

IN ALL THINGS CHARITY / A SERIES

ABOUT ABORTION

10 THINGS A NEW GENERATION
OF CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW

JAMES V. HEIDINGER II

About the "In all Things Charity" Series

JOHN WESLEY IS often credited with the saying, "In essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity."

As the world becomes more religiously pluralistic and societies and cultures grow more contentious and divided it will behoove the church to gain clarity in its discernment of the distinction between essentials and non-essentials. We must not shrink back from boldly articulating the core truths of the Christian faith. At the same time, we must grow in the quality of our character as our very conversations witness to the gospel in the presence of a watching world. Said simply, our relationships within the church are the barometer of our witness to the world.

Jesus minced no words when he told his disciples that the authenticity of their association with him would be known only by the quality of their love for one another. Later in prayer he would connect the loving unity of the church to the believability of the gospel. See John 17.

The Apostle Paul, in the celebrated thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian Church, in essence tells us the absence of charity, or love, signals failure.

As a publisher, Seedbed does not want to steer clear of the difficult subjects of our time. Nor do we want to agitate the church with unnecessary controversy. For this reason, Seedbed created the, "In All Things Charity" series. The series will contain books across a range of challenging issues. For the series we are selecting authors whom we believe embody the variety of character which enables them to demonstrate confidence in their point of view with truthful love in their approach.

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Introduction

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I became convinced of the need for this new generation of Christians to fully understand the substance of the case that can be made for life in the ongoing controversy about abortion. In these days, when we are being urged to rethink church, it also would be well for us to rethink abortion. The timing to do so is right.

In January 2013, we marked the fortieth anniversary of the sweeping *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, which gave women an unprecedented constitutional right for legalized abortion in America. Since that decision, an estimated 55 million abortions have been performed in the United States. The

Guttmacher Institute, Planned Parenthood's research arm, claims that 43 percent of women of childbearing age in America have experienced at least one abortion. This staggering statistic tells us that there are literally millions of women in America who are living with the guilt, hurt, and heartache of having experienced an abortion.

Adding to the timeliness to rethink abortion, is the recent *Time* magazine cover story that noted the fortieth anniversary of *Roe*, saying, "[Forty years ago,] abortion-rights activists won an epic victory with *Roe v. Wade*."¹ Underneath the title it reads, "They've been losing ever since." According to the *Time* article, abortion-rights supporters are losing because it is getting more difficult to find clinics to do the procedures.

A 2010 Gallup Poll revealed that 47 percent of Americans say they are pro-life on abortion versus 45 percent who say they are pro-choice. An encouraging part of the poll was that 47 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds said they are pro-life, which is an increase of five percent from the 2008 Gallup numbers. If there is a growing resistance to America's culture of easy-access abortion on demand, we need to understand why that is happening.

Why rethink abortion? Because we have a generation of Christians who have known nothing except the culture of easy and legal abortion, brought about by the *Roe v. Wade* court decision. Many in this new generation, according to the Gallup Poll numbers, seem to have pro-life instincts. They may know of the political debate they see in the media, but may not be aware that it has not always been this way in America. They may be unaware that the arguments and rationales used in the '70s and '80s in support of unrestricted abortion were (and remain today) substantively weak, not carefully reasoned, and sometimes based on misleading, even dishonest claims. They may not know that the Supreme Court's decision was and continues to be sharply criticized by respected ethicists, legal scholars, and Christian theologians. Knowing these things may help inform today's generation and give substantive support to its pro-life instincts.

I have found myself reflecting on what this new generation of Christians needs to know about the controversy—a generation which has only known forty years of *Roe's* abortion culture. I have thought much about what I would try to say to my precious grandchildren—my eight- and seven-year-old

granddaughters and three-year-old grandson—as they grow toward adolescence and maturity.

As I address this generation of Christians in America about abortion, I want to rightly handle the word of truth. The apostle Paul charged Timothy to be “a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). He also urged Timothy to keep what he had heard from Paul as “the pattern of sound teaching”(2 Tim. 1:13).

It may sound strange to speak about the word of truth, but the church has always spoken about truth. Paul also referred to it as the pattern of sound teaching. This sound teaching included, of course, the church’s teaching about life, family, marriage, and children.

As we reflect upon the fortieth anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, I fear that neither the church nor American society has done well in following the pattern of sound teaching. We have not listened to what the church has taught historically concerning the sanctity of life; we have not considered carefully the teaching of the church fathers of the first five centuries; we have not listened carefully to the pattern of sound teaching of our greatest theologians and ethicists of the last century.

So, as I write, I hope to correctly handle the word of truth about abortion. I want to do it prayerfully and with sensitivity, knowing that there are those who will read this who may have had an abortion. Some may have struggled in desperation about the decision to have an abortion. Others may have had a family member or friend who has had an abortion. Some may yet struggle with that decision in the future.

