

God & Life

Chimpanzees - our closest cousins?

A recent BBC documentary, aired on Tuesday 10th October 2006, was entitled "Chimps are People Too". In the documentary presenter Danny Wallace travelled the world to speak to a number of different experts about the issue of whether or not chimpanzees deserve the same rights as human beings. On the website summary of the arguments, five main points are made in support of "chimp rights":

1. Genetics – chimps have 99.4% of their DNA in common with humans. This means that relatively small changes in genetic material lead to significant differences.
2. Society – chimps stay with their mothers for 12 years, unlike monkeys and most other animals. This is similar to human family dynamics.
3. Culture – chimps can learn skills and spread knowledge (based on an experiment in which chimps could either poke or a trapdoor to receive food – whichever technique was taught to one chimp in a group spread throughout that group). This is defined as "culture".
4. Language – chimps use many sounds that communicate to others in their social groups.
5. Law – since legal judgements of human rights are normally based on the person's ability to reason, chimps should have at least the same rights as a three year old child according to US lawyer Steven Wise.

However, on closer examination these arguments lose their force somewhat:

1. Genetics – humans also share 50% of their DNA with a banana, but no one argues in favour of "banana rights"!
2. Society – dogs are much more similar socially to humans than chimps. Does this mean they should have the same rights?
3. Culture – human culture is not simply the ability to learn skills and spread knowledge. No animal expresses culture as humans do in terms of clothing, art, sport or religion. The degree of difference between humans and the most advanced animal is staggering.
4. Language – parrots are far more advanced in terms of language skills than chimps. Does this mean that they too should share human rights?
5. Law – the basis for judging human rights depending on the ability to reason is arbitrary. Who decides that this is the best basis for judgement?

Perhaps you may think that this documentary was more of a comedy than an examination of a serious current issue, but in fact this is not the case. The question of human rights is an extremely hot issue in the 21st Century, and the difference, if any, between human beings and animals is of great significance. Man, the only "animal" capable of asking the question, is struggling to know what his identity is. What does it mean to be human?

A Biblical perspective

The current debate over human identity stems in large part from a rejection of the Biblical framework for understanding who we are. Since Darwinism replaced creation as the explanation for human origins man has come to see himself as simply the latest and, to date, greatest product of the random powers of genetic mutation that have shaped all life. Man is neither in a special class of his own, nor is he the final possible stage of development of life. The phenomena of culture and religion are the result of our "selfish genes" (to use the phrase coined by Richard Dawkins, the "high priest" of Darwinism). The value of human life does not stem from any innate worth but depend on the usefulness, or at least the self-awareness of the individual in question. How does this square with what the Scriptures say about man?

Genesis 1:26-28 – Created in God's image

The starting point for our examination of Scripture must be creation. In this passage we read that man was made in the image of God, both male and female. This designation is not given to any other living creature created by God. Although scholars debate exactly what the "image of God" refers to, it seems clear that there are certain things unique to man when we examine both the Bible and the world.

Three of the most distinctive, which I believe reflect the image of God, are:

- Creativity – man creates things not only for practical use, but also simply for enjoyment
- Relationships – man can form unique and lasting relationships based on selfless love
- Religion – man has a tendency, in every culture, to seek something or someone to worship

Although man fell from the image of his creator, that image was not completely destroyed, and the fact of man's creation in God's image remains the foundation for human rights throughout Scripture (see Genesis 9:6). The genetic similarities between human beings and chimps (or any other animal) simply

reflect the use of a common pattern by our divine designer. The true distinctiveness of man is not based on our genes, but on our ability to know and be like our creator!

Genesis 1:26-28 – Created to rule

Another key aspect of man's identity as a being created in the image of God is the purpose for which God created him, which is to care for and rule over all other created creatures. This sets mankind apart from the other living beings in our world. We are, uniquely, the stewards of the King of the Universe. Man can only know his true place in the created order by reference to his God-given responsibility to look after all creation. Adam gave the chimpanzee, and all other animals, their first names (Genesis 2:19&20). This act shows the concrete distinction between mankind as steward of the King, created complete with the ability of advanced language and creativity, and the animals.

