

FOREWORD BY JIM WALLIS, AUTHOR OF *GOD'S POLITICS*

Adam Hamilton

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Seeing  
**Gray**

**in a World of  
Black and White**

Thoughts on Religion,  
Morality, and Politics

**SEEING GRAY IN A WORLD OF BLACK AND WHITE  
THOUGHTS ON RELIGION, MORALITY, AND POLITICS**

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# Introduction

## Are Jerry Falwell and John Shelby Spong Our Only Options?

It was 1991 and I was getting ready for work while watching *Good Morning America*. Just before a commercial, host Charles Gibson announced that when he returned he'd be joined by two clergy, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, the pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church, and Bishop John Shelby Spong, Episcopal bishop of Newark, New Jersey. Falwell had founded the Moral Majority and was known as America's most outspoken fundamentalist. Spong had just written a book entitled *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, and he was quickly gaining a reputation as America's most outspoken liberal Christian.

Jerry Falwell believed that the Bible was to be taken literally, and that wherever the modern world conflicted with the Bible, the modern world was wrong. John Shelby Spong noted that neither he, nor many of the people he knew, could bend their minds into first-century pretzels any more, and thus he could

not accept a literal reading of Scripture. He noted that there were many places where the Bible was simply in error. Theologically, sociologically, and politically they were diametrically opposed. In listening to them, I found places where I sympathized with Spong, and others where I sympathized with Falwell. But by the time their "conversation" was over I found myself thinking, "These two cannot be our only options for being Christian!"

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The truth is, most Christians find themselves somewhere in between these two extremes. Most evangelicals found Falwell too conservative long before his comments following 9/11 that the ACLU, abortionists, and gays and lesbians had to “take a lot of the blame for this” (a statement he retracted a day later with an apology). Most liberals are unwilling to follow Spong as he discards nearly all of the historic doctrines of the Christian faith. These two men represented a kind of black-and-white world, Falwell’s yin to Spong’s yang. Falwell’s kind of Christianity emerged as a reaction to late nineteenth-century modernism. Spong’s liberalism was a reaction to Falwell’s kind of late twentieth-century fundamentalism.

The history of ideas and movements within Christianity has often been reactive, like the swinging of a pendulum. Using the language of Newton’s Third Law of Motion, major movements within Christianity have too often reflected the fact that “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” The Reformation was a reaction to Catholicism’s shortcomings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Yet in its more radical expressions the pendulum swung too far, making claims and pursuing practices that, in essence, threw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Likewise fundamentalism might be seen as an “equal and opposite” reaction to “modernism”—a pendulum that swung as far to the right as modernism or liberalism at its most radical had swung to the left.

Falwell and Spong represent the poles or extremes of the last quarter century. The extremes have clear views on every subject, and those views are black and white enough to enable one to

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articulate them in brief sound bites. This is why people like Falwell and Spong are often called upon for comment by the media. Unfortunately, when the people representing the Christian community are Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson on the one side, and John Shelby Spong on the other, you end up with a wide gulf in between with no one articulating a middle way.

It seems to me that increasingly there are large swaths of the Christian population who are yearning for a middle way. There are self-described evangelicals who are embracing elements of the social gospel and who are open to insights from historical critical methods of biblical study. There are self-described liberal Christians who are embracing elements of the evangelical gospel, who are speaking of their “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” and who are learning to give evangelistic altar calls while still championing social justice. And, perhaps exemplifying this trend, there are those who describe their faith as “emergent” or “postmodern” and who yearn for a “generous orthodoxy.”

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for a middle way.**

As many Christians are drawn to a centered or balanced faith, there is an increasing frustration with the role that Christianity has played in the culture wars. Too often faith has been used by Christian leaders and politicians to further a particular political party or political agenda. And in the minds of many nonreligious people in America, Christianity is not associated with love or grace or justice, but with a particular view of homosexuality, or a particular stance on abortion, or a seemingly absurd and anti-intellectual view of human origins. Christianity has become a wedge that drives people from Christ, rather than drawing them to him. And Christians have, in their political involvement, acted to divide our nation rather than serve as the balm that can heal it.

