

# On Terryl Givens and Abortion

OCTOBER 20, 2020 BY SAM BRUNSON

Yesterday Terryl Givens published what he characterized as “[A Latter-day Saint Defense of the Unborn](#)” at Public Square Magazine. He ultimately concludes that Latter-day Saints are obligated to oppose abortion and that there is basically no room for personally opposing abortion but supporting its legality and availability.

Givens seems completely sincere in his revulsion for abortion. But that sincerity has led him to pen (type?) a deeply misleading and unchristian jeremiad against his fellow citizens and fellow-Saints who take the opposite tack.

I’m not going to detail all of the factual and legal problems with his piece, though I will highlight a couple of what I consider to be the big problems. I’m also want to point out that the way he’s framed his argument undercuts any assertion that he makes it in good faith and that it demonstrates a huge lack of moral imagination.

Note that, as I respond to Givens, I’m not arguing that the church doesn’t have a clear position opposing abortion (with a small handful of exceptions). Its policies clearly proscribe members from getting, performing, or paying for abortions most of the time. I am arguing, however, that Givens is wrong that the church’s position requires Latter-day Saints to oppose legal abortion or to support legal restrictions on abortion.

## Bad Faith

First things first: why do I say he’s arguing in bad faith? Well, his lead paragraph includes this:

“ I taught in a private liberal arts college for three decades, where, as is typical in higher education, political views are as diverse as in the North Korean parliament.

Granting that political liberals are overrepresented in academia, this doesn’t describe any faculty I’m aware of. If he believes that his colleagues’ views were identical, he hasn’t put in the effort to get to know or understand them. Moreover, bringing up North Korea—an authoritarian dictatorship where dissent can lead to execution—strongly hints that he’s creating a straw opponent, not engaging in good-faith discourse.[fn1]

Still, though he signals upfront that he’s not engaging in good-faith debate, I’m going to ignore his signals of bad faith take him at his word that he’s trying to engage with pro-choice Saints.

## Wrong on the Law, Wrong on the Facts

The constitutional status of abortion isn’t my specialty, but it’s worth pointing out that Givens’s reading of the law gets it remarkably wrong. Most notably, the *Roe* trimester framework was essentially overturned in 1992’s Supreme Court decision in [Planned Parenthood v. Casey](#). In that case, the Court upheld most of a Pennsylvania statute imposing limitations on abortion. The Court’s new standard asked, not what trimester of pregnancy did the abortion restrictions apply to, but whether they imposed an “undue burden” on women seeking pre-viability abortions. (For a broad, albeit slightly out-of-date, review of the state of the evolution of the right to abortion, read [this](#).)

Givens claims that

“ Many states have imposed various restrictions, but the Supreme Court is the ultimate arbiter, and consistently invalidates most such attempts.

The problem is, he’s entirely wrong. Or rather, he’s right that the Supreme Court has struck down blanket bans on abortion. But the courts have been more than willing to countenance marginal changes in state abortion laws. In fact, the states are taking the Supreme Court’s most recent ruling—striking down a Louisiana restriction on abortion clinics—as a win. Why? Because the case [changed the underlying legal standard](#) for evaluating whether an abortion restriction comports with its constitutional jurisprudence.

In fact, just last week the [Sixth Circuit upheld](#) a Kentucky law requiring that abortion clinics have a hospital transfer agreement. So the idea that abortion regulation always fails in the courts is absolutely absurd.

Givens also claims that because of [Doe v. Bolton](#), time limitations on abortion are effectively irrelevant (because of the slipperiness of mental and emotional health). That’s, how shall we say this, a poor reading of the case. In *Doe*, the court dealt with a Georgia statute criminalized abortion unless certain criteria were met. One criterion was that a doctor found an abortion necessary because, among other things, the pregnancy endangered the woman’s health. Ms.

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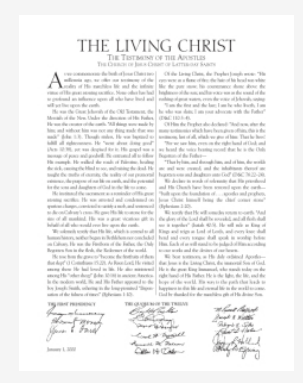
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Doe argued that the Georgia statute was unconstitutionally vague in describing “health.” The Supreme Court held that it wasn’t unconstitutionally vague because “health” had been interpreted to include both physical and mental health. The Court did not, as far as I can tell, either require a health exception or require that that health exception include mental and emotional health. In fact, 26 states that ban abortions after a certain gestational period have an exception for life and *physical* health of the mother.

I get that the nuances of reading law are tricky. Lawyers spend 3 years of law school learning about how to read cases, how precedent works, and how statutory law works. That’s not to say it’s solely our domain. But you’ll find that most attorneys refrain from making absolutist statements about what the law is; Givens would benefit from that same type of humility in approaching U.S. law (or, rather, state law, since each state separately and independently regulates abortion, subject to constitutional requirements).

### Moral Repugnance

About halfway through his article, Givens explains the roots of his opposition to abortion:

“ I am not personally opposed to abortion because of religious commitment or precept, because of some abstract principle of “the sanctity of life.” I am personally opposed because my heart and mind, my basic core humanity revolts at the thought of a living sensate human being undergoing vivisection in the womb, being vacuum evacuated, subjected to a salt bath, or, in the “late-term” procedure, having its skull pierced and brain vacuumed out.

Essentially, he finds abortion physically disgusting and, at least partly in consequence of that disgust, finds it morally repugnant. That in itself is fair: as humans we’re both rational and emotional. Moral repugnance based at least partly in physical disgust is a deeply human and deeply appropriate response. Still, where he’s grounding his argument largely in this physical disgust, it’s hard to argue with him because he’s not making a rational argument: he’s making a deeply personal argument that something disgusts him physically and morally and thus shouldn’t be legal.

Still, I want to respond, both rationally and emotionally.

The rational: to the extent that he wants to reduce the prevalence of abortion, his argument is oddly lacking in proposals for how to reduce the prevalence of abortion. In fact, his whole policy proposal seems to consist of: Make it illegal.

Why no support for, for example, free access to high-quality contraception? A [Brookings study](#) found that access to high-quality contraception reduces both unwanted pregnancies and abortions. An [NCBI study](#) found that access to high-quality contraception led to a statistically-significant reduction in abortions, repeat abortions, and teenage birth rates. And a [Washington University in St. Louis](#) study found that access to free contraception reduced abortions by 62-78% as compared to the national rate.

To the extent we want to end abortions, rather than just ban abortions, it’s worth looking at providing free contraception. Not only is it tremendously effective, but it doesn’t face the same sort of constitutional impediments that direct regulation of abortion does.

The moral disgust: you know what I consider disgusting? Unnecessary maternal death. The [NCBI reports](#) that unsafe abortion accounts for about 13% of maternal deaths. That adds up to about 47,000 women dying each year (plus roughly 5 million who suffer from temporary or permanent disability). The vast majority of these unsafe abortions occur in countries where abortion is severely restricted.

You know what else I consider morally repugnant? Racial inequality. The [Institute for Women’s Policy Research reports](#) that access to legal abortion significantly increase Black women’s educational attainment (in part because prior to *Roe*, Black women had less access to contraception). The Institute also reports that access to abortion has increased women’s labor force participation (and especially increased Black women’s labor force participation).

In addition to the racial inequality component, there’s a [socioeconomic inequality component](#): 75% of abortion patients in 2014 had incomes of less than 200% of the poverty line, and nearly 50% were below the poverty line.

You know what else I find deeply troubling? The state exercising its coercive power to force women to stay pregnant for 9 months. Especially since the state has significant non-coercive tools at its disposal to reduce—significantly—the prevalence of abortion.

Is abortion disgusting? Sure. Am I a fan of abortion? No. But any weighting that ignores the costs of pregnancy and the benefits of abortion to women and to women of color isn’t doing a fair weighting. Moreover, where there are avenues for reducing abortion that don’t require coercive state power (and, while I mentioned access to contraception, how about access to health care for pregnant women? how about access to health care after birth? how about family leave policies? how about a decent social safety net to provide for women who choose to carry their babies to term?), why default first and solely to the coercive power of the state?