Genesis 9:1-6 & Exodus 20:13– The sanctity of life

After the Flood God reinforced to Noah the principle of the sanctity of human life. He gave to Noah a new privilege not found before this in Scripture – to be able to eat the flesh of animals (presumably mankind was vegetarian before the Flood). In doing so, God again reinforced the distinction between human life and animal life on the basis of man's special creation in His likeness (v6). He also reinforced the seriousness of taking human life by instituting the principle of capital punishment. The sixth of the ten commandments re-emphasises this principle, saying "You shall not murder". The Hebrew word is *ratsach*, one of ten Hebrew words that the King James Version translated as "kill". Its specific meaning is narrowed by other passages from the Law:

- Exodus 21:12-14 – it must be an intentional killing
- Leviticus 24:17-21 – the penalty for killing an animal was to repay the owner, but the penalty for killing a human being was execution
- Numbers 35:16-31 & Deuteronomy 19:4-13 – accidental killing of another person is not murder, but intentional harm resulting in death is classified as murder

These passages make God's position on the taking of human life absolutely clear: to intentionally cause harm to another human being the results in death is murder and is deserving of the death penalty. Human life is sacred, and human beings only have the right to take human life as God permits. This is the prerogative of the legal system (in the New Testament it is clear that Christians must allow the state in which they live to exercise punishment for crimes rather than exercising justice themselves – see Romans 12:19-13:5).

Matthew 5:21&22 – Christ repeated the command against murder

The New Testament does not remove the protection of human life, and Christ re-emphasised the commandment forbidding murder. In fact, he raised the standard to show that hatred is in effect equal to murder. It cannot be argued that the sanctity of human life is less strict a principle in the New Testament than the Old.

Psalms 139:13-18 – God knows and has plans for each human being before birth

In this remarkable psalm David praises God for His absolute knowledge of him, and in these verses he acknowledges that God created him in his mother's womb with a unique plan for his life. The biblical view is not merely that mankind as a species is created in God's image, but that every human being is a unique creation of God, and that the uniqueness of the individual extends back into the womb, presumably to the time of conception. The principle of the sanctity of human life applies from the very beginning of life (with conception) to its end.

Body, soul and spirit?

The Scriptures use three key words to describe aspects of man's nature. In the New Testament Greek these are:

- a) *Sōma* – normally translated "body"
- b) *Psychē* – normally translated "soul"
- c) *Pneuma* – normally translated "spirit"

These three concepts are clearly recognised in the New Testament, for example in I Thessalonians 5:23, and appear in some instances to be distinct (e.g. Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the word of God separating between the soul and spirit). However, in many other places the concepts of spirit and soul are not so easily distinguished, and there appears to be considerable overlap. Generally speaking, these three aspects of man can be defined best in terms of the ability to relate to different things:

1. Body – the physical aspect, capable of interacting with (relating to) the physical created universe. The body houses the soul and spirit.
2. Soul – the emotional and rational aspect (also called the "heart" or, in modern language, the "personality"), capable of relating to other human beings.

3. Spirit – the aspect that is truly distinct from other animals, capable of relating to God and the spiritual world. This is the centre of man's ability to worship.

Furthermore, all three aspects have been damaged by sin, so that the body is subject to disease, decay and death, the soul is corrupted so that we no longer trust one another and the spirit is dead because of its disconnection from God. Sin broke the harmony of mankind with God, with one another and with the physical universe.

The usage of these three terms has resulted in debate between theologians over whether man is bipartite or tripartite (whether Scripture sees a dichotomy or trichotomy). Some tend to speak of man as being three parts (body, soul and spirit), while others prefer to speak of two parts – the visible body and the invisible soul or spirit. However, in recent years biblical theology has tended to move away from these definitions to speak of the human being as a whole person. This is an important concept, as we will see in a later study when we consider the nature of health. The reality is that it is impossible to separate the body, soul and spirit, at least for the human mind, and to be fully human includes having all three in relationship to one another. If the soul leaves the body, the body dies. Our eternal state will be in a body (I Corinthians 15), although it will be a different kind of body than our present one. The terms used by Paul in I Corinthians 15 are interesting in themselves and only serve to highlight the dangers of trying to distinguish firmly between body, soul and spirit – our current body is called a *sōma psychikon* (literally "soul body") while the resurrection body is a *sōma pneumatikon* (literally "spiritual body"). The tendency to create a dichotomy between body and soul owes more to Greek philosophy (particularly the theories of Plato), which viewed the body as the source of corruption and the prison for the soul. In this view, the body must be punished and cannot be enjoyed, and the ultimate destiny of man is to exist in spirit form out of the body. This philosophy is the basis for the popular concept of heaven as a place of spirits, but contradicts the Bible, which sees our ultimate destiny inhabiting the new earth in our new bodies. In biblical terms, the whole person (body, soul and spirit) is fallen and requires a new act of God's creation to restore it to its original potential. It is unhelpful and unbiblical to create a false separation between body, soul and spirit. As one dictionary of theology says:

the popular debate concerning whether human nature is a bipartite or tripartite being has the appearance of a rather ill-founded and unhelpful irrelevancy. The human person is a 'soul' by virtue of being a 'body' made alive by the 'breath' (or 'Spirit') of God.

This discussion on the interaction of body (physical), soul (emotional) and spirit in the person has interesting parallels with our understanding of the existence of the godhead in the trinity. Just as a human being is body, soul and spirit and yet is one, so God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet is one. In conclusion, then, we may find these three aspects of our being useful in terms of describing what it is to be human, but we must not create a false separation between them as they constantly interact with each other in the complexity of human existence.

Issues of personhood at the end of life - euthanasia

Euthanasia is defined as "the painless killing of a patient suffering from an incurable and painful disease or in an irreversible coma" (New Oxford Dictionary of English). The term "assisted suicide" is used to describe helping a person to end their life by their own choice. Voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide are legal in both the Netherlands and Belgium, and Switzerland, although not officially legalising it, does not prosecute for assisted suicide. Between July 1996 and March 1997 euthanasia was also legalised in the Northern Territory of Australia. In the USA, only one state, Oregon, has legalised assisted suicide. There have been a number of attempts to introduce assisted suicide in the UK, including most recently the *Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill* introduced by Lord Joffe. This Bill was rejected by the House of Lords on 12th May 2006 by 148 to 100, but Joffe plans to bring the Bill back in future.

The issue of euthanasia and assisted suicide is one of when it is acceptable for a person to end the life of another person. From a Biblical perspective, based on the passages considered above, it is wrong for anyone to end the life of another person, except where that person has been found guilty of a crime deserving of the death penalty under the law of the state. This means that suicide as well as assisted suicide and euthanasia is sinful (please note that the view that people who have committed suicide cannot enter heaven, which was the traditional view of the Roman Catholic Church and which is regularly presented in movies, finds no support in Scripture). The Bible only mentions two cases of voluntary euthanasia:

- a) Abimelech's armour bearer killed him when he was fatally wounded to prevent him being killed by a woman (Judges 9:52-55)

- b) King Saul was allegedly (because the story appears to be different from the account of Saul's death in I Samuel 31) killed by an Amalekite at his own request when dying from his wounds on the battle field (II Samuel 1:6-9).

God does not sanction either of these actions, and in the second case King David actually ordered the Amalekite's execution for his action!

Of course, other arguments are proposed by those who are in favour of voluntary euthanasia, but for a Christian the principle of the sanctity of human life must prevail over these. There are other problems with the concept of voluntary euthanasia including the following:

1. **Palliative Care provides an alternative** – I have personally worked in the medical specialty of palliative care, and I can vouch that there is a huge amount of support for terminally ill patients. It is possible in the vast majority of cases to achieve a comfortable death, at times including terminal sedation, in which the patient is sedated with medication at the end of life. This is neither illegal, nor unethical. In cases where patients are adequately cared for requests for voluntary euthanasia are actually very rare.
2. **The "choice" made by patients is seldom "free"** – many patients who are terminally ill are depressed, fearful and anxious about the "burden" they present to others they care for. In these circumstances it is not surprising that some people in this situation express a desire to die or feel that things would be better if they were already dead. However, to consider giving in to these requests is often to ignore the real issue of their mental state and their need for affirmation of their value. In fact, the last stages of life are often an extremely valuable time for patients and their families in terms of healing rifts and
3. **It gives too much power to doctors** – It is a dangerous thing when professionals have too much power. Doctors are in a position of power with respect to patients who are terminally ill, and it is easy for them to influence patients in favour of a decision. Legislation for voluntary euthanasia can be exploited to bring in non-voluntary euthanasia, as has already happened in the Netherlands (in 1991 of over 3000 euthanasia deaths over 1000 were confidentially revealed by doctors to have been non-voluntary). The results of a minority of doctors with lax ethical standards who were given freedom by the government was seen in Nazi Germany where the non-voluntary euthanasia of people with mental handicaps was practised.