There are a growing number of Christians who believe the gospel calls us to be healers and bridge builders, not dividers. There are new calls to civility in how Christians dialogue and debate

ethical and political issues. And there are many Christians who are coming to see that even on the important ethical issues of our time there may be a need for a different approach than has been taken in the last thirty years.

This book is my attempt at laying out one Christian's view of a Christianity of the *via media* or middle way between the extremes. It is not a systematic theology or textbook on ethics. It is a series of essays on various topics meant to serve as a constructive proposition—an invitation for you to think about the various topics to see if they make sense to you. You'll agree with some and disagree with others. I suspect that as time goes by, my own views will change on some of these topics. But this is a place to start the discussion on what a Christianity of the middle way might look like.

I've organized the essays into three parts. The first introduces the idea of seeing gray in a world of black and white and the characteristics of a Christianity of the middle way. The second part turns to the issue of the Bible, oft-debated questions concerning evolution, the fate of non-Christians, and the problem of suffering, before ending with a look at Christian spirituality. The third part turns to issues of ethics and politics. Here we'll consider the controversial topics of abortion, homosexuality, and war before turning to a couple of chapters that seek to look at the relationship between faith and politics.

My own approach to controversial issues, first laid out in my book, *Confronting the Controversies* (Abingdon Press, 2001, 2005), is that any issue about which thinking Christians disagree likely has important truth on each side of the debate. The key is to listen to both sides and look for ways to integrate the legitimate concerns of each side, often forging a new way forward, or at least plowing forward while taking seriously the views of the other. This willingness to listen to those with whom we disagree, and to take seriously their legitimate concerns, is critical for people of all religions and nationalities. Until we can learn to do that, there will be no hope for resolving the culture wars here at home, nor the broader international conflicts that threaten our world.



I believe that Christianity is in need of a new reformation. The fundamentalism of the last century is waning. And the liberalism of the last fifty years has jettisoned too much of the historic Christian gospel to take its place. Christianity's next reformation will strike a middle path between Jerry Falwell and John Shelby Spong. It will draw upon what is best in both fundamentalism and liberalism by holding together the evangelical and social gospels, by combining a love of Scripture with a willingness to see both its humanity as well as its divinity, and by coupling a passionate desire to follow Jesus Christ with a reclamation of his heart toward those whom religious people have often rejected. This reformation will be led by people who are able to see the gray in a world of black and white.

# Eighteen

## Abortion: Finding Common Ground

*Americans cannot be easily characterized as conservative or liberal on today's most pressing social questions. . . . Along with favoring no clear ideological approach to most social issues, the public expresses a desire for a middle ground on the most divisive social concern of the day: abortion.*

—Summary of a 2006 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Survey of 2003 Americans

No other controversial issue is as emotionally charged or has the capacity to generate such deep-seated feelings of anger and indignation as abortion. The poles in this case are clear. They may go by different names, but we most often hear the designations pro-life and pro-choice. Those most passionate about the issue on either side seem to see little or no room for compromise.

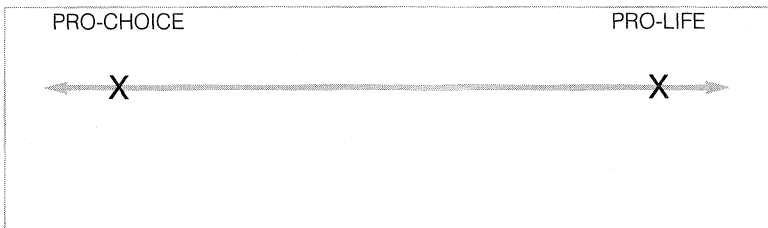
When it comes to the debate about abortion I am reminded of Newton's Third Law of Motion: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." You've seen this law illustrated, no doubt, with the use of a toy called the Newton's cradle—five silver balls suspended by wires or string between a frame. When one ball is pulled back and released, it strikes the remaining four balls, sending the last of them flying back to a distance roughly equivalent to the distance from which the first ball was dropped. This action-reaction of the Newton's cradle is the picture I have of the pro-life and pro-choice movements in America.<sup>1</sup> For thirty years each side has sought to gain the upper hand, and each law that is passed, each proposition that is put forth, seems to generate an equal and opposite law or proposition on the part of the opposing force. In the process there is a lot of "heat" but very little "light" produced in the debate.