### To the Latter-day Saints?

Although he claims to be making a Latter-day Saint defense of the unborn, his argumentation is almost entirely devoid of Latter-day Saint content. In fact, the only specific references I saw were his fairly pro forma dismissal of arguments from LDS-based thoughts on agency and his assertion that the church’s countenance of abortion in certain circumstances should be read

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narrowly. Nothing from scripture, nothing, in fact, from LDS church leaders.

What is the church's official policy position on abortion? You can read the whole thing [here](#), but a relevant excerpt (the part that Givens seems to be addressing) is this:

“ The Church opposes elective abortion for personal or social convenience. Members must not submit to, perform, arrange for, pay for, consent to, or encourage an abortion. The only possible exceptions are when:

- “ \* Pregnancy resulted from forcible rape or incest.
- \* A competent physician determines that the life or health of the mother is in serious jeopardy.
- \* A competent physician determines that the fetus has severe defects that will not allow the baby to survive beyond birth.

“ Even these exceptions do not automatically justify abortion. Abortion is a most serious matter and should be considered only after the persons responsible have consulted with their bishops and received divine confirmation through prayer.

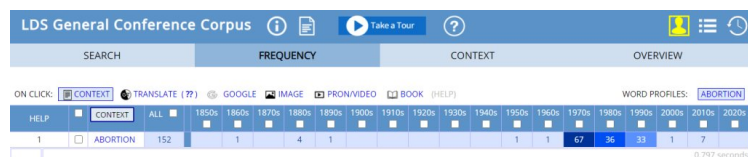
Givens reads these exceptions as relating to agency. A woman who has been raped didn't deliberately risk pregnancy and so shouldn't have to face the consequences of that. A woman who deliberately had sex, by contrast, must “accept responsibility for the natural consequences of choices willfully made.”

I'm skeptical of that reading, for at least two reasons. The first is that the church's express exceptions don't, in fact, reflect an agency/non-agency distinction. Life of the mother and viability of the fetus have no relationship to whether a woman had consensual sex or not. And further, the church doesn't teach that we have to bear the natural consequences of what we do. That, in fact, is the whole point of the Atonement. And of one of Pres. Monson's favorite stories about [Big Tom taking Little Jim's licking](#). In fact, while we believe that exercising agency has consequences, we also believe that sometimes “[the way of the wicked prosper\[s\]](#).” Not every consequence necessarily has to flow directly and immediately from our actions and, thanks to the Atonement, not every consequence will flow. At the very least, though, our belief in agency and its consequences doesn't inherently require that sex lead to babies.

Moreover, Givens doesn't engage with the consequences of the church's policy. Yes, the church says its exceptions aren't automatic—abortion is still only permissible after divine confirmation. But at that point, the church has no issue with abortion.

And that lack of issue with abortion—albeit in rare and exceptional circumstances—anticipates the availability of safe and legal abortion.

In fact, the church doesn't seem to have spent a lot of thought on abortion until *Roe v. Wade*. A search at the [LDS General Conference Corpus](#) shows that before the 1970s, conference speakers mentioned abortion 8 times. The mentions exploded in the 1970s, then kind of trailed off.



### The Moral Imagination

In the end, Givens exhibits a tremendous lack of moral (and policy) imagination. He has decided that abortion is bad, that because it is bad, there is no way to support a woman's right to have an abortion, and that it's not worth pursuing other routes to reduce the prevalence of abortion. He also seems to think that the answer is so clear that he doesn't have any obligation to accurately represent the law or the facts on the ground, and that he doesn't need to engage in respectful dialogue with those who disagree with him

The thing is, the question isn't black and white, as he putatively acknowledges. There is no easy answer, in spite of what Givens would have us believe. I find abortion troubling as, I believe, most people do. But I also find a world without legal abortion troubling. The solution, I believe, is not to ban or criminalize abortion, but to create a society in which abortion is virtually unnecessary because women and men can prevent unwanted pregnancies and, if those pregnancies occur, women can still access the education, employment, and other resources that they need.

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[fn1] There's also his assertion that the US is one of the few countries that allows full-term abortions, along with China and North Korea. It's interesting to me that he's referencing non-white countries, when, for example, the Netherlands is sitting there ready to be name-checked.

Preach It:

## Comments

**Leona says:**

October 20, 2020 at 5:44 pm

Bravo. Especially that last paragraph, as fine a summary of why I'm pro-choice as I've ever read. Thank you for this.

**Elisa says:**

October 20, 2020 at 5:49 pm

Yes! Thank you for this rebuttal. So good.

Honestly such a bizarre thing for Givens to be opining about and it's clear he's well outside his realm of expertise. Not impressed.

**C. Keen says:**

October 20, 2020 at 5:51 pm

Sam, I think you should have waited until you were able to read Givens charitably to write this. You do yourself no favors by throwing out accusations of arguing in bad faith, or by disdaining someone else's moral objection to killing a living human being, as he sees it, as mere disgust. You're also presuming that he doesn't support access to contraception or maternal health care, but who knows if that's actually the case.

**Elisa says:**

October 20, 2020 at 5:52 pm

(Should add, I hate to say but this makes me distrust his apologetics seeing how fast and loose he is with facts and judgments here.)

**Brian says:**

October 20, 2020 at 5:53 pm

Givens is no LDS Stanley Fish.

**waynefrank says:**

October 20, 2020 at 5:59 pm

Banning abortions or declaring them wrong, disgusting or otherwise abhorrent without providing lasting and meaningful solutions (Health care, day care support, family and mental health counseling, financial aid, job training, etc.) is hypocritical, mean-spirited and un-Christlike. Plus giving an exemption or free pass for any reason is a slippery slope for the grantor and one where both logic and practice can make a mockery of the exemptions. Just think of the rape exemption and who defines it and who can claim it and when. And SB, thanks for such a good overview of the subject.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 20, 2020 at 6:01 pm

Thanks Leona and Elisa.

C. Keen, I would love to have been able to read Givens charitably. But he didn't write in a way that invited a charitable reading, a combination of his disdain and disregard for his colleagues and his disregard for accurately determining what the law says and his lack of moral imagination. You're right, maybe he supports expanded access to contraception and expanded social safety net programs. But if he does, wouldn't it make sense to discuss those in the context of reducing abortion? I can't read his mind but I can read his words.

As for moral disgust: like I said, there's nothing wrong with arguing from moral disgust. And it was he, not I, who framed his opposition to abortion as stemming, not from his religious convictions, but from disgust at the process of (certain types of) abortion.

**kgrant85 says:**

October 20, 2020 at 6:09 pm

I am saddened that Givens wrote what he did (and I almost wish that it had been a case of Russian hacking. I don't want to believe that the same person who wrote The God Who Weeps also wrote this).

I also have a deep sense of dread that Sam was compelled to write this very much needed

response. It really was a shocking level of close-mindedness on the part of Givens to accuse American academia to North Korea. I fear that the vitriol of our time is infecting the best of us. If these two can't have a civil discussion—which requires two civil participants—what does this mean for America going forward?

**JNG says:**

October 20, 2020 at 6:17 pm

I can't help but connect the revulsion rationale with the emotional drive that I sense catalyzing the "pro-life" movement, and so many other zealous expressions of religion: it's not about doing right, it's about punishing wrong.

If someone is completely unmoving in their advocacy for strict anti-abortion laws but not just as ardent in their support of social policies that are actually more effective at reducing the number of abortions, that tells me that their not interested in preventing abortions. They're interested in avenging them.

**TS says:**

October 20, 2020 at 6:34 pm

You misread his reason for opposing abortion. It's not a generic disgust, it's specifically disgust at \*violence\*.

"If abortion is wrong, it is wrong because it involves the intentional destruction of another human being. This is really the heart of the matter."

...

"Abortion is not like heavy drinking or pornography or blaspheming, where one deplores the action but accords another the right to act immorally. Abortion is of that class of wrongs that entails the willful infliction of pain or killing on another human being."