Issues of personhood at the beginning of life - abortion

Based on our examination of Scripture above we have concluded that the taking of the life of an innocent person is sin. The Bible does not specifically deal with the issue of abortion, but based on what we have already seen about the sanctity of human life, the key question must be when human life begins. We can consider this question in terms of the three aspects of the person discussed above:

1. **Body** – although the human body is not made up of unique molecules, each human being has a unique genetic identity from conception when the sperm and egg combine to produce a new combination of genes from father and mother. From that point onwards the development of the body is a continual process before and after birth. Advances in neonatology have now made it possible for babies born as early as 22 weeks to survive, whilst abortion is legal up to the age of 24 weeks. There is no discernable point in the process of development from conception until adulthood that marks a point where the body changes its nature – the genetic material is the same throughout the process, and the development of the baby is a continual gradual process. Some of the landmarks in this development are:
 - Day 1 Conception takes place
 - 7 days Tiny baby implants in mother's uterus.
 - 18 days Baby's heart begins to beat.
 - 21 days Pumps own blood through separate closed circulatory system with own blood type
 - 28 days Eye, ear and respiratory system begin to form
 - 42 days Brain waves recorded, skeleton complete, reflexes present
 - 7 weeks Photo has been taken of baby sucking its thumb
 - 8 weeks All body systems present
 - 9 weeks Baby squints, swallows, moves tongue, makes fist
 - 11 weeks Spontaneous breathing movements, has fingernails, all body systems working
 - 16 weeks Genital organs clearly differentiated, grasps with hands, swims, kicks, turns, somersaults, (still not felt by the mother)
 - 18 weeks Vocal cords work – can cry
 - 20 weeks Has hair on head, 30cm long
 - 23 weeks 15% chance of viability outside of womb if born prematurely
 - 24 weeks 56% of babies survive premature birth
 - 25 weeks 79% of babies survive premature birth

- 40 weeks Birth

I have deliberately used the word "baby" throughout this list as opposed to the word "fetus", because I believe that the use of a different word before and after birth is used by some supporters of abortion to try to create a false distinction between the unborn baby and the baby after birth.

2. **Soul / spirit** – the individual's personality and emotional and rational capabilities develop as the body develops. Full self-awareness is probably not achieved until several months after birth and personality is not fully developed until the late teenage years or adulthood! Based on this definition, if abortion is justifiable on the grounds that the unborn child has not achieved full "personhood", then the killing of infants and even of adults with severe mental handicaps would also be justifiable. In fact, this is exactly the conclusion reached by some modern ethicists, who conclude that the value of the individual depends on their intellectual and relational capabilities. There is a serious movement in favour of licensing infanticide of babies and the non-voluntary euthanasia of people with advanced dementia and with severe physical and mental handicaps. The Bible does not clearly answer the question of when the human body "receives" its soul. The early church fathers had three views about the question of the origin of the soul:

- (i) *Pre-existence* – this idea came from Platonism, which saw the soul as originating in the divine being and existing in a higher state before entering the body. This view was held by Origen, but is not favoured within orthodox Christian theology today.
- (ii) *Traducianism* – the view that the soul, like the body, originates in the process of procreation from our parents. Tertullian took this view, which is the official position of Lutheranism and has gained increasing support in recent years. This view has the advantage of avoiding a dichotomy between body and soul, and is helpful in explaining the concept of original sin inherited from the parents.
- (iii) *Creationism* – the view that God creates a unique soul for each human being. This view has had the widest support among Christians throughout church history. It is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church and is also widely accepted amongst Protestant theologians. Creationists point to verses such as Ecclesiastes 12:7, Zechariah 12:1 and Hebrews 12:9 in support of their view.

Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between *traducianism* and *creationism*, but we cannot be dogmatic on the basis of Scripture. Of the latter two views, only *creationism* allows for the belief that the soul enters the body at some point later than conception. Augustine believed that "ensoulment" occurred around 60-80 days after conception, and therefore saw abortion before this stage as a less serious crime than abortion at a later stage. However, this view is not based on any Biblical or biological evidence, and is therefore somewhat spurious. The basic reality is that we have no basis for believing that the individual is anything less than fully human (possessing body, soul and spirit) from the time of conception onwards. If we have any doubt about this surely we must err on the side of caution in view of the seriousness of taking human life!