My aim in this chapter is not to recount the arguments in the debate. I have laid out the moral arguments on both sides of this issue and my own moral reasoning on it in my book *Confronting the Controversies*.<sup>2</sup> My hope is to offer a constructive approach for moving forward.

My assumption is that we will never come to a place in America where we have agreement on this issue. According to the most recent polling, slightly more than half of Americans surveyed believed that abortion should always or usually be legal.<sup>3</sup> This meant that slightly fewer than half felt abortion should be illegal in most cases. A strong majority of respondents opposed late-term abortions. When questioned as to whether abortion should be legal in the case of rape, incest, or when the life of the mother is at risk, a majority of those who are pro-life believed abortion should be legal. Yet 13 percent of those surveyed believed abortion should be illegal, even when it would be necessary to save the life of a woman.<sup>4</sup> In 2006 the Pew Research Center conducted a poll asking, “When it comes to abortion policy do you believe, (a) We need to find a middle ground, or (b) There is no room for compromise on this issue.” Fifty-five percent of Americans responded that there is a need to find a middle ground, with only 29 percent believing there was no room for compromise.<sup>5</sup> My aim in this chapter is to suggest some ways in which a middle ground might be found.

I’d like to begin by considering the poles in this debate over abortion.

My assumption is that we will never come to a place in America where we have agreement on [the issue of abortion]. My aim, however, is to suggest some ways in which a middle ground might be found.



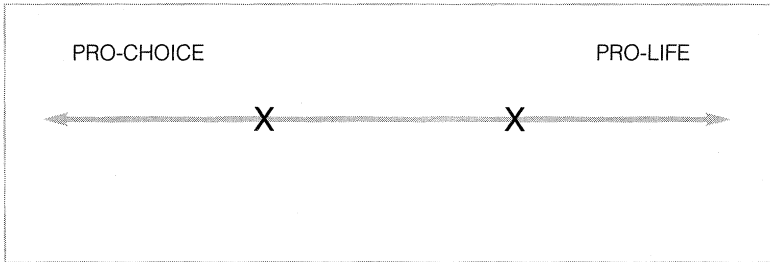
The most extreme positions can be summarized as follows. On the pro-choice side, the fetus is not seen as a human being until it has been delivered and it is no longer dependent upon the life of the mother for support. Only then does it gain rights. Up to the point of delivery the mother should have a legal right to abort the fetus. This position would be held by a very small percentage of those who support abortion rights.

The most extreme pro-life position would hold that from the moment of conception the conceptus is a human being who possesses a soul, *and* that the fertilized egg (and, as it develops, the fetus) cannot be willfully destroyed or aborted, not even to save the life of the mother. As noted above, 13 percent of respondents indicated that abortion should not be allowed under any circumstances, even in the case of an effort to save a woman's life. A very small number of the most ardent pro-life advocates have even supported the use of violence to stop doctors from performing abortions.<sup>6</sup>

These views represent the poles in the debate over abortion. But the vast majority of those who are pro-life or pro-choice do not identify with the extremes.

Of those who identify themselves as pro-choice, the majority oppose late-term abortions. Of those who are pro-life, the majority would allow for a legal abortion in the event of rape, incest, or to protect the health of the mother.<sup>7</sup> Further, in speaking with women and men who identify themselves as pro-choice, it is not uncommon to hear them state that "I would not personally have an abortion, but I believe that there are situations in which a woman should have the legal ability to have an abortion." Many of these persons would agree with pro-choice advocate William Saletan's January 22, 2006, Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* in which he wrote: "Abortion is bad, and the ideal number of abortions is zero." He noted that "abortion . . . generates moral friction. Most people will tolerate it as a lesser evil or a temporary measure, but they'll never fully accept it. They want a world in which it's less necessary."<sup>8</sup> If this is, in fact, where a majority of pro-choice advocates find themselves, this would indicate that many are already much closer to the center than the polls often indicate. The

continuum pointing out where a majority of pro-life and pro-choice advocates are likely looks more like this:



