

Family Affairs

Jason Roach argues that the end doesn't justify the means in family planning

*'When the most powerful president in the world will not release money already allocated to prevent unwanted pregnancy, to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, for the poorest citizens in the world, where is the morality in that?'*¹

Amy Coen - President of Population Action International

At the time of writing, the Bush administration are withholding \$34 million appropriated by congress for the UN population fund (UNFPA), because of accusations that it condones forced abortions in China.¹ Similar moves are underway in the UK Parliament as well.^{2,3} On this issue, both the US administration and UK government seem to believe as Christians do, that not all means can justify the end. Amy Coen is president of Population Action International, a private organization in Washington that focuses on voluntary population planning. Her language, and that of many others in recent weeks, would seemingly like the world to think differently. However, American apologist Gregory Koukl puts it like this, "There is a relationship between means and ends, and there are ethical considerations not just for the goals that we have in mind, but for the way that we get to those goals. We have to weigh both of those things in light of biblical commands and the biblical ethics of absolute truth."⁴

The accusation

The decision to withhold US funding was made after congress representative Christopher Smith, Vice Chairman of the International Relations Committee, wrote to President Bush in October last year. He alleged that the fund condoned Chinese birth control policies that include forced abortions and involuntary sterilisation. The evidence for these actions came from the Policy Research Institute, an international organisation set up by the pro-life group Human Life International. Josephine Guy, director of governmental affairs for the institute was a key witness. She spent four days in a region of China where the UNFPA was known to operate. She interviewed many women about the methods of family planning enforced in the region, one in which the fund claims that women are free to determine the timing and spacing of pregnancy. All the interviews were videotaped.

The interviews paint a picture of 'ongoing, rampant and unrelenting' abuse.⁵ One 19 year old girl was forced to have an abortion, as she was too young according to the strict family planning policy. Women reported having to hide their pregnancies and their children, to escape retribution from officials for not having an abortion. Some described punishments inflicted on those who wished to freely determine for themselves the timing and spacing of pregnancy.⁵ Others described non-voluntary intra-uterine device insertion, and mandatory checks to ensure they remained in place. All interviews were conducted within a few miles of a UNFPA office, in areas under its governance.

The explanation

The UN, however, contends that its work in China is limited to areas where the one-child family policy is no longer enforced. It also says that it does not use US money for Chinese programmes.¹ Other sources report that the population fund was instrumental in helping China design pilot projects to test relaxed target approaches to family planning that stress quality of care.⁶

After frantic negotiations earlier this year, the Bush administration told the UNFPA that it would set up a delegation to go to China to uncover the real situation. The body was assembled on 1 May, amidst concern from some that the Chinese may have had too much notice to cover up evidence that the UN is working in countries practising forced abortions.⁷

Our reaction

Whatever the truth is about the situation in China, the furore surrounding it raises important issues for Christians.

Firstly, the Bible is clear about the sanctity of life. It lays out a fundamental worldview as to what it means to be human⁸ and created in the image of God.⁹ God is described as having total authority over his creation and our demise¹⁰ and having a relationship with us even before conception.^{11,12}

Secondly, we cannot distinguish between personal and social ethics as if they were separate fields of enquiry.¹³ It is sometimes suggested that in the name of love, we might decide that abortion is indicated where the baby is unwanted by the family, society, or an overcrowded world. But we cannot adapt our ethical principles for the greater good.¹⁴ Love does not override divine principle, or justify utilitarian social policy.

Thirdly, the US/UN argument is a reminder of the ongoing struggle of Christians able to influence debate, in a society seemingly enslaved to relativism. The wisdom revealed to us is for the whole world. Just as whole kingdoms benefited from Solomon's wisdom, so the whole world can benefit from the knowledge of God and his purposes for mankind. Most importantly, this comes through the spiritual dimension of eternal life. But we also know living life God's way is the best way for humanity. So, it is good to strive for a society in which following God's path is at least possible, within the frameworks of imperfect societies.

Finally, we must remember that objections without solutions often meet opposition, scorn, and resentment. If possible, loving, practical alternatives are needed too. Our trust in the truth of Scripture should spur us on to find practical ways of following God's law in a fallen world, both personally and politically.

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