One passage that has been used in support of the view that life before birth is of a lesser value than life after birth is Exodus 21:22-25. This interpretation was based on some English translations that suggested that the woman in question suffered a miscarriage, in which case these verses would seem to say that the death of the unborn baby is punishable only by a fine, whilst the death of an adult is a capital offence. In fact the Greek simply means that her child "came forth", and since there is nothing in the passage to indicate that it was dead when it "came forth", it seems logical to read this word in the usual Old Testament meaning of a live birth (this is clearly the meaning in verses such as Genesis 1:24, Genesis 8:17, Genesis 15:4, Genesis 25:25-26, 1 Kings 8:19, Jeremiah 1:5, II Kings 20:18). Furthermore, there is a Hebrew word for miscarriage, and the writer would surely have used that word had the meaning been a miscarriage rather than a live birth. The second question about the interpretation of these verses relates to the nature of the serious injury – whether it is to the mother or the child. Since the verse does not specify we must assume that it refers to injury either to the mother or her child. In other words, the unborn child has the same protection as the mother. It must be stressed, however, that these verses refer only to accidental injury to the baby through carelessness, and do not impinge on the issue of intentional abortion.

There are numerous other Bible passages that refer to life before birth and often to the plans God had for the individual even before he or she was born. Some of the most noteworthy are:

- Genesis 25:22-23 – Esau and Jacob wrestled together in Rebekah's womb
- Psalm 51:5 – David could describe himself as sinful from conception
- Psalm 139 (see above)
- Isaiah 44:2, 24; 49:5 – refers to God forming the individual in the womb
- Jeremiah 1:5 – God knew and chose Jeremiah in the womb
- Luke 1:41-44 – John the Baptist leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb when Mary visited

Furthermore, the New Testament uses the same Greek word, *brephos*, to refer to a child both before and after birth (Luke 1:41, 2:12), suggesting continuity of life from pregnancy to infancy.

So, then, on biological and Biblical grounds I cannot determine any basis for treating human life in the womb differently from life outside it. The only grounds for such a distinction would be based on the development of full "personhood" in terms of self-awareness. To regard abortion as acceptable in any given situation, therefore, one would have to be prepared to accept it at least for a baby of three months and for a person with dementia or significant learning disabilities. From a Biblical perspective all human life is sacred, from conception to the grave.

Against this background, we should be aware of the extent of the abortion issue in our country. Abortion became legal in England and Wales in 1967 with the passing of the *Abortion Act* if two doctors agree that:

- a) To continue with the pregnancy would involve a bigger risk to the woman's life than abortion
- b) Abortion is necessary to prevent serious permanent injury to the woman's physical or mental health
- c) Before 24 weeks, pregnancy would involve greater risk to woman's physical or mental health than abortion [this is very subjective – if the woman says she feels suicidal she could get an abortion]
- d) Before 24 weeks, pregnancy would involve greater risk of injury to the physical or mental health of any existing children of the family of the pregnant woman than abortion [also very subjective]
- e) There is substantial risk that if the child were born it would be seriously handicapped mentally or physically [the definition of "substantial" and "seriously" is subjective – cleft palate / Down's syndrome are included]

Or in an emergency, if abortion is certified by the operating practitioner as immediately necessary:

- f) To save the life of the pregnant woman
- g) To prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman

The following statistics are for abortions performed in England & Wales:

- There were 194,179 legal abortions in 2004 – the highest number ever (an increase of over 2% from 2003). This represents around
- There have been around 6.2 million abortions since 1968 – an average of 534 per day, 22 per hour, 1 every 3 minutes
- Although abortion remains illegal throughout Ireland except in situations f) and g) above, 1,280 women from Northern Ireland and 6,217 women from the Republic had abortions in England and Wales in 2004
- 3,756 girls under the age of 16 had abortions in 2004

Abortion is an even bigger issue in the USA where around 2 million abortions are performed every year, representing 1 in 3 pregnancies. By 1982 only 28% of the world's population lived in countries where abortion was largely illegal, mainly in the Islamic world, Africa and Latin America. In 1986 it was estimated that around 55 million legal abortions were performed worldwide. Currently 95% of abortions in England and Wales are performed for reason c) (based on alleged risks to the mothers physical or mental health), 3% for d) (risk to existing children) and 1% for e) (the baby is handicapped). Only 0.013% are for reason f), to save the mother's life in an emergency. Because of the flexibility in the definition of risk to the mother's mental health, we effectively have abortion on demand in Britain – if a mother who is under 24 weeks pregnant says she needs an abortion and two doctors are prepared to agree, there is nothing to stop her.