I believe the majority of people in America would find their position represented near these two Xs. When seen this way it begins to seem at least possible that the two sides in this debate might be able to find common ground and work together to achieve common goals as Saletan suggested in his Op-Ed piece.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, 46 percent of women who have abortions in the United States each year were not using birth control when they became pregnant. Understanding and addressing the reasons for the failure to use birth control could reduce the number of abortions by more than 500,000 each year.<sup>9</sup> If both pro-choice and pro-life advocates could agree that birth control is preferable to abortion, and work together on this approach, the goals of both would be partially achieved.

Many pro-life advocates prefer encouraging abstinence for unmarried persons to birth control. Some pro-choice advocates also recognize the value of abstinence. What if, as a nation, we sought to reclaim the sense of the sacredness of sex among young people? What if both liberals and conservatives came together to try to influence society's view of sex with serious advertising campaigns while seeking to enlist Hollywood in an effort to reshape an entire generation regarding the meaning and sanctity of sexual intercourse—to see it is as something beautiful, holy, and which is meant to bind two people together in the most profound of ways? What if we moved away from portraying sex as something everyone does after only a couple of dates and sought to shift away from the glorifying of casual or recreational sex? Is it possible this, too,

One does not need to be conservative to believe that sexual intimacy is something profound, that the sharing of one's body with another human being is supposed to be meaningful. This might be a place for the right and the left to seek agreement.

would reduce the number of abortions? One does not need to be conservative to believe that sexual intimacy is something profound, that the sharing of one's body with another human being is supposed to be meaningful. This might be a place for the right and the left to seek agreement.

Seventy percent of all women having abortions in the United States identify themselves as Christians: 43 percent are Protestant and 27 percent are Roman Catholic.<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that there will be debate in society at large regarding the time when the claims of the fetus to be born are greater than the claim of the mother to exercise complete control over her own body, I think it is unlikely that *Roe v. Wade* will be overturned. But if 70 percent of those having abortions claim to be Christian, the church must, with compassion and love, articulate to its members the reasons they should choose to carry a child to term when the pregnancy is unplanned—and then the church must plan to support such women. This is a catch-22 for some churches, particularly when the woman is unmarried. Would supporting the woman mean dismissing the fact that she conceived outside of marriage? If the church is serious about reducing abortions, it must (and I think most do) find ways to remove the stigma surrounding a woman conceiving out of wedlock.

I believe there is room, between the poles,

The church must, with compassion and love, articulate to its members the reasons they should choose to carry a child to term when the pregnancy is unplanned—and then the church must plan to support such women.

for most pro-life and pro-choice advocates to find at least some middle ground where they might work together to accomplish common goals of reducing the number of abortions. I would like to suggest seven points upon which I believe moderate pro-life and moderate pro-choice advocates could agree:

1. Pro-choice advocates and pro-life advocates each have legitimate concerns.
2. Abortion is both “not ideal” and yet, occasionally, “necessary” (at the very least, most pro-life advocates would allow abortion to save the life of the mother).
3. Decreasing the number of abortions in America would be desirable.
4. Adequate information about and access to birth control can reduce abortions.
5. The longer a pregnancy progresses the more morally problematic an abortion becomes.
6. No one should be pressured into having an abortion.
7. If an abortion occurs it should be safe.

There is a place for pro-choice and pro-life advocates to sit down with one another, in a spirit of humility, and with a willingness to listen in order to understand the other’s concerns. If they do this, there is an opportunity to see if they can find shared strategies for reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions each year.

Our society has made abortions legal under far wider circumstances than many Christians find morally justifiable. Given that abortions will occur for reasons some will find morally objectionable, and that it seems unlikely that *Roe v. Wade* will be entirely overturned, it behooves those who are pro-life to seek ways to foster efforts by both sides in this debate to reduce the situations in which abortions are sought.

