

Philippa Taylor draws inspiration from the reforming zeal of two great individuals as abortion debate continues

THE ABORTION ACT 1967 50 YEARS ON

key points

- The reforming zeal of two individuals – Martin Luther in the 16th century and Raymond Johnston in the mid-20th – drew strength from common convictions.
- Advocates of the Abortion Act 1967 said they did not expect it would significantly increase the number of abortions – how wrong they were. Since then nearly nine million unborn lives have been lost at unfathomable cost.
- The medical profession has become abortion's greatest facilitator (as well as promoter), betraying its own historic position.
- 50 years on Christians can demonstrate compassion and understanding to women facing an unplanned pregnancy or difficulties following an abortion.
- Many CMF members are involved in the Pregnancy Centres Network. In a collapsing culture people get hurt.

A momentous day back in September 1971 saw 35,000 Christians gather in London's Trafalgar Square for the Nationwide Festival of Light. It was the largest outdoor gathering of Christians ever recorded in the UK.

They gathered together, as a grass roots movement, to stand for God's righteousness and grace. They had witnessed passing of several laws in the 1960s that radically altered traditional British culture and reflected how the UK's permissive society had moved away from the Bible's teaching and our Judeo-Christian heritage.

One of the more radical of these 1960s Bills was the Abortion Act, passed by Parliament on 27 October 1967, 50 years ago. Almost exactly five hundred years ago was another momentous event. Martin Luther, then an unknown monk, nailed his '95 Theses' to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg on 31 October 1517.

Luther's act had far-reaching consequences. It not only led to schism in the Western Church, but more subtly it gave shape to a different way of thinking about the relationship between God and human beings. An important side-benefit was that the natural marriage of Christianity and medicine, formed throughout the centuries, gained fresh impetus, voice and expression after the Reformation, as Peter Saunders reflects (see editorial page 3).¹

Raymond Johnston, the first director of the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL), appointed in 1974, saw a clear connection between the NFOL and the movement initiated by Luther. Johnston was widely acknowledged as a 'prophet', able to discern the signs of the times and say: 'There's something wrong here and we need to change'. The NFOL had quiet but considerable influence, engaging in research, writing, briefings, and coordinating campaigns.

Rooted in the Bible

In 1983 the NFOL was re-launched as CARE (Christian Action Research and Education) and Johnston served as its director until his death in 1985. Three beliefs and concerns were at the heart of Johnston's work. First, he was rooted in the Bible and the 16th century reformers; second, he focused on cultural disintegration; and third, he called for radical and concerted Christian thinking and action. These three could hardly be more relevant today as we mark the anniversaries of both the Reformation and the Abortion Act.

Raymond Johnston believed that the 16th century reformers need to be rediscovered for our times. After all, they themselves were rediscovering apostolic Christianity. 'It was because Raymond was a "Reformation man" that he saw no dichotomy between his Christian faith and social concern. The doctrine of the Sovereignty of God means that God is concerned for the whole of life, not just on Sundays in church but Monday to Saturday out in the world as well.'²

'He believed that God had created man in his own image, and that although that image was distorted by sin, it hadn't been destroyed. He, therefore, believed in the sanctity of human life. Believing also that "the archetypal transgression was murder" as evidenced in the sin of Cain, he naturally campaigned against attacks on human life. And the great attack since 1967 he saw coming through abortion, that huge blot on the moral landscape.'

Johnston presciently asked (and answered): 'Is the unborn child my neighbour – or not?' Abortion always remained one of his deepest concerns. This was at a time when evangelicals, generally speaking, were silent on abortion. Most evangelicals had 'believed the politicians, that this bill would not result in abortion-on-demand, that it would end back-street abortions and that there would be careful safeguards'.³ Indeed, the 'go-to' resource

among many evangelicals was a book published in 1972.⁴ The author, Rex Gardner, argued that 'fully human life' begins only at birth, and abortion right up to full-term could be morally acceptable in some circumstances. CMF subsequently adopted a stance opposing abortion, based both on the biblical understanding of human life and the Hippocratic Oath.⁵

Although David Steel's original Private Member's Abortion Bill aimed to reduce the numbers of dangerous 'backstreet abortions'; in reality it quickly opened the door to legalised abortion on demand. Since 1968, nearly nine million unborn lives have been lost. Nine million human beings, the value of whose loss is impossible to measure: potential law-makers, journalists, doctors, inventors, scientists, technicians, scholars, city-builders, discoverers, and mothers and fathers. To put this into perspective, it is more than the combined populations of Wales and Scotland.⁶ According to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, at least one-third of women in Britain will have had an abortion by the time they reach the age of 45. Most of them are for so-called 'social' reasons.