Arguments in favour of abortion usually appeal to one or more of the following questions:

1. **Doesn't the woman have a right to choose?** In this argument the unborn baby is spoken of as if it was part of the woman's body and she has a choice whether to proceed with the pregnancy or not. Biologically speaking, the baby is a distinct genetic and physical entity, and Biblically speaking it is a human being with the same rights as any other human being. Therefore this argument would also mean that any person should have the right to kill any other person if that person's continued existence posed a threat to their physical or mental well-being. Clearly this would lead to anarchy. Once a child is born it is not seen as a possession of the mother, but as a human being with rights that are protected under law. Why should this be different before birth?
2. **Won't removing abortion lead to women and children suffering?** The reality is that the majority of women who consider abortion but decide against it continue to have good, healthy relationships with their child. In fact, there is more evidence of psychological harm to the mother through having an abortion than continuing with the pregnancy. Likewise, there is no such thing as an "unwanted" baby. Even if the mother decides after her child is born that she cannot keep it, there are parents who are ready and waiting to adopt babies. The rate of adoptions has fallen sharply in line with the increase in abortions since 1967.

3. **If abortion is illegal won't there be a return to unsafe back-street abortions?** This is not really an argument when the life of the unborn child is considered to be of equal value with the mothers. Even if there is a mortality rate from illegal abortions this cannot equal the mortality rate for legal abortions when one considers that there is an (almost) 100% mortality for one of the two patients in any abortion. Prevention of harm does not form a defensible basis for legalising something that is ethically indefensible.
4. **What about abortion for rape?** This is an extremely tragic circumstance, but it does not alter the ethical status of the unborn child. There are two innocent victims in this case – the woman and her unborn child. To abort the baby is to punish an innocent victim. In fact even alleged rape is a factor in less than 1% of abortions. Rape is a despicable and heinous crime, and the rapist should be punished severely, but to abort a baby does not undo the crime, and may well leave the woman feeling even more guilty in future. If she continues to have the baby and then feels that she cannot care for it because it reminds her of the rapist, the baby can at least be adopted. In fact once the baby is born the mother may well discover that she can love it irrespective of the rape.
5. **What about abortion for handicap?** This accounts for only around 1% of abortions in Britain. Ethically it only makes sense to support abortion for a handicap if killing of a baby with the same problem was acceptable. This judgement depends on attributing value to a person's life based on their abilities. We must ask the question what gives us the right to do this, and how severe the handicap must be to warrant it. Where do we draw the line? Surely this would only really be acceptable from a Christian perspective if we know that the baby cannot survive after birth.

So, I maintain, it is only really conceivable that abortion would be ethically acceptable within the Biblical framework in two situations:

- a) To save the life of the mother
- b) In cases of severe handicap to the baby that would make it impossible for it to live after birth

Even in these cases it is not clear-cut, since it is not always easy to determine risks accurately. So, how should Christians respond? I think there are three vital responses:

1. Pray – for mothers faced with tough decisions and for those who are experiencing guilt because of having an abortion. A mother seldom decides on an abortion flippantly. Often she reaches her conclusion because she can see no other way out. Sadly, in Britain the option of abortion is presented to her. If it were not readily available mothers may have to make a different decision.
2. Peacefully make our voice heard in the debate – we must resist change in the Northern Ireland law and campaign for change in Great Britain. However, we must do this compassionately, peacefully and graciously.
3. Show compassion to women – we must offer adoption and support, reassurance and forgiveness. We must be willing to sacrificially support single mothers and to offer adoption in cases where there is no other way forward. This is what it will mean to take the way of the cross in response to abortion. Unfortunately Christians have at times been quick to judge in these cases but slower to offer a real alternative to women facing an unplanned pregnancy.

What is your life for?