You ignored that "heart of the matter". Abortion is not just wrong, or disgusting. It is violent.

If you are personally opposed to abortion but pro-choice on policy, I want to know: is abortion violence? If it is, why should it be legal? If it is not, what about it makes it wrong?

**christiankimball says:**

October 20, 2020 at 6:34 pm

Good work, Sam. I'm comforted that this work exists as a counterpoint to a disturbing piece by Terryl Givens. Disturbing enough that I was left to wonder whether someone else ghost wrote and attached his name. But in the end, I do think the disgust is real, where the whole reads to me as centered in disgust with a wrapping of argument. He quotes approvingly the picture argument: "The argument against [abortion] doesn't take even a single word. The argument against it is a picture." This is a notorious call for simple answers to hard questions, and taking this line is to fall far short of the mark, legally and morally.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 20, 2020 at 6:53 pm

Thanks Christian.

TS, take a look at your questions. You're making a ton of assumptions, including that abortion is violent and that it inflicts pain or kills a human being. Those two propositions are clearly possible, but not inevitable; you can't assume that they are the state of the world. And our religion doesn't clarify things: we don't have any doctrinal lock on when life begins or when a fetus becomes a human being.

Similarly, even assuming that abortion is violence, from a policy perspective you have to look at the whole mix of benefits and harms. That's what I've tried to do here (imperfectly and incompletely, of course). The question of abortion is politically fraught, but even without the politics, it's a hard, multifaceted question that doesn't lend itself to absolutes or easy answers.

**christiankimball says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:03 pm

One more thought—Almost everything I see in the pro-life and pro-choice rhetorical worlds is preaching to the choir. Sometimes pure virtue signaling, but even at its best not likely to change any minds. Within that framework, I think Terryl Givens' piece is not going to change any minds. If you like it you knew you would before you opened the file. But I think this piece has a chance (slim, but >0).

**Robert Lawrence (@RobLawrencium) says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:19 pm

Nice piece, sadly the narrow labels of pro-choice and pro-life have made it very difficult to have meaningful conversations like this about the policies that have actually been effective in bringing down the abortion rate since Roe v Wade. One pedantic piece of feedback: the NCBI is just a repository for data and journal articles that is managed by the NIH. They don't actually conduct the studies themselves. So the NCBI study and University of Washington in St. Louis studies you mentioned are actually the same study, if I'm not mistaken.

**Fred Hedge says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:20 pm

Great post. Two additional points:

1) When Givens shifts to discuss the LDS position, and highlights the agency angle, note that his argument falls apart. His whole point is premised that abortion, in itself, is evil, which means it is an evil act in all cases. But when discussing the LDS policy on rape, suddenly it is not solely about the evil act, but about accepting consequences; that because the woman did not choose to become pregnant, it's okay. The issue is that undercuts his primary thesis. If abortion is evil, no nuance, than the woman's "innocence" does not justify it. As you say, it's a lack of policy imagination to be so black/white in the face of complexity.

2) It is notable that Givens has been much more silent on public and political issues than many Mormon studies academics, presenting himself as above those disputes. It's quite telling, then, that the one time he chooses to speak out, it is making an argument that, whether he intends it or not, will be both understood and used as a justification for Mormons to support Trump mere weeks before an election.

**rainmom99 says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:27 pm

Your last paragraph touched my heart so deeply. Abortion for "personal convenience" is not a legitimate description of the choices most women face when considering abortion. It is not a matter of convenience to be able to access education, employment, health care and other resources. It's a matter of survival.

**rainmom99 says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:30 pm

Not to mention the church's recent amicus agreeing that women's access to birth control can be arbitrarily limited by their employer.

**Fred Hedge says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:34 pm

One more thing: it is my understanding that the Maxwell Institute, where Givens is a senior fellow, is still trying to grow and build credibility. (And they've accomplished a lot so far.) They are even running three searches for various research positions. Looking at their current roster, especially the permanent positions, I imagine adding more gender diversity is a top priority.

It will be very difficult, however, to accomplish that goal when their most prominent voice is on the record taking such a public and unapologetic view that explicitly dismisses and devalues women's voices, let alone women's choices. And if they want to meditate on why spaces like theirs are still perceived as hostile to female scholars, despite all the other good things they are doing, they don't need to look any further than this.

**Megan says:**

October 20, 2020 at 7:55 pm

Perhaps this is just me, but it was a bit unsettling to see a Latter-Day saint use the term "unborn" which I associate strongly with different sort of theology. For a religion that is at best agnostic on the state of a soul within a fetus, this seems a little strange to say.

Much like JNG, I don't believe most of the pro-life/anti-abortion movement is particularly interested in reducing the number of abortions; I think they are just interested in condemning them. In a way, this is a reflection of a belief that the primary purpose of this life is a mortal probation where we are tested and punished. After all, if the purpose is testing, we can't make the test too easy, can we? They just don't want loose women to go unpunished for their sins, and if comes between punishing or reducing abortions, they'll always choose punishment.

**Cynthia L. says:**

October 20, 2020 at 8:11 pm

TS, I bet if you think really hard you could brainstorm a list of many circumstances where violence is legal.

Also what about medical abortion, is that "violent" in the traditional sense? Many first trimester abortions that are handled by taking a pill [footnote] rather than any procedures or instruments.

[footnote] To be clear, since pro-lifers often conflate them—it's not "the pill," ie birth control pill, which cannot end pregnancy once established. It's a different medicine specifically for abortions.

**W says:**

October 20, 2020 at 8:29 pm

Thank you, Sam, for writing a more coherent and insightful response than I've been able to muster, and for using visibility I'd never have to distribute it.

I am also going to ask here for something: I'd like recommendations for the best of Givens to consider and balance against the piece this is responding to. I'm having the same experience with his apparent status as some kind of community thinker as I did with Rod Dreher this year — it's clear to me from the way people discuss them that the name means something but I'm struggling to find in the writings I've reviewed so far distinguishing work that earned them standout regard, and some astonishing missteps that do them no favors.

**Meg Conley says:**

October 20, 2020 at 8:43 pm

I know better than to get involved in the comment section of any post anywhere but thought it worth pointing out that the source of the Caitlin Flanagan quote about the picture.

It comes from an article where she argues for abortion, movingly. And argues for engaging with honest arguments over the issue of abortion, unflinchingly. It's a nuanced piece and one that has helped many of my friends who were searching for words that explain why that one picture isn't the whole story. Many of us don't like to admit all those words are needed to justify even a moderate pro-choice position, but comprehensive argument is always necessary when deciding between two competing rights. Aeschylus comes to mind but since mothers didn't fare too well with him, I'll leave that for now. The full quote is here,

"The argument for abortion, if made honestly, requires many words: It must evoke the recent past, the dire consequences to women of making a very simple medical procedure illegal. The argument against it doesn't take even a single word. The argument against it is a picture."

While the quote is good, I recommend the article.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/the-things-we-cant-face/600769/>

**christiankimball says:**

October 20, 2020 at 8:53 pm

Thanks, Meg Conley. It just adds to my disappointment that the picture quote was taken out of context to make a 180-degree different point.

**Travis says:**

October 20, 2020 at 8:57 pm

Sam, I have two criticisms. The first is that your piece needs a good proofread. Typographical issues are perhaps too trivial a matter for serious minds to pay attention to, but lots of typos make a piece harder to read and make it seem less sophisticated than its arguments deserve.

My second criticism echoes C. Keen's. I don't think the ad hominem attacks helped your case. Your reply to C. Keen essentially amounts to "He started it!" You don't have to respond in kind just because Givens implicated the morality of a category you belong to. Take the high road. Elevate the level of discourse. That's what it means to turn the other cheek.

After worrying that, I feel overly condescending and patronizing. I respect your work (and Givens' as well; I'm reading his book on the Pearl of Great Price right now and think Gerry Tivens' comment on this thread was much too harsh) and appreciated your other points.

