

Foreword

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND THE ABORTION DEBATE

Few people bring the passion, energy, or insights motivated by serious biblical scholarship to the abortion debate, as does John V. Stevens, Sr. He brings an authentic witness to his claims about biblical authority and the religious bases of his involvement in this divisive debate. His writings through the years have focused consistently on the twin concerns for truth and justice. His approach to truth involves an informed perspective on what the Bible actually says. He does not substitute claims that are widely disseminated by the mass media but have little, if any, factual relation to the texts of Scripture. His concern for justice embraces issues from the manner in which women are treated to the constitutional protections for religious freedom in belief and practices.

Both the demands of truth and the requirements of justice are loudly claimed by the powerful religious coalition that has dominated the public debate about abortion for the past three decades. The problem is that dissimulation and pre-judgments dominate their arguments and the proposals they pursue with such vigor and vehemence. Three “Justice Sundays” were organized by politicized evangelicals in their pursuit of dominance in American governance. Their pronouncements and perspectives had nothing to do with justice as portrayed in Scripture, however, or, for that matter, in American jurisprudence. It had to do with putting pressure on the Administration to appoint only those “justices,” that is, judges, who would support their agenda in making and enforcing American laws. Speakers specifically targeted Supreme Court appointments.

The social contract of tolerance and protection for people of different religious persuasions and practices is a major emphasis in John Stevens’ approach to the abortion debate. The law is obliged to provide “equal protection” to women who choose to abort, as well as to those who choose not to abort, regardless of the circumstances. Both act on the basis of powerful moral and/or faith beliefs that inform and give support to the decision. Any effort to foreclose the option for choice by those religious groups who oppose any grounds for abortion is, at the same time, an exercise in religious intolerance and a breach of the wall between church and state.

The Abortion Controversy places the legal question in perspective by drawing on the history of the debate from the colonial era to the latest decisions of the Supreme Court. In doing so, Stevens describes the major players and their church-state patterns of action and beliefs. He rightly portrays the Puritans as heavy-handed and authoritarian in matters of personal morals. Their style of governance was one that emphasized the dominance of the clergy, not the religious or moral commitments of the individual. The idea of theocratic

governance was not invented by the Puritans, but they found stalwart and committed partners in seeking the dominance of the church in shaping public policy and constitutional law in groups such as orthodox Roman Catholics. That theocratic mentality is still found on the American scene. Stevens pulls off its mask, showing the threat it represents to democratic governance and religious freedom. The challenge is for Americans to recognize and resist those movements and ideas that deny the basic premise of the American experiment in democracy.

Stevens rightly argues that the debate since *Roe v. Wade* has focused the question of the personhood of the fetus. He spends several chapters dealing with Supreme Court decisions and the major players and arguments that shaped their outcomes. Strong differences of opinion among the protagonists are noted that range from the notion of the zygote-as-person to the emphasis on the woman as the person at issue. She is the one who unquestionably bears the image of God and thus has the moral responsibility for making a decision consistent with her own conscientious opinion. She is to render a stewardship of powers that is given each person in creation and affirmed in redemption. The reader will find a wealth of information in this section of material that condenses and analyzes the arguments in ways that are both helpful and insightful.

Stevens examines every passage in the Bible that deals with abortion and does so with careful attention to the details of content and context. He leaves no stone unturned in his quest for the truth of the biblical materials.

In perhaps his best and strongest section, Stevens argues that the biblical story of Creation is rather clear in its declaration that personhood begins with birth and breath (Gen. 2:7). Certainly, it does not teach that one is a person with the fertilization of the embryo or at conception. Nor is there a search for an invisible, non-corporeal soul that somehow invades the embryo and resides in the body until death. Nor are there unconditional prohibitions of abortion in Scripture. To claim otherwise is to misrepresent the clear teachings and meaning of the biblical materials. Notions of a non-corporeal soul are Greek, not Hebrew or Christian.

Neither Jesus nor Paul condemned abortion, which is rather remarkable, given the fact that abortion was not legally forbidden in the Graeco-Roman world into which Christianity was introduced. Paul gave rather explicit moral guidance to his readers, but nowhere in his lists of forbidden vices is abortion to be found. These truths are not only inconvenient but embarrassing to those who claim the Bible as their authority for attempting to outlaw the practice in the United States.

Some readers will be tempted to dismiss Stevens' treatment of biblical prophecy and its meaning for America and the abortion debate. He deals with prophecies that religious dictators will rule the world, and teachings concerning the judgment of God on all evil-doing. He finds support in the book of Revelation and includes passages about the mark of the Beast as warnings against destructive trends that are discernible and predicted by Scripture. Readers who prefer not to bother with such passages will be confronted by Stevens' challenge to deal honestly and comprehensively with the Bible itself, not popular or dismissive assumptions that lightly skim its pages and develop convenient and comfortable theories alien to biblical perspectives.

Stevens moves from the moral instructions of Scripture to the prophetic perspectives that permeate both the Hebrew and Christian writings. The apocalyptic passages of the Bible are there and must be reckoned with, he rightly argues. His fears for the future of America are grounded in the awareness of the ebb and flow of natural history, the rise and fall of nations, and his concern for the survival of the United States, which he regards as “history’s most unique nation.” He is a true patriot in the deepest meaning of the word. He is profoundly committed to the America that invests dreams of liberty and freedoms assured by law in a democratic society. The destruction of America would be a great tragedy, in his judgment, but trends seem to be headed in that direction. The question in the subtitle of his book, “Will a free America survive?” should be taken with radical seriousness.

Thoughtful and informed readers will find ample reason to enter the debate with Stevens, as he applies apocalyptic imagery found in Scripture to the United States. His courageous venture into this arena is not a simple re-hash of pre-millennial apocalypticism. Stevens argues that those who give up the divinely appointed standards that make them great will fall victim to their own disobedience, that is, to the wrath of God and thus wind up in destruction. He blends a concern for the Ten Commandments with a passion for following Christ, which is the only way to acquire immortality—it does not come by soul infusion at conception. He interprets the acrimonious debate about abortion and the theocratic solutions sought by religious groups as signs of the end of the world and a warning that must be heeded, if catastrophe is to be avoided.

This intriguing and unusual book should have a wide reading. An extensive discussion of the writer’s arguments could be beneficial in the current abortion debate. Stevens considers a wide array of legal opinion and biblical material that will make it an authoritative and frequently cited reference to those in the fields both of law and of religion, as they deal with abortion. Scholars in seminaries, public policy think-tanks, and law schools should pay careful attention to Stevens and his arguments. He has spent his adult life struggling with issues of soul liberty and democratic governance. This book summarizes his spiritual and intellectual insights into one of the most intractable debates of our time. He embraces a strong emphasis on religious liberty and the separation of church and state that will appeal to separationists and civil libertarians but will offend theocrats and those determined to rule the minds of dissenters and punish those who act against narrowly construed religious dogma or moralistic requirements. Through it all, Stevens’ love and devotion to biblical authority dominates his arguments and challenges the opposition to render a more faithful following of its precepts and perspectives.

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