There are several common Christian answers to this fundamental question, which go something like this:

- To know and glorify God (e.g. the Westminster Shorter Catechism)
- To make God known to others
- To love and care for others
- To become like Christ
- To use our gifts to serve God and others

These five purposes for life (famously popularised by Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*) are all biblical and very helpful, but they may give the impression of a false division of life and efforts. Based on our examination of the Bible's teaching about the nature of man I would summarise the purpose of our life in one sentence:

Man exists to reflect the image of God in exercising stewardship in God's Kingdom

This definition includes all of the ideas above, but it also answers the question of the lasting purpose of our life. What will last beyond death? Only what we build into God's Kingdom will last the test. In "heaven" our eternal privilege will be to live in relationship to God, enjoying our part in His amazing

Kingdom, serving in whatever capacity He entrusts to us. We will then be fully restored into the image and likeness of God which has been so marred in us by the effect of sin. In this sense it is only in the person of Christ that we understand what it means to be fully human. In Him we see the perfect example of sinless submission to His Father. His life of constant dependence on the Father and selfless devotion to proclaiming and building the Kingdom of God are our pattern. This is the true meaning of Christ-likeness – it means to be like Him in character, but also in actions and in intention.

Christ taught us to pray that the Father's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 6:10). What does this mean in practice? Surely we are to be part of the answer to this prayer – that through us God's Kingdom would be established and extended. Furthermore, Christ taught us to:

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously...” Matthew 6:33a (NLT)

This is our primary aim – to seek God's rule over us, in us and through us. You are a unique individual created in God's image to exercise stewardship under His rule. The core principles of God's Kingdom are always two-fold:

- a) Truth and righteousness – standing for what is right and seeking justice for the oppressed
- b) Grace and mercy – offering forgiveness to those who do wrong and seeking to restore them

It is worth pausing to think how these principles work out in an issue like abortion. We must stand for justice for the unborn children and take a firm stand about what is right, but we must also actively seek to bring God's grace to those who have had abortions – there is forgiveness and restoration in Christ. Understanding the truth that we should seek first God's kingdom has several implications:

1. You matter

Your life is not an accident, and you have a unique role to play in God's plan. If Darwinism was true, what purpose would your life have? You would just be a random accident – the chance coming together of certain molecules on a tiny speck of dust in a backwater of the universe for an infinitely short period of time. Your purpose is, at best to reproduce and to help produce a better environment for the survival of your species, but even this seems fairly pointless. The result is that many people just focus on themselves or on enjoying life and others give up entirely and decide there is no purpose at all. Realising that God made you as a unique individual with unique personality and gifting brings a renewed purpose to life.

2. Your purpose is to do God's will in every sphere of influence

Our goal should always be to build God's Kingdom, not our own empires. We must seek to bring glory to Him as the King and to use all of our power and influence to bring the values of the kingdom. This will mean living by the standard of righteousness and treating others with the surprising mercy that God showed to us. This is true in:

- i. Our personal life – we should be seeking God's will and Christ-like character, not our own pleasure and satisfaction
- ii. Our family life – in our marriage, in relationship to parents and children, we must reflect the character of Christ and seek to order our relationships around the principles of God's Kingdom
- iii. Our working life – we will seek to live by God's standards and to influence our work-place to make it more in line with God's Kingdom. We will practice diligence in our work but also grace. We will seek to do what is righteous and also what is compassionate.
- iv. Our church – we will not seek to build this church so much as the Kingdom of God. Every believer will be discovering his or her place in ministry, and the results will be that we are building into God's eternal Kingdom as new people become Christians and those who are already in the Kingdom discover the joy of stewardship.
- v. Our world – in the way we vote and in our engagement with world matters we will seek the justice and mercy that are the foundation principles of God's rule.

How are you doing in the Kingdom? Are you a kingdom-builder in your life, family, workplace, church and world?

3. You can trust God to provide for you as you seek His Kingdom

The command Christ gave us to seek first God's Kingdom is accompanied by a promise:

“... and He will give you everything you need.” Matthew 6:33b (NLT)

God will not leave those who seek His Kingdom first unprovided for. The promise is clear. We do not need to focus our energy on building our own empire, providing security for ourselves in possessions, career or status. God will be our security, and He will provide everything we need.

So, then let us stand up and step forward for God's Kingdom! May it come in me, and may others experience its blessings through me.