**Karla says:**

October 20, 2020 at 8:58 pm

I noticed with trepidation the recent surge in excitement among church people about child sex trafficking. I fear it is being used, like the anti-abortion movement, as a way to re-energize a well-meaning but politically unsophisticated conservative base. Everybody is against killing babies, right? Everybody is against sexual abuse of children! We feel the emotional appeal and don't look beyond it to ask who is accusing whom, what are they asking for (usually money), and who benefits from the furor. If we truly care about reducing abortion or child sex abuse, we find out what is effective, not just what raises our blood pressure the most. In the case of abortion it is accurate and thorough sex education, family planning, general education for girls and opportunities for women. In the case of child sex abuse it is clear and accurate sex education (maybe a pattern here), including training in consent for both boys and girls, an effective and supportive societal safety net, and a cultural and legal system that believes victims.

**Meg Conley says:**

October 20, 2020 at 9:03 pm

I'm not sure it was taken out of context merely because it was used in a pro-life piece. I mean, she's not discounting the picture. She's just saying sometimes we must use words to frame it. Again, I recommend the article.

**Kristine says:**

October 20, 2020 at 9:03 pm

Travis, the admin agreed with you about that comment—it has been removed due to its ad hominem character.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 20, 2020 at 9:10 pm

Meg, thanks. That's important context.

Travis, that's fair. Others certainly would have written differently; I wrote in a tone that seemed appropriate to me. And to be clear, I didn't take ad hominem shots at him. I did say his piece wasn't honestly engaging because it's not honestly engaging; it's largely knocking down straw arguments and constructing extreme and one-sided pictures. (As for typos: guilty as charged. I blog for fun, and it takes me away from work and from family responsibilities, so I clearly don't proofread as well as I should.)

Karla, that's an important point. I focused on access to contraception, largely because that's the data I found quickest. But the data also indicate that access to sex education helps reduce pregnancy and abortion. There are a lot of ways to reduce rates of abortion and, as several people have mentioned, it's curious to leave those out and focus only on legal prohibitions.

**Perma Banned says:**

October 20, 2020 at 9:31 pm

What's funny is the offence at Givens' comment about the lack of diversity in political thought in academia, and then in the comments the implication that the prospects of the Maxwell Institute have now been destroyed because of Givens' article. Irony. I enjoy it.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 20, 2020 at 9:38 pm

Perma, that's kinda dumb. You're deliberately misreading both the OP and the comments. I have faith you can do better.

**Ian Thomson says:**

October 20, 2020 at 10:12 pm

Cynthia L., speaking of violence. I've seen enough of what we call medicine, to know that surgical intervention is nothing if not violent. We have to anesthetize and put people to sleep just to slice them open, use saws, scalpels, hammers, and drills, all while we perform what would otherwise be considered torture if not at someone's request. \*Unless\* we are willing to make a claim that the fetus actually is a human, I can't imagine that we should consider the removal of mere tissue as anything different than the removal of a uterus or ovaries, which we do with some frequency. I'm very interested in trying to figure out at what point we decide that piece of tissue is separate from the mother's uterine wall lining. (From my understanding, at some point after uterine wall attachment, a placenta starts to form as an extension or outgrowth of the mother's uterine wall. That layer includes villi, or little roots, that connect the wall of the uterus in a more and more complicated arrangement until an umbilical cord is formed, which tethers the embryo to its host and feeds it the nutrients and nourishment that it requires to grow.) We can watch an organ removal, we can watch skin grafting, we can watch amputations, we can even watch a circumcision on a poor little helpless baby. These things are not violent or revolting. Such procedures only become "violent" when we believe that it is no longer a medical procedure, but is attendant to the killing of a little baby. My point is that Givens can only arrive at his disgust when he has already made up his mind about the nature of the procedure, not as a result of his simple observations.

**jpv says:**

October 20, 2020 at 11:08 pm

[fn1] There's also his assertion that the US is one of the few countries that allows full-term abortions, along with China and North Korea. It's interesting to me that he's referencing non-white countries, when, for example, the Netherlands is sitting there ready to be name-checked.

Holland notwithstanding, the assertion is not inaccurate:

Most of the EU has very sensible abortion regulations and bans abortion far earlier than must US states.

Most of your argument begs the question that Givens is opposed to open access to contraception. Seems shaky.

**Andrew says:**

October 21, 2020 at 1:37 am

I enjoyed reading this summary. I think that it accurately points out some of the flaws in Givens' argument.

The chief flaw in both your argument and Givens', however, stems from the definition of abortion. What Givens appears to be opposed to is second and third trimester abortions that require surgical fetal dismemberment. He does not mention, even in passing, first trimester abortions. The abortions that you and most of the commenters seem to be discussing are the medical first-trimester abortions that are induced by medication and resemble a miscarriage in most aspects. These two types of abortion are very different in scope and perception.

It would be interesting to separate abortion into two debates: one debate for abortions based on medication early in pregnancy and one debate on surgical abortion later in pregnancy. If we were to do so, we might find significant common ground between the "pro-life" and "pro-choice" factions, including many of the ideas to reduce the need for abortions that you suggest, such as



free contraception and more financial support for mothers.

**Kyle M says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:14 am

Thanks for this Sam.

And holy smokes the church's language around abortion is strange. "Forcible rape" is an abortion of language, logic, and compassion. Ew. But also, the "competent physician" requirement is such a legalistic approach to a religious matter. Does the doctor's note need to be signed in triplicate and notarized before the life-saving procedure can happen?

**Geoff-Aus says:**

October 21, 2020 at 3:46 am

There is a suggestion this is to shore up republican support. Republicans have sold the idea that anti abortion = republican, but they have done absolutely nothing to reduce abortion. When Democrats have been in power they have reduced the number of abortions by half, by funding womens services including birth control.

<https://qz.com/857273/the-sharpest-drops-in-abortion-rates-in-america-have-been-under-democratic-presidents/>

The assumption among pro life people is that making abortion illegal, will stop abortion. It won't, the only way to reduce abortions is to reduce unwanted pregnancies.

The other thing to be aware of is that the Republican anti abortion position also applies to foreign aid. This restriction means that NGOs that provide health services in third world countries and might advise abortions are defunded. When Democrats are in these services are funded. So when democrats in 2.7 million abortions, when republicans in 4.6 million abortions (40% more 1.9 million). For context 600,000 abortions in America. As noted in Sams blog this also causes 47,000 maternal deaths.

So if Republicans succeeded in making abortion illegal, (and also defunded womens health services, the number of abortions in America would likely return to earlier levels, ie 600,000 extra abortions, along with the 1.9 million in reduced aid.

70% of abortions in America are for women living below the poverty line (can't afford birth control).

Universal healthcare will reduce abortions, by providing affordable birth control.

**Geoff-Aus says:**

October 21, 2020 at 4:02 am

Vote republican 5.2 million abortions, and 60,000 maternal deaths, after making abortion illegal. Vote democrat 3 million abortions, after universal healthcare, and reducing.

**CTR says:**

October 21, 2020 at 4:12 am

It's strange that someone who has spent his career advocating for a complex, nuanced view of Joseph Smith, is incapable of applying those same standards to one of the most divisive and troubling issues in the contemporary world.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 6:11 am

"And our religion doesn't clarify things: we don't have any doctrinal lock on when life begins or when a fetus becomes a human being."

The church also has no position on evolution, but that doesn't justify believing in pseudo-scientific nonsense. As Pres. Nelson has said, "The onset of life is not a debatable issue, but a fact of science."

"In the biological sciences, it is known that life begins when two germ cells unite to become one cell, bringing together twenty-three chromosomes from both the father and from the mother. These chromosomes contain thousands of genes. In a marvelous process involving a combination of genetic coding by which all the basic human characteristics of the unborn person are established, a new DNA complex is formed. A continuum of growth results in a new human being."

Anyway, I want to reiterate that you misread or misunderstood Bro. Givens' argument. He believes abortion is wrong because it is violent. That is the "heart of the matter". That there should not be laws against abortion because it is "wrong", but because it is violent. If you want to disagree with him you should address what he said.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 6:17 am

Andrew, you're absolutely correct that his description of abortion looks like he's objecting to later-term abortion. But his argument is against abortion, period. He hasn't limited it to later-term abortion. If he had, both his arguments and mine would have been different.