As we consider an issue that has been painful, heart-wrenching, and life-changing for millions of women, we must always address it with compassion and in the spirit of Christ. Not to do so would be an egregious contradiction. On the other hand, we must not allow the painfulness of the issue or a binding political correctness to mute a passionate teaching and defense of the truth about this critical moral issue. Therefore, we must be equipped to engage in conversation about this difficult topic in a loving and informed way.

**ABOUT
ABORTION**

The Consequences of *Roe v. Wade*

THIS GENERATION OF Christians should understand the sweeping nature of the *Roe v. Wade* decision and what it actually brought about in America. Until the turbulent and revolutionary 1960s, there was very little public support for abortion in America. This all changed with the urban unrest that accompanied the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, and the widespread dissemination of the birth-control pill. As women pressed for political and economic equality, they also felt they should exert new control over their own reproductive

destinies. Abortion offered what seemed like plausible answers to problems such as unwanted children, overpopulation, child abuse, juvenile delinquency, and welfare costs. The groundwork was being laid for 1973. It was in that year that the United States Supreme Court found a virtually *unrestricted right* for women to choose abortion in its monumental and tragic *Roe v. Wade* decision.

The *Roe* decision on January 22, 1973 and the companion *Doe v. Bolton* decision overturned two state laws (*Roe* in Texas and *Doe v. Bolton* in Georgia) that prohibited abortion. With an expanded understanding of the term “a mother’s health,” the decisions were the precedent for the removal of all meaningful limits on abortion throughout the entire nine months of pregnancy.

What this generation does not fully realize is the scope of the decision—*Roe* struck down laws prohibiting abortion in most states. Prior to the *Roe* decision, New York allowed abortions, but its legislature had voted to restore legal protection to unborn children. However, the action was blocked by a governor’s veto. In 1972, Michigan and North Dakota voted to reject proposals to loosen their abortion laws. The *Roe* decision and its companion trumped the laws of those states

and the existing laws in most other states, creating a sweeping national policy that took precedence over the laws of any state in America at the time. This was not a benign decision reflecting a gradual liberalizing trend in America about abortion. It was a radical departure from the practice in America at the time.

Criticism of *Roe v. Wade*

THIS GENERATION SHOULD know that the *Roe* decision has been sharply criticized by eminent legal theorists as seriously flawed jurisprudence, which is one reason many believe it should be reversed.

In his dissent in *Roe*, Supreme Court Justice Byron White strongly criticized the ruling as an exercise in “raw judicial power.” Noted legal scholar Archibald Cox of Watergate fame said the reasoning of the court in *Roe* was an embarrassment. Yale law professor John Hart Ely said that *Roe* was “a very bad decision . . . It is bad because it is bad constitutional law, or rather because

it is *not* constitutional law and gives almost no sense of an obligation to try to be.”¹ Edward Lazarus, former clerk to Justice Harry Blackmun who authored the *Roe* opinion, says that “*Roe*, as constitutional interpretation, is virtually impossible to defend.”² Few today are aware of these devastating critiques.

In 1992, in its *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision, the Supreme Court reaffirmed *Roe*. However, three justices said they were doing this not so much because the original case was rightly decided, but simply because it had been the law for a long time and many had come to rely on its availability. In response to such questionable logic, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops challenged the ruling, saying, “If one realizes the decision was wrong, it is doubly wrong to keep imposing it on the country.”³

In his dissent in *Casey*, Chief Justice William Rehnquist noted that in the previous two decades the Supreme Court had “overruled in whole or in part thirty-four of its previous constitutional decisions.” So those who are concerned by our abortion epidemic in America should realize that a reversal of *Roe* would not be unprecedented in terms of the Court’s history.

Many of today’s generation may not realize that eminent scholars, theologians, and ethicists believe the

Court made a serious mistake when it first considered, then decided to reject, the precedent about abortion found in the Hippocratic Oath, the generally accepted ethical standard for the medical profession. The Hippocratic Oath clearly opposes abortion by saying, “I will not give a pessary [suppository] to a woman to cause abortion.” This belief was at the heart of medical ethics since the fourth century B.C. This ancient ethic came to be accepted not only by Jews and Christians, but also by Arabs, medieval doctors, Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars, and scientists of the nineteenth century.

For the Court to ignore the Hippocratic ethic on abortion, wrote theologian Harold O. J. Brown, was “to reject the very heart of our ethical tradition, of principles common not merely to Judeo-Christian religion in the narrow sense, but the Western Civilization as a whole.”⁴ I am confident most Christians today are unaware of this fact.

Christian churches in America are slowly, but surely, coming to understand the flawed, tragic character of this sweeping Court decision. It is not something to be celebrated, but rather, lamented. It is bad law—and its result has been to give us more than 55 million lost lives since its passage. I believe this realization about

the flawed character of the Court's ruling in *Roe* would help more Christians challenge the abortion culture in America and speak out for change. Unfortunately, on the true nature of *Roe*, neither our churches nor our courts have done as well as they should in rightly handling the word of truth about abortion.