If a pregnancy is to be terminated, I favor the use of what is commonly called “the morning-after pill” or “emergency contraception” rather than allowing the embryo to develop and be aborted

later. These pills prohibit the fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus and they are effective up to three days after unprotected sex. I support this as an alternative to surgical abortions, recognizing that surgical abortions might not take place until weeks five to twelve of the pregnancy, by which time the heart begins to beat and development progresses rapidly. If an abortion is going to occur, it seems to me morally preferable to end a pregnancy at the stage when many pregnancies are, in nature, terminated (some estimate that as much as 40 percent of the time when women conceive, the fertilized egg does not implant in the uterus, it is sloughed off, and the woman never knows she had conceived<sup>11</sup>) and when there is only a collection of undifferentiated cells.

I believe conception is a miraculous event in which we have become cocreators with God, and is to be violated only under the most extreme of situations. While for many women who seek abortion, this decision is traumatic and not taken lightly, the number of repeat abortions would indicate that for many, abortion has become a form of birth control and the act of ending the life of a developing human being is not taken seriously enough. I believe this diminishes the humanity of the individuals seeking abortions, and the rest of society as well.

A letter I received from one of my parishioners seven years ago has fundamentally shaped how I view abortion. The woman wrote and told me that she was seventeen and her boyfriend was sixteen when they had sex for the first time. It only took one time for her to conceive.

She told me how, when her father found out about the pregnancy, he was furious. These were the days before *Roe v. Wade* and legal elective abortions were not available. So he set up an appointment with a doctor in Switzerland. He would fly her there for the procedure. But she refused to go. She and the boy were going to marry and have the baby. She writes, "My father told me I would never be welcome in his home again if I went through with the marriage and delivery of the baby."

She moved in with the boy's family and the couple quickly married. They dropped out of high school in order to care for



this child. The couple struggled over the next few years, barely making ends meet. After twelve years their marriage ended in divorce. This couple's future was radically changed by their decision to have the baby. For both the woman, who gave birth, and her young husband, their childhood was cut short; they did not go to college, and ultimately they divorced. I wondered if this woman regretted her decision. But her letter concluded in this way:

Yes, my life changed dramatically due to the pregnancy prior to marriage but, to this day, that child has been the greatest blessing to me and thousands of others. God prompts him to call his Mom when she needs to talk but doesn't want to bother him. God has blessed me more with this son than I can ever imagine being blessed. I am so proud of the Husband and Father that he has become. So many times when I look at him I think that this . . . person could have ended up aborted, but instead, due to the classes in Sunday School week after week that had been taught to me as a child, I knew that even from the very moment that he was conceived, he was a gift from God. I look back sometimes at the college that I missed, the experiences that "could have been" . . . my life is different than it could have been but I wouldn't change it for anything.

Thank you, Adam, for being my "gift from God"—there can be no greater gift than that of a child that God wants to be born. I never dreamed 36 years ago while I was carrying you that you would have the impact on God's people, and me, that you do. You are my Pastor, my confidant and my best friend.

I love you, Mom

This is *my mother's* story, and *I* am that child. And what it reminds me of is a powerful gospel truth: God takes what we think of as "mistakes" and "accidents" and redeems them. This is what he specializes in. He knits us together in our mothers' wombs—he has plans for each child. These "accidents" and "unwanted babies" have potential. They grow up. I am one of those children. And

had abortion been as readily available and accepted in 1964 as it is today, my mother may have aborted me.