TS, your evolution thing is spot-on. The church doesn't have an official position on evolution and,

as a result, it's incoherent to argue for or against evolution on the basis of the church's position. Similarly, the church has no position on when life begins and so it makes no sense to argue, from the perspective of our religion, that a fetus is or is not life/human. As for your assertion that abortion is violent: again, it depends on how you define "violent." You can't just assume (a) that something is violent and (b) that all violence is immoral. Both are propositions that need defending.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 6:43 am

Sam, what I'm saying is that we don't have to look to religion on basic biological questions like "does evolution occur" or "are humans sexually dimorphic" or "are living human fetuses living and human", because the answers are so obvious. Simply by applying definitions we can see that abortion consists of violence (use of force one knows is likely to cause physical harm) against a living human. There is no dispute among informed people about this. So of course, for the purposes of an ethical debate, we can "assume" these things.

The remaining questions are ethical. I do "not" in fact believe your statement (b) that all violence is immoral. Rather, I think many variables enter into the moral calculus and that violence is wrong (and should be illegal) in almost all cases we are likely to encounter. I agree with the church's position on the ethics of abortion—as Pres. Nelson has taught it is the "shedding of innocent blood" and a grave sin in most cases, but it can be justified in exceptional circumstances.

If you have some bizarre, mystical disagreement with the notion that abortion is violence, you have to spell it out and justify yourself. No hand-waving and glossing over the question and pretending you and Terry just disagree about racism or the role of government or how much you like women or something.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 6:51 am

TS, no handwaving. I made my points in to OP: the question of abortion is complicated. Abortions do harm. Abortions also do good. Bans on abortion do harm. And weighing the benefits and harms against each other is a difficult task, one Givens essentially ignores despite paying lip service to it.

Is abortion violence? Again, in spite of your confidence that the answer is obvious, it depends on how you define violence. It may be, depending on your definition of violence. Is a fetus human life? Again, it depends on your definition of both "human" and "life." But to be clear: even if a fetus is human life *and* even if abortion is violence (both deeply contestable claims), we still need to take into account questions of equity, rights, and government use of coercive force, all of which lean against blanket bans on abortion. Do you want to end abortion? Me too. So let's use our efforts advocating for policies that reduce it through equitable and rights-respecting ways.

**Wondering says:**

October 21, 2020 at 6:58 am

Andrew, just yesterday I had a brief "discussion" with someone about her political position on "abortion". My attempts at discussion were a total failure. The conversation ended with the other's adamant and angry declaration that she was talking about late term abortion and post-birth "abortion". Prior to that declaration there was no hint that the subject was so limited. I wonder how many special, private definitions are in play in such emotional discussions. I'm with Sam on the responsibility of persons using such restricted definitions to be more clear. I appreciate the analysis of the OP; I expect I would have stopped with thinking Givens' argument ridiculous — and surprisingly unlike what I've read of his other work.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:06 am

"Is a fetus human life? Again, it depends on your definition of both "human" and "life." "

I'm starting to get the feeling you just haven't thought very hard about this. If a human fetus is not human, what species is it? And as far as life, there is simply no dispute. A fetus can die and be killed; it is alive. Even in the earliest stages, abortions work by poisoning the child or withdrawing life-sustaining nutrients to bring about death. These are fundamentals, starting points. Assuming we are on the same page, then—

"we still need to take into account questions of equity, rights, and government use of coercive force, all of which lean against blanket bans on abortion."

For example, girls are more likely to be killed in abortion. Black babies are also more likely to be killed. People with disabilities are much more likely to be killed. Human rights apply to all humans (as suitable for age), and include at a minimum the right to protection from unjust violence.

But the way you are speaking about abortion suggests you have not fully considered or imagined that abortion is violence, even hypothetically. Because your arguments would also apply to infanticide. Yet you would never argue that because marginalized women commit infanticide more often, or because coercion is bad, that we should legally permit infanticide.

**JTH says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:08 am

One of the big lies of the sexual revolution is that there is a so-called right to consequence-free sex. In other words, the lie is that people have a right to engage all the sex they want...but should also be free from the natural consequences of sex (the creation of human life).

No one has the moral right to engage in the act of procreation and then use abortion as an escape hatch when that act leads to the creation of life. The legal right may exist, but legality does not make it moral.

When it comes to sex, the moral law is the Law of Chastity – no sex outside of marriage, and fidelity after marriage.

Latter Day Saints who believe in and support the law of chastity cannot also be supporters of abortion as a form birth control. The number of abortions performed in the case of rape, incest and saving the health of the mother are a small number of all abortions performed (less than 5%). Thus, the remaining case of abortions are but a form of birth control (either a backup when other forms of birth control fail or as the primary form when no birth control used during sex)

If abortion is performed by someone who became pregnant by having sex outside of marriage it is merely compounding the immoral act of fornication by adding the termination of life to it.

If an abortion is performed by those who are married, it then becomes an act of terminating life in order to escape the responsibility for the life that has been created.

The solution is not more birth control, not more public health, and not even improving the economic condition of people. Focusing on those things is merely hacking at leaves rather than striking at the root. And the root of the problem is two-fold: a) violation of the moral law, and b) providing a means for people to escape the consequences of their actions (for that is what legal abortion is).

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:16 am

TS, you've made your point clear, as have I. Our further discussion isn't going to go anywhere. So thanks for stopping by; I respect that you care deeply about this.

JTH, a couple things. First, it's tremendously odd that you (or anyone, frankly) would describe having children as essentially punishment. Second, as I said in the OP, we don't, in fact, believe that having babies is the inevitable and necessary consequence of having sex. Also, while we believe that agency entails consequences, we believe that, inter alia, the Atonement obviates some of those consequences. Finally, let's assume that most abortions are forms of ex post birth control (a deeply flawed assumption, but let's go for it): if that's the case, it seems like making ex ante birth control more easily and affordably available is the perfect solution to the problem of abortion. Once you argue against birth control, you're telling me that (as a commenter mentioned above) you're not interested in reducing abortions, but that you're interested in punishing sex.

**Scw says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:17 am

Abortion is a medical procedure. It has established indications. Leave it at that. Stop with the handwringing.

**Mark Brown says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:19 am

TS,

Brunson does not need to address the argument about violence, because Givens didn't make that argument. He made an assertion that doesn't hold up.

If Givens opposes abortion because it's violent, does he oppose a 14 y.o. girl who was raped having an abortion because it's violent? I don't know, and neither do you. Givens never bothers to engage that question.

Brunson is correct. Givens isn't building a case, he is expressing emotion. That's a lazy excuse for an argument.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:29 am

Sam, again with the arguments that also work for infanticide. "Once you argue against birth control, you're telling me that (as a commenter mentioned above) you're not interested in reducing infanticide, but that you're interested in punishing sex."

Someone doesn't have to be in favor of birth control to oppose infanticide (killing of an infant under the age of 1 by its mother). The fact that unwanted children are more likely to be killed in infanticide doesn't change this.

Scw, going by Florida and Arizona administrative data, which is about the best we have, fewer than 5% of abortions are medically indicated.

Mark, maybe you didn't read the whole thing, but Givens says that abortion can be justified in cases of rape, but even then, not automatically. As I have said, not all violence is wrong (though, when against innocents, it almost always is).

**Brian says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:42 am

TS, if you're going with the definition that violence is killing something living, then we're all freaking killing stuff and committing acts of violence all the time. Plants are living. Bacteria is living. You're playing games with definitions without being sincere and yet demanding everyone else play your game. It's not clear at all via science when a human is a human. Potential is something else. But, as Sam has implied, you either need to stop with this infantile game or step up your rigor.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:47 am

Brian, we are humans, and we have greater and different responsibilities toward other humans than we do to other living things. Violence against humans is qualitatively different from violence against others, for this reason. "Human rights" captures this concept.

"It's not clear at all via science when a human is a human."

