

When does a human life begin, really?

General Assembly abortion policy says that Presbyterians do not agree on when a human life begins.

The policy illustrates the point with a list that implies that it reflects responses from a survey by the denomination's Office of Research Services. While the survey gave only three options, the policy writers added two more.¹ The three options to which Presbyterians responded were:

"An individual's life begins at conception";

"An individual's life begins at birth";

"An individual's life begins somewhere between conception and birth."

Research Services summarized the responses by saying,

"Opinions were almost evenly divided among the three options." Despite the fact that two-thirds of the Presbyterian sample said they believe a human life begins prior to birth, all implementation of church policy by church officials is done as if an overwhelming majority believe a human life does not begin until birth.

Church policy abandons Scripture in favor of opinion

The background material in the policy document offers biblical support for the opinion of the two-thirds majority who believe a human life begins before birth. Citing Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation, the background paper concludes, "Life in the womb may be just an embryo or a fetus or an impersonal blob of flesh to some, but that is not the case in God's eyes....For God, the unborn child is human life, created for a purpose and belonging to God, incorporated into God's plan and loved by God, and then birthed and surrounded by God's mercy."

Why didn't this biblical understanding in the background material produce a policy that protects unborn children? The answer is that the policy writers were a diverse group. Some of the writers could not be sure that every conception is really intended by God. Therefore, they concluded that women must take responsibility for deciding whether to bear a child or end his or her life. They used the split opinion of the survey results to create ambivalence about when a life begins. The

policy represents a conflict of opinions rather than a search for biblical truth.

The cost of not knowing when a human life begins

The result in the policy section is an attempt to accommodate two conflicting views. The policy says on the one hand that "The strong Christian presumption is that since all life is precious to God, we are to preserve and protect it," and "we do have agreement that taking human life is sin." On the other hand the policy also says, "The considered decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy can be a morally acceptable, though certainly not the only or required decision." And, in the end, the latter view prevails.

It prevails in the policy statement, primarily because the policy professes not to know when a human life begins, thereby avoiding the obligation to protect it. And it prevails in implementation when church offices teach, produce materials and lobby against any protection for unborn children. It prevails in abortion coverage for unrestricted abortion by our own denomination's medical benefits plan. It prevails in denominational financial support for The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options.

So, even though the policy says, "The large number of abortions in this society is a grave concern to the church," it provides no help.

Need for better policy

The background for the policy contains sufficient Scripture to support much more protection for unborn babies. It uses no fewer than 29 passages to undergird the following statements:²

"The Scriptures clearly testify that not only is all life precious to God, but that all life also belongs to God."

"God's ownership of life extends not only to those who have been born, however, but also to those still in the womb."

"...God has also formed you and me and all persons while we were in our mothers' wombs, and we and all persons belong to God."



An unborn baby at eight weeks.

Illustration courtesy of Little One Sweet, Baltimore, MD.

"...The Scriptures also never deal with life in the womb in impersonal terms.

"For God, the unborn child is human life...."

One of the policy writers is a surgeon and a Presbyterian elder, Thomas A. Miller. Dr. Miller was one of a three-member minority who supported a much stronger position on life. He wrote a paper for PPL after the denomination's policy was adopted in which he explained "Why There Are Not Five Possibilities for When A Human Life Begins."³

Both Scripture and science support the view that a new human life begins at conception. Scripture teaches God's value for each new human life and the obligation of Christ's body, his church, to protect and care for each new life.

The church needs a policy that proclaims that truth and calls us all to give ourselves to the care of every baby, born and unborn, and to the care of their mothers.

Endnotes

1. The five possibilities are conception, when the Harvard Medical School criteria are met, "quickening," "viability," and birth.

2. Ask PPL for a copy of the positions stated in the background material, including the Scripture references.

3. Dr. Miller's paper is available from PPL and also is on www.ppl.org.