



The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society October 2019

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Thoughts Concerning Abortion

By Rev Todd Beiswenger

If you live in New South Wales, you've no doubt heard that there is now a new effort to change the laws around abortion for the State. Arguments from both sides are popping up in my newsfeed lately, and I suppose that in my opinion the basic battle lines are fairly well known. The debate usually gets framed as a "woman's right to choose" versus "abortion = murder." Over the years I've noticed my position change one way, then the other, and quite honestly I'm not sure that I have a "one size fits all" answer for this one. However, the current political discussion has provided a good reason to do some research on the subject.

Before we go any further, let me just say that I know this is a sensitive subject, and I'm a bit hesitant to write about it, but at the same time I think it is useful to work through some of these things. The goal isn't to pass judgment or make anybody feel guilty for past decisions, but to enhance our decision making process for the future. So, if you're willing, let's take a look at some of the quotes we're given.

Now, I don't know about you, but the passage that I was most familiar with on this subject was the following:

"The one receptacle is to be the Will of the future human being, the other to be his Understanding, yet there is nothing whatever of his Will and Understanding present during formation. Will and Understanding do not commence with man prior to the opening of the lungs, which only takes place after birth; for then the receptacle for love becomes the man's Will, and the receptacle for wisdom becomes his Understanding" (Divine Wisdom III:5)

The context of this passage is that Swedenborg is writing about the difference between humans and animals, stating that there are degrees of life, and that animals are alive to the first degree but not the two higher ones where there are the will and understanding. Therefore, we deduce from the above passage that we don't really have human life until the lungs are opened. *Divine Providence* puts it like this: "Without these two abilities we would not have immortality or eternal life" (DP 96.7). The traditional General Church logic is essentially that we need the will and understanding to have eternal life, and we don't have the will and understanding until the lungs are opened after birth.

However, there have been some things in my life that have caused me to question that understanding. One was reading a book titled, "Heaven Is For Real" that was published a number of years ago. Essentially a little boy has a near death experience, and one of the things that happens is he meets his brother... but the thing is, the brother wasn't ever born. His brother was miscarried. Since then I've heard other such stories, where surprised parents or siblings meet with a miscarried child in the afterlife. In fact, among women who have had an NDE (Near Death Experience) it seems to be a relatively common occurrence to meet a miscarried or aborted child.

This of course brings into question the understanding from Divine Wisdom that our life doesn't begin until we take that first breath after birth. There are some ways of resolving this I suppose. One way is to claim – and I have no idea if this is true or not – that during the miscarriage the little foetus does manage to open up its lungs and take a breath.

However, one of the instructions we are given for researching the Writings is to make sure we have “two witnesses.” The idea is that you don't create doctrine from a single statement, but you really need to have the idea confirmed elsewhere as well. In that spirit, here's another passage that people will use to declare that eternal life doesn't begin until after birth:

“The human foetus lives because of its heart, but not because of its lungs; for blood does not flow then from the heart into the lungs and grant them the power of respiration, but flows instead through an opening [from the right atrium into the left atrium and so] into the left ventricle of the heart. Consequently during that time the foetus cannot move any part of its body, but lies bound, nor is it capable of any sensation, its sensory organs being closed. The case is the same with love or the will, which causes the foetus nevertheless to live, but dimly so, that is, without sensation or activity. As soon as the lungs open, however, which happens after birth, it then begins to experience sensation and to act, and likewise to will and think” (DLW 401).

As I read this, it doesn't actually come out and say that “life begins after birth,” and in fact says that the foetus is alive... albeit “dimly.” But what some will point to is that human life requires the operation of the heart AND lungs, and from this quote we see that the foetus really only has the heart operating which isn't really life. It's a degree of life, but not yet fully human life.

Finally, we find in True Christian Religion a paragraph that is talking about newborns, and how they have no innate ideas, but “they are able to breathe because they are alive - breathing is universal to life” (TCR 335). So while it doesn't say exactly what *Divine Wisdom* says, we get once again that breathing is the marker of life.

With that in mind, this is where things get tricky, because there actually are witnesses for a different point of view as well. Let's look at this:

“It is well known that a person's soul begins in the mother's ovum, and is after that developed in her womb, and is there surrounded with a tiny body, which indeed is such that by means of it the soul is able to function properly in the world into which it is born” (AC 3570.4). We're given something similar, i.e. another witness, in *Secrets of Heaven 1910*, which states that conception is “initial life.” Using this, it seems that the soul is acquired at conception, and as a result some people have concluded that any miscarriage or abortion would still result in an increase in the population of the highest heaven. Yet, you could emphasize that it says the soul only “begins” at conception, and question that the soul isn't really complete and therefore be insufficient for eternal life. Not to mention the Divine Providence quote above that specifically states that what we need for eternal life is the will and understanding, not the soul.