I refuse to believe you believe this. The offspring of two humans is a human. A human fetus is human. A human is a human. A human is not some other species. If somebody informed told you that we don't know if human fetuses are human, they were giving you propaganda.

**Brian says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:51 am

TS, well done. You've completely failed. If you think the science is out on whether an embryo before nine weeks is human, then you've completely digested someone's propaganda.

**Brian says:**

October 21, 2020 at 7:56 am

Annabel, I'd wager your comment was deleted for spreading a conspiracy theory that also doesn't belong in this thread.

**Elisa says:**

October 21, 2020 at 8:02 am

JTH, given the orientation you're coming at this with I don't expect you to change your mind. Having said that, in addition to it being a bit strange that you're essentially describing unplanned pregnancy as a "punishment" for "immorality," you're also forgetting that such a punishment is levied against \*women only\*, and restricting access to abortion also punishes \*women only\*. (Don't bother with "men are on the hook for child support", that's a flimsy excuse, not really true, and the vast majority of the consequences, and 100% of the physical consequences, are felt and experienced by women and women alone). I can't for the life of me fathom why we think it's ok for legislatures made up of a majority of males to make decisions that directly impact women's health, and only women's health.

As for "violence", here's what else is violent – a c-section and even a vaginal delivery. In restricting access to safe and legal abortion, we're saying we'd rather impose that set of violence on a woman's body. You're not avoiding any violence, just picking a different victim.

Personally I wouldn't get an abortion absent a serious health concern, but as someone who has gotten pregnant, twice, while using birth control (I guess I am just incredibly fertile), and has very difficult pregnancies and deliveries, I would never deprive another woman of the right to a safe and legal abortion. (And no not talking about late term which – by the way – really only ever happens in extreme, life-threatening circumstances. No one terminates a pregnancy at 36 weeks for kicks.)

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 8:03 am

Brian, by all means, elaborate. What species is a human embryo before nine weeks, if not human?

**Socrates says:**

October 21, 2020 at 8:04 am

Thank you for pointing out Givens' article; it is one of the most well-written defenses of the pro-life position that I have ever read.

Regarding your accusation of bad faith on the part of Givens, his likening of college political diversity to the diversity found in the North Korea parliament was clearly a joke (I read his article before reading your post, and I laughed when I read this line). Your Footnote 1 implying racism on the part of Givens is either "bad faith" on your part (do you really think Givens is a racist?) or shows that you totally didn't get his point. In case you didn't get his point, I'll explain it to you: no one wants to be in the rare company of China and North Korea when it comes to abortion policy because these are oppressive and totalitarian regimes. As the WaPo fact-check points out (which Givens linked to in his article) the US is only one of seven countries that allows

such late-term abortions. The WaPo then ranked these seven countries based on their permissiveness of abortions, and the U.S. was third after, you guessed it, China and North Korea. So Givens' point this not racist as you suggest, but instead is based on a leftist fact check by the WaPo which points out that only China and North Korea have more liberal abortion laws than the U.S.

Overall, your post doesn't effectively address Givens' main arguments and ignores his refutations of your own arguments (such as the common canard that instead of making abortion illegal, it's sufficiently moral to simply try to minimize unplanned pregnancies).

Lastly, your claim that legal abortion makes Black lives better ignores the fact that a high disproportion of abortions occur within the Black community (in 2016, 42 percent of legal abortions were performed on Blacks). As a result, the potential Black population in the U.S. has been disproportionately and artificially curtailed by the liberalness of our abortion laws.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 8:08 am

"As for "violence", here's what else is violent – a c-section and even a vaginal delivery. In restricting access to safe and legal abortion, we're saying we'd rather impose that set of violence on a woman's body. You're not avoiding any violence, just picking a different victim."

Uh, violence by who? The doctor? And if a c-section or delivery is violence against a woman, then so is an abortion, then? Opening up the cervix with laminaria and metal tools, sticking forceps and curettes inside the uterus, scraping the uterine lining to get all the parts? So it's not "picking a different victim", since the woman is a "victim" of the abortion or c-section or delivery anyway (in your understanding), it's just victimizing one less person, i.e. the child, by not killing it.

**Brian says:**

October 21, 2020 at 8:12 am

TS, your argument is not with me or with Sam at this point, but with science.

**Socrates says:**

October 21, 2020 at 8:16 am

One observation on the preceding anti-Givens comments : it's clear many of the commenters here haven't read Givens' article, but instead have relied on Sam's representation of it. Givens clearly does address the arguments that many of you say he doesn't (such whether abortion is violence, and whether it's ok for a women who was raped to get an abortion (so Mark Brown, please read the Givens article before posting about it)).

**lastlemming says:**

October 21, 2020 at 9:04 am

Dismiss JTH at your peril. His or her position demonstrates why, given the rape exception in the Church's position, it is futile to argue over what is and isn't "human life" or what is and isn't "violence." The Church is insisting on its right to regulate sex—nothing more. That's why the "improve access to contraception" argument gets no traction.

What might get traction is the graph at this link, which shows the share of teens having sex dropping by 16 percentage points between 1991 and 2019 :

<https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#/graphs?questionCode=H58&topicCode=C04&location=XX&year=2019>

First, you have to convince members that this trend is real. We've been fed a steady diet of going-to-hell-in-a-handbasket rhetoric that makes the trend difficult for some to believe. And CDC does not seem to have much credibility with a lot of members these days either. But if we can agree that the trend is real, then we can focus on why it is happening and promote policies to continue it without running afoul of the the Church's underlying concern. And, if it isn't obvious, further reducing teen sex will further reduce the number of abortions.

**Dsc says:**

October 21, 2020 at 9:19 am

lastlemming: With all due respect, you appear to be engaging in the sort of bad faith argumentation that Sam accuses Givens of. You're ignoring other factors that go into the rape exception, as well as a long string of pro-choice arguments that argue for abortion regardless of whether a fetus is a person. The rape exception, as articulated by bioethicists and philosophers (admittedly, not by the Church itself, which doesn't see a need to articulate its justifications), is based on two possible ideas, or a combination of the two. The first is that one can presume that a pregnancy that is the result of rape presents an extraordinary danger to the victim's mental health. The second is that some of the arguments made by pro-choice philosophers becomes more tenable in the case of rape, specifically that people have a right to bodily autonomy and that even an innocent person does not have a right to another's body in the absence of consent.

And the Church's position that, even where an exception applies, abortion may not always be justified indicates that rape provides only a possible exception, which requires weighing the risks on an individual level.

**Seline says:**

October 21, 2020 at 9:28 am

Bravo Elisa! My thoughts exactly! I think it would add an interesting level of nuance to this discussion if commenters were also identified by gender.

**BAA says:**

October 21, 2020 at 9:43 am

I am frankly astonished to read the response and comments about Terryl Given's defense of the defenseless and a position that squares with what Church leaders for decades have said about abortion; that it is akin to murder.

Here is just one specific talk by the man who occupies the position of President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and as God's mouthpiece on the earth today on this topic. It does not appear that this will persuade many who have posted above, even if it should.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2008/10/abortion-an-assault-on-the-defenseless?lang=eng>

**Amy says:**

October 21, 2020 at 10:08 am

Thank you BAA. I read your link. Thanks for standing.

**Barb says:**

October 21, 2020 at 10:18 am

Man-made rules vs God's laws. Two choices. Study both sides and choose.

**A Turtle Named Mack says:**

October 21, 2020 at 11:07 am

It just seems as though people are more focused on making and enforcing a RULE banning abortion than they are actually preventing abortions. If you are genuinely interested in reducing the number of abortions that occur you would be all-in on increasing access to healthcare for women, including contraception, prenatal and pregnancy care, family leave (pre and post), and sex education for all. These absolutely lead to decreases in abortions. Banning abortion doesn't prevent abortion. It simply doesn't work that way. It does, however, lead to blame, shame, discrimination, and poor health outcomes for infants and mothers. The thinking that women (because men are blameless in this, of course) who become pregnant should live with the consequences seems ridiculously draconian. It views unwanted pregnancies as sinful, and the punishment for that sin is having to give birth to and raise a child. Having children and child-rearing should NEVER be a punishment.