Cultural disintegration

Tragically, the 1967 Abortion Act has resulted in a greater loss of human life than any other piece of legislation in the history of our country, while countless women have suffered – physically and emotionally – from the experience of ending their pregnancy.

Johnston's second concern about cultural disintegration needs little justification now. He knew we in the West are living in a 'collapsing culture', particularly with the loss of Judaeo-Christian religious and moral contribution. He described this as '...the deepest formative principle in the development of Western European culture. It was this that brought us the dignity of woman, the sacredness of the family, the intellectual base for the rise of modern science, our hospitals, our schools, our universities and – if we are to believe even some of the non-Christian economists – our great economic take-off after the Reformation.'⁷

The implosion of our 'collapsing culture' can be clearly seen as we not only look back at the last 50 years of legal abortion. The same can be discerned as we look forward in the face of growing pressure to decriminalise abortion further and allow it to take place for any reason up to full term in England, Wales and Scotland. Ironically, the medical profession has become abortion's greatest facilitator (as well as promoter), betraying its own historic position.⁸

For those who think it cannot get much worse, here are a few chilling tweets and media reports that I have recently picked up from those leading current campaigns to further promote abortion:

- 'The 67 Abortion Act made Britain a world leader in women's reproductive rights and it's time we were again.' Diana Johnson MP.⁹
- 'Counselling has become pro-life weaponry.'

Dr Wendy Savage (who has carried out 10,000 abortions herself).

- 'Offering counselling unaffiliated from clinics providing abortion is deeply immoral.' 'Anti-choice protestors are a danger to women.' Professor Ellie Lee.
- 'Choice is choice and sex-selection abortion of girls must be allowed.' Kerry Abel, Abortion Rights.
- 'Abortion is just like having a bunion removed.' Lesley Regan, President of the Royal College of Gynaecologists.¹⁰

Christian thought and action

If ever there were a time for action, it is surely now. Johnston did not just ask questions, he challenged Christians to get involved. His third concern was for Christian thinking and action.

For Raymond Johnston, 'thinking' did not just mean understanding and quoting biblical texts. He was also concerned to harness and use anthropology and sociology to confirm God's truth. Christian people, he said, are to think and then be active. He maintained that we all have a clear obligation to participate and to use our voice for the standards which we know God has revealed. If God is concerned with guiding nations, so must we be. Johnston was speaking at a time when most evangelicals deliberately steered clear of any engagement with politics, arguing that, 'we can't impose our ethics on others'.¹¹

He wrote: 'We are commanded by the Apostle Paul to pray for good government.'¹² He maintained that the Public Square was bigger than Parliament Square.¹³ He was constantly asking: 'What is our Christian duty in this situation?' But to Johnston 'action' also inevitably involves compassion because 'As a culture collapses people get hurt.'¹⁴ Every time the scan allows us to gaze through a window into the womb we know that this is no bunion but a new member of the human race. Which is why one of the greatest gifts we can give an unborn baby is to care for his or her mother. Both lives matter.

That's why for many years, Christians have sought to equip and encourage volunteers in local Christian centres to demonstrate compassion and understanding, both to the mother facing an unplanned pregnancy and to the women experiencing difficulties following an abortion. Many CMF members are involved in the Pregnancy Centres Network, who today are carrying out this crucial work.¹⁵

However two things particularly angered Raymond Johnston. First, the false teaching of heretics and, secondly, the passivity of the faithful. That challenge stands as strongly today as it did then.

So inspired by Raymond Johnston, in God's strength, the challenge in our day is to be faithful and then to be active and not passive.¹⁶ We cannot stop being active until all pregnant women choose to head to maternity clinics and not abortion clinics, even if that takes us longer than the next 50 years.

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CMF statement of values (extract)

As Christian doctors seeking to live and speak for Jesus Christ we aim:

To practise whole-person medicine which addresses our patients' physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

To maintain the deepest respect for human life from its beginning to its end, including the unborn, the handicapped and the elderly.

references

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11. Timothy 1:2-4
12. Holloway, *Ibid*
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14. For information about pregnancy advice centres, pregnancycentresnetwork.org.uk
15. Holloway, *Ibid*: 16
16. Holloway, *Ibid*: 23