep longing to be "mother-sustainers", although unable physically to give birth? What concepts of ownership and possession are at work here and from where do they derive? Are they truly Christian concepts or feminine concepts? Women who have fought so long against the notion of being considered property by men must beware of subscribing to comparable ideas in relation to their children, because of social conditioning. We must also ask who stands to gain most from abortion on demand? Is it a coincidence that abortion legislation got through a predominantly male Parliament much more easily than other legislation relating to the rights of women? The establishment has become aware, I think, that women are not going to give up easily

those rights they have already won. To retain them, and at the same time bear children, will cost in terms of time, money and personal commitment. But who stands to pay most, to lose most, if that were to be the case? Women with rights are a threat to the system, but they are less of a threat if they are compelled to behave like men and at least keep the system intact.

To sum up, the questions are these: does seeking abortion on demand perpetuate the very system which requires it in the first place? In campaigning for free abortion, are we not rather encouraging those who wish to alienate women from their bodies and each other, than helping women to lead fuller and more satisfying lives? Should we be seeing our capacities for child-bearing and nurturing in much more positive terms than we have heretofore? As feminists, we should see the need of addressing these issues. As Christians, it is our duty to address them.

II — Prolifers for Survival*

Susan Dowell

Abortion was a hot election issue in the US of 1984. The pro-family rhetoric of the Born-again Right¹ predictably incurred the correspondingly doctrinaire derision of the women's movement and the Left. The National Organisation for Women (NOW) banned from its platform women who in any way opposed abortion. Both sides agree, it seems, that abortion is a primary and integral component of women's liberation and a crucial test of "reliability" for or against.

All the more vital, then, is the search for ethical consistency and clarity which *is* being maintained in some wings of the peace and women's movements. This was given some force by the visit to Britain last autumn of the US Catholic pacifist Juli Loesch, who founded, in 1979, an organisation called Prolifers for Survival. She came to promote a parallel network here. This exploratory visit, (sponsored by Pax Christi, some members of London SPUC and Women for Life) provoked signs of increasing polarisation in UK. One reaction in *Peace News*—which in 1983 published a reflective consideration of the links between private and public violence—"was to curl into a ball and puke".

Juli Loesch described her own conversion on this issue with an almost revivalist persuasiveness. The warm-up of her testimony was a head-on mocking of the traditional ideological line-ups. Hands up all those on the left in this audience: ban-the bomb, pro-feminist, pro