**Brian says:**

October 21, 2020 at 11:17 am

And yet, BAA, Amy, and Barb, the church allows for exceptions—which is what the whole debate is about. Thanks for playing the “I have all the answers and you are less righteous” move though!

**Perma Banned says:**

October 21, 2020 at 11:24 am

BAA, you must be trolling, or have never been to this site before. No one here is astonished by Sam's article or the comments.

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 11:50 am

Turtle,

It just seems as though people are more focused on making and enforcing a RULE banning infanticide than they are actually preventing infanticides. If you are genuinely interested in reducing the number of infanticides that occur you would be all-in on increasing access to healthcare for women, including contraception, prenatal and pregnancy care, family leave (pre and post), and sex education for all. These absolutely lead to decreases in infanticide. Banning infanticide doesn't prevent infanticide. It simply doesn't work that way. It does, however, lead to blame, shame, discrimination, and poor health outcomes for infants and mothers. The thinking that women (because men are blameless in this, of course) who become pregnant should live with the consequences seems ridiculously draconian. It views unwanted pregnancies as sinful, and the punishment for that sin is having to give birth to and raise a child. Having children and child-rearing should NEVER be a punishment.

**A Turtle Named Mack says:**

October 21, 2020 at 11:58 am

TS – If those things were shown to reduce infanticide, I would be all-in. I would be less worried about making a rule than about reducing the occurrence. But, your conflation of infanticide and abortion doesn't hold water.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 12:42 pm

TS, that's enough with the conflation of infanticide and abortion. It's not as insightful and clever as you think and, if you're unable to differentiate between abortion and killing a baby, well, that puts you in the intellectual company of Peter Singer and literally nobody else. And I'll be frank: I can think of very few people whose intellectual company I would less enjoy being in than Singer's.

**AM says:**

October 21, 2020 at 1:00 pm

There are a lot of great comments. I think it's worth noting that the possible exceptions listed in the handbook does not say "physical health." It just says "health." I suggest that the policy allows for the importance of mental health to those who wrote the handbook.

**Jack Hughes says:**

October 21, 2020 at 1:14 pm

Terryl Givens has spent years carving out a niche for himself as a leading voice in nuanced Mormonism, through special invitation-only firesides, as well as books that promote some fairly unorthodox theological views but are "safe" enough to be sold at Deseret Book. Yet here he presents a very un-nuanced view of a complex, politically charged legal/moral/ethical/medical issue (and not necessarily a religious one) which is way, way outside of his wheelhouse. I am disappointed, to say the least. If I were to give him the benefit of the doubt, it would seem like he is trying to pivot his career into being a respected authoritative voice in Mormonism (not unlike BRM when he first published Mormon Doctrine). If this is the case, then he failed miserably.

And I don't accept RMN's views on this issue as authoritative either. He may be a prophet, but like Givens he is first and foremost a man. If we want to move this difficult societal conversation to a better place, we can start by allowing women to control the narrative and the policy/decision-making processes.

**Dsc says:**

October 21, 2020 at 1:27 pm

Sam, where would you draw the line between abortion and infanticide? What is the morally and legally significant difference between a 9-month fetus and a 1-hour baby? Your statement makes it seem like the distinction is obvious. It is not. The only difference between a human just before and just after birth is its location.

**Carey F. says:**

October 21, 2020 at 1:44 pm

For that's are convinced life begins at conception what are your thoughts on death? Why do we allow the burying of people including babies just because we they don't meet our biological definitions of life? The body continues to go through biological changes after what we call death. At what point is the human body no longer a human body?

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 1:52 pm

Dsc, what register do you want this in? Legal? One is eligible for a social security number. The other is not.

Religious? Under church policy, one is eligible to be sealed to its family, recorded on the records of the church, and have temple ordinances performed on its behalf. The other is not.

Biological? One breathes oxygen on its own. The other does not.

So please don't play the facile and false game of "We can't differentiate the two." We differentiate the two for various reasons all the time.

**Amy says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:33 pm

Thank you for the post! I'm pro-choice and it is my belief and faith in Jesus Christ that has informed my position. I feel like this post illustrates this perfectly! Jesus was all about leaving the 99 and rescuing that one. So if there is even one mama's life saved by having medical care for ending a pregnancy, I am for it. There will always be mamas in situations that are so bleak and so dire that they'd seek a back alley clinic. I'd rather them be cared for by modern medicine. I'm blessed to have never been in bleak and dire situations with my pregnancies, but if we believe that women have divine nature and are specifically chosen to mother, we should listen to them when they decided a pregnancy needs to be aborted. No mama is taking that choice lightly. Every

mama should have the medical help she needs.

And then I wanted to ask everyone, but particularly the very thoughtful author of this post, their thoughts on 3 Nephi 1: 12-14. If Jesus is answering Nephi's prayer and telling him "On the morrow come I into the world" can members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints use these verses to argue that life begins at the moment of birth? Where is Jesus's spirit when he says this? It doesn't sound like it is already imprinted on the mortal tabernacle of tissue that Mary has been gestating in her womb. I know that members of our faith believe that the soul is the spirit plus the body, do we equate having a soul as being the definition of alive and human? According to these verses in 3rd Nephi it seems there is some evidence here that Jesus's spirit is not already part of the world yet at approximately 39 weeks into a pregnancy. How could it be if he's taking about how he's coming into the world tomorrow?

One of the things I love most about our faith is that we believe in further light and knowledge. As a mama I have my own ideas about why and how this verse is included. I wonder if other people do too.

**Greg says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:42 pm

JTH: Fixed your statement for you:

"One of the big lies of the sexual revolution is that FOR ANYONE OTHER THAN MEN there is a so-called right to consequence-free sex. In other words, the lie is that ANYONE OTHER THAN MEN have a right to engage all the sex they want..."

Funny how deeply pro-lifers feel about legislation on women's autonomy, but they never even contemplate pro-life legislation on men's autonomy.

**JPV says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:45 pm

This blog post is a huge bummer. The Givens essay is short enough to just read without some guided tour through it. There is certainly sincere difference and disagreement on this issue, and it's all very touchy. But the Givens piece at least presents itself as an essay that strives to be persuasive. This reads (to me) like essentially kicking the hornets nest. What an unbearably annoying way to have difficult discussions.

**SML says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:49 pm

All I want to say here is thank you for writing this piece, Sam. I often lurk here, but do not usually comment. I saw Givens' piece linked to on another site yesterday. I read it and immediately felt disturbed and disappointed, as I thought he was a much more nuanced thinker. I felt much the same as other commenters, who now question some of his apologetic writings. I fall into the camp of wanting to reduce abortions and come close as we can to eliminating them, but I do not think the solution is to use legislation to control women's bodies and eliminate their choices. Elisa's last comment really resonated with me. Whenever I think of making abortion illegal, I think of myself on a table after nearly 40 hours of a grueling labor that led to 2-hour scary, painful, and risky c-section. After that experience, and as much as I love my daughter, I just do not think that any woman should be forced to carry a pregnancy to term. There are so many complex circumstances that lead women to seek abortions. Even if consensual, there can be power imbalances and coercion in relationships that blur the lines about what is truly is a mutual decision to engage in sexual activity. I have heard many stories as a mental health therapist on this topic and I just come away with the sense that abortion is such a complicated choice. It is not my place to judge the choices of others around it, especially when there are many perspectives about when a fetus becomes a human being. While I do think there should be conversation and/or policy modification about when in a pregnancy to draw the line on elective abortion (I personally think the 20-week limit set by many other countries sounds reasonable.), I really hope that more people can start to see the nuance and complications that exist for so many people in making this choice, and that more constructive dialogue can occur around it. I am not really confident at this point that my hope can turn into reality, but it is something I will continue to hope for.

**Perma Banned says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:49 pm

Mr. Brunson, I'm curious, do you feel that having a public pro-life position would be career suicide in your department? I presume not, at a Catholic (?) university. Would it be difficult to get a job at another university if one had written papers on the ethics of abortion that argued a pro-life position? This is not a gotya question. I'm just curious.