Now, if you want a witness outside of the Arcana, we can actually look to the Old Testament. It seems to indicate that life begins in the womb as well. Among all the laws the Lord gave to Moses, we find this:

“If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life...” (Exodus 21:22-23). From this, it’s pretty clear that a foetus is a life, because if one is killed you shall give “life for life.”

At this point, I’ve put before you the main passages used for discussion over when life begins, and hopefully you can see why there are differing points of view on this issue. As much as I am personally wedded to the Writings for my understanding of all spiritual questions, I do put a fair bit of stock into those NDEs where people see and hear from the children they never met. After all, even Swedenborg reports that his books are from “things seen and heard” in the afterlife. I won’t say that Swedenborg got things wrong in DLW or DP, but maybe we just don’t understand them as intended.

Does this answer the question though as to whether or not abortion should be legal? I’m not so sure. If you look at the two sides of the abortion argument, what we’ve really been wrestling with is the question “does abortion equal murder?” I hate to say this, but it seems like it does. For me, it does explain some of the problems that women experience after an abortion. The feelings that can occur after an abortion have become so identifiable that this condition has been named Post Abortion Syndrome (PAS). Moreover PAS is being recognized as a form of post-traumatic stress reactions (PTSD).

The following paragraph comes from this website: <https://adviceandaid.com/the-very-real-effects-of-abortion-emotional-facts-you-need-part-2/>

“In the immediate period after the abortion, a sense of relief is often reported (as documented in the book “Her Choice to Heal”). However studies indicate that the effects can be more profound than simple relief. Compared with women who delivered a child, those who aborted had a significantly higher risk of death from all causes and, most notably, more often from suicide. Higher death rates of women who have had an abortion persist over time and across socioeconomic boundaries. Some of this may be explained by self-destructive tendencies, depression, and other unhealthy behaviour brought on by the abortion experience. Those who have conditions (like depression or other emotional disorders) before the abortion and those who have difficult circumstances surrounding the abortion (for example, being bullied into an abortion) increase the risk for major emotional problems after abortion.”

For many the issue of making abortion legal is about the health of a woman, and reports such as these make it clear that we need to consider her mental as well as her physical health. So what do we do with the other side of the argument, “the woman’s right to choose?” To me that’s also a difficult question to answer from doctrine. You could argue

that once conception has occurred, God never intended there to be a choice. Conversely one could argue that what makes us human is our freedom and rationality, so we do have the ability to make the choice. For example, there are certainly the extreme cases of rape or incest where it would seem really unfair to force a woman to carry the child to term, and so we call on our freedom and rationality to make such a decision.

So how do we wrap this up? What's the conclusion? Should we make abortion legal? I'm going to leave that to you.

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Shelley Beach Outing

One of the things we've learned in proposing this is that there are several places named "Shelley Beach" in the area. So let's be clear: we're talking about the Shelley Beach that is in the Royal National Park down by Bundeena. One of the main reasons we're doing this particular outing is that the last few have been walks/hikes, and the boys don't all seem to enjoy them, so we're trying to do something that they will enjoy. It'll be interesting to see how long they can stay in the water since it will likely still be cold, but just getting them outside and running around on the beach itself will be a victory against watching a screen.

However, for those of you with more sophisticated tastes, there is something for you at Shelley Beach as well. The Dharawal engravings at Jibbon Head/Point are one of the best-known sites for indigenous art and ceremony, and they're just a short walk from the beach. If your tastes lead you more towards exploring nature, there are other trails to explore, and apparently good snorkelling and scuba diving to be had there as well.

While the exact details are yet to be finalized, here's what we do know: this will be happening on **October 6th, after church**. We'll likely take a combination of cars and public transport to the beach, and have lunch there. Fun will follow. Why not join in?

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October Working Bee

The school holidays are upon us, yippee! Although we're making some progress in the conversation regarding garden rehabilitation, our help with their upkeep is still necessary, so we'll 'celebrate' the return to school - term 4, last term of the school year! - with a working bee on the first Sunday of the term, **Oct 20th**, after church. There will be a list of jobs and a tasty pizza lunch for participants. Perhaps we'll even crank up some tunes, to increase the fun-factor, too! We hope you'll join us for church, that Sunday, and stay on afterward to lend a hand. Every little bit helps!

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New Baby

Congratulations to **Margaret & Owen Heldon** on the birth of their 7th grandchild and 5th granddaughter. **Azalea (Zali) Edna Robson** was born to **Michelle** and **Dylan** on 19th of September 2019. She will be a little sister to 2 year old **Aneira** .

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Birthdays

Happy Birthday to **Stuart Heldon** (10th), **Zach Beiswenger** (10th), **Murray Heldon** (13th), **Darren Kermond** (20th), **Cameron Walsh** (20th), **Jenn Beiswenger** (27th)

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