**lastlemming says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:50 pm

dsc,

OK, my "nothing more" was overstating things, but if the Church does not see fit to justify its positions I don't see why it is bad faith for me to impute a justification. I'm not trying to engage with bioethicists and philosophers, and I'm highly skeptical the the Church consulted any when arriving at its position. I am interested in engaging with the average church members who take positions they unnecessarily think the Church demands of them. And with BCC readers who, I



think, incorrectly impute to the Church a purely pro-life/anti-violence justification for its position.

As for the exceptions to the rape exception, those might indeed reflect a desire to reduce the number of abortions. But they could just as plausibly be interpreted as a desire to keep the definition of rape narrow in this context (e.g. a pregnancy resulting from a drunken encounter might legally be rape, but might not be seen sympathetically as an excuse for an abortion.)

**TS says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:50 pm

Sam, stop deleting my posts just because you're losing the argument. Trying again:

The point is you used arguments with respect to abortion that also apply to infanticide. Whether there are ethically relevant differences between the two or not, the principles you gave didn't make use of them. If you want to defend legal abortion, defend it on its own terms. Not by bad faith arguments that you don't actually believe like "if you are opposed to birth control you cannot oppose X which is made more likely by not using birth control". Or "marginalized women do X more often, so you're probably a racist if you oppose X being legal". Or "we should be very hesitant to coerce women not to do X, because coercion is bad and also sexist". (In each case, both abortion and infanticide fit.)

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:51 pm

Thanks, SML. I appreciate hearing about your experience and the empathy you've drawn from it.

**mez says:**

October 21, 2020 at 2:52 pm

I agree with everything Pres. Nelson said. Abortion should be rare—not never done under any circumstances. In order for an abortion to be performed safely, that all would deem should take place, doesn't it have to be kept legal? If it's illegal, what happens in a case where the mother's life is in danger?

**Heber Frank says:**

October 21, 2020 at 3:13 pm

The Scriptures only mentions what we call abortion once. In the law of Moses it mentions an abortion caused by accident. It treats it like a crime against property and not murder. (Ex 21:22-23)

The one causing the accidental abortion must pay a fine to the husband of the woman. If a person accidentally causes someone to lose an eye, or arm, or leg or some other body part a similar fine is imposed under the law of Moses.

However, if the act that caused the abortion also causes the woman to die, it is treated as murder, and the penalty is death. If the death of the fetus was the same as the death of the woman then it would have the same penalty. But it is not.

Adam was not a "living soul" until his first breath. Jesus spoke to a prophet the night before his birth. So I remain convinced that a fetus is not a living soul until it is born and starts breathing. Until then it is a part of the mother. Maybe it has a spiritual connection to the spirit that will come into it. But the spirit does not enter the body until the first breath.

So the scriptures support the conclusion that the fetus is part of the mother until it is born and starts breathing. Thus under Bible teachings abortion is not murder, but a lesser sin. But maybe not much lesser in some cases.

I trust that if God wanted us to consider abortion the same as murder that the Bible would have made it absolutely clear to us. But instead the Bible makes it clear, at least to some of us, that abortion is not the same as murder. But it is still a sin under the laws of God.

**Starfoxy says:**

October 21, 2020 at 3:33 pm

Years ago I read a story about El Salvador (described as "Where life prevails") with their full ban on abortion.

It included an anecdote about a patient with an ectopic pregnancy that doctors could not treat until the fetus died, or the fallopian tube ruptured. They sent the patient to have an ultrasound while the newest ultrasound tech was on duty in hopes that the novice tech would be unable to find a heartbeat so they could act immediately to preserve her life and fertility.

I am fully open to regulating, even heavily regulating abortion. But criminalizing the various medical procedures that save women's lives is how Satan turns a righteous desire to protect the innocent into perverse and unfeeling cruelty.

**kevinf says:**

October 21, 2020 at 3:39 pm

To those who are claiming that Given's lead comment about academic diversity in his attempt at a serious article about a serious topic is a joke, a question. Is that how you start a rational

discussion about such an emotionally charged issue, especially when that “joke” is at the expense of “others.?”

**Perma Banned says:**

October 21, 2020 at 3:53 pm

Kevinf, I am in academia (of sorts), but not liberal arts. I can't think of a single faculty member that is open about conservative political beliefs. Not a single one. I'm right of center for sure, and I have colleagues that I have allowed to follow me on social media. And I do speak my opinion from time to time on political topics. And it certainly has crossed my mind many times whether I am harming my career by doing so. No one who is left of center has to worry about this. I took Givens' comment as a form of humor, but I am betting it comes from a place of hurt and academic PTSD. That he can now speak freely, whereas before he had be much more careful. I'm sure that academic freedom is an emotionally charged topic for him. And his comment reflects that. If you've never been a conservative academic in an environment that is unfriendly to your beliefs, you will have a hard time relating.

**IanThomson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 4:28 pm

Perma Banned, you say “If you've never been a conservative academic in an environment that is unfriendly to your beliefs, you will have a hard time relating.” Are you sure that is true? Even if one has been a progressive or liberal member in a church environment that is equally unfriendly to your beliefs? Are you sure that they aren't alike enough to at least provide some measure of comparison?

**Geoff-Aus says:**

October 21, 2020 at 4:38 pm

Do the anti abortion commenters here believe that making abortion illegal will stop it, or even reduce it?

All the arguments above are meaningless if what you are arguing for will not work.

America has about one third more abortions than countries like Canada or Australia, but there are countries like Germany, where they are one third of America. Abortion is legal in the countries that have less abortion, along with respect for women, sex education, and affordable birth control.

Rather than arguing about when the spirit enters the body, how about which actions are known to reduce the number of abortions?

If you swallow the line that making abortion illegal will stop abortion. Lets see some evidence for that?

**Sute says:**

October 21, 2020 at 4:50 pm

So you're in favor of abortion restrictions if contraceptives are free? No? Then don't distract with it. Abortions have declined with contraceptive technology. But the cost of contraceptives are so low that reducing costs further will have a limited to negligible impact. Half the women who had an abortion used a contraceptive the month they got pregnant. In additional research, cost was not listed as a reason they did not use a contraceptive. More free contraceptives is a red herring.

At bare minimum, once that baby has a heart beat, an abortion should be illegal. True the mother has rights. True, it puts an disproportionate burden on her. True, she might not have even asked for it.

But every one of those reasons is a “life's not fair” complaint. It's not fair some get cancer and others never do. We can list the unfairnesses until the cows come home. The reality is, each complaint is simply superceded by a higher one.

The baby has rights to, and a body as well. Dependency requires responsibility, not abdication. The burden for life on the mother is unavoidable and inherently unequal. There are an infinite number of unequal burdens that others carry. A soldier drafted to war or enlisted in the military has an unfair burden put on him or her when they get called to the front. It's not the job of the legislature or courts to resolve the burdens of nature.

And even if she doesn't ask for the child, the child is still there. If didn't ask to be created and then destroyed. Once a vulnerable life exists, we have some responsibility to it.

These aren't particularly Latter-day saint arguments. They are moral ones, which can be debated. The ambiguity in the church policy, on the other hand, is a mixture of PR and political pragmatism. The church can not get locked out of cities, states, or countries, or get embroiled in hot debate ad nauseum every time the issue gets used as a cudgel against the church or it's members. It's wisely sidestepped the issue from an organizational perspective.

But surely no one believes we've ever had a prophet who actually believes a woman should get an of social, financial, career, or mental convenience? The only possible exception is in the legitimate physical health of the mother. Which requires a doctor. Not planned parenthood.

**Sam Brunson says:**

October 21, 2020 at 4:57 pm

Sute, it's a little disturbing to me that you're so sure of your personal opinion that you attribute ambiguity in the church's policy to a PR stunt rather than a legitimate attempt to thread a

difficult moral needle. Because surely nobody believes that church policies, set by the highest church leaders, are just PR stunts, right? (And note, your assertions to the contrary, that church policy doesn't demand *physical* health. Church leaders are sufficiently capable of wordsmithing to fix that if they wanted.)

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