There are complex moral situations in which there are “tragic conflicts of life with life.” In those situations there needs to be a legal and safe option for abortion. Yet our society has embraced a very broad understanding of when abortion is appropriate. Christians, both liberal and conservative, should be asking critical questions about when the removal and destruction of a forming human being from the

**Both those who are pro-choice and those who are pro-life can and should agree that the number of abortions is too high, and that it should be reduced.**

womb is morally acceptable. Over one million abortions occur in the United States each year. At least 75 percent of these are unrelated to the health of the mother, the health of the fetus, rape, or incest.<sup>12</sup> Both those who are pro-choice and those who are pro-life can and should agree that this number is too high, and that it should be reduced. And it is important to note that thirty-five years of heated rhetoric and court battles have not led to a significant reduction in the number of abortions. Both sides must move beyond the current impasse. Only as pro-life and pro-choice advocates work together, understanding the concerns of the other, and looking for solutions to address one another’s concerns, will abortion become increasingly rare in our society, and that seems a goal that both sides could agree upon.

## Notes

1. The Newton’s cradle is an interesting metaphor I’ve used to describe what happens in politics in America, and in the broader culture wars as a whole, where so much of what we see happening is reactionary, and those in the center tend to get “hit” by those on both sides.
2. *Confronting the Controversies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005). This book is also available as a small-group study with a fifteen-minute video in which I summarize the various issues covered by each chapter. A leader’s guide is also available. The chapters cover topics such as the separation of church and

- state, prayer in public schools, euthanasia, the death penalty, abortion, and homosexuality, among others.
3. I reviewed the data from six different nationwide polls concerning abortion that were conducted in the spring and summer of 2007. The data can be found at [www.pollingreport.com/abortion.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/abortion.htm).
  4. This information is from the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll conducted April 20–23, 2007, in which 1,004 adults responded. I believe the question was not carefully worded—it would have been more helpful to discover how many would support abortion in the case of rape, then how many would support legal abortion in the case of incest, and finally, how many would support legal abortion in the case of the life of the woman being at risk. The results in the poll showed that 55 percent of those surveyed believed that the decision for abortion should be made between a woman and her doctor. This was understood to be support for legalized abortion. An additional 30 percent of respondents supported the legal option of abortion in the case of rape or incest or when the life of the woman was at risk. Thirteen percent responded that abortion should always be illegal. Since approximately 45 percent of the population surveyed in other polls taken in the spring identified themselves as pro-life it would appear that the majority of those considering themselves pro-life support a legal option for abortion in these circumstances.
  5. The survey interviewed 2,003 adults between July 6–19, 2006. See <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/social-issues-06.pdf>.
  6. For an example of the moral reasoning of those who advocate killing abortion doctors, see the “Eulogy for Paul Hill” by Rev. Bruce Evan Murch found at [www.covenantnews.com/murch030905.htm](http://www.covenantnews.com/murch030905.htm). For links to numerous websites of more radical pro-life groups and proponents see [www.my.execpc.com/~awallace/index.htm](http://www.my.execpc.com/~awallace/index.htm).
  7. The data for the percentage of abortions that occur for these three reasons, plus fetal deformity, vary significantly by survey, but appear to be between 2 and 10 percent of all abortions performed.
  8. William Saletan, “Three Decades After Roe, a War We Can All Support,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2006. The piece can be read online at [www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/opinion/22saletan.html?ex=1187236800&en=29ef0966e859ed15&ei=5070](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/opinion/22saletan.html?ex=1187236800&en=29ef0966e859ed15&ei=5070).
  9. See [www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb\\_induced\\_abortion.html](http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html). The figure of 500,000 plus abortions that would be avoided is derived from multiplying the 46% of abortions that occur among women not using contraceptives times the total number of induced abortions of 1.29 million that occurred in 2002 as cited by Guttmacher, which gives a total of 593,000 abortions that could be averted if all contraceptives were used by these women. Given the unlikelihood of all of these women using birth control, and the small but known failure rate of birth control, increased use of contraceptives could

nevertheless still result in a reduction in abortions in the hundreds of thousands each year.

10. Ibid.
11. The 40 percent figure for zygotes which do not implant in naturally occurring fertilizations is widely reported. See Gregory Pence, *Re Creating Medicine: Ethical Issues at the Frontiers of Medicine* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 124, among many others. The range of numbers given for this is typically between 30 and 50 percent.
12. A 2005 Guttmacher Institute study entitled, "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives" by Finer, et. al. can be read online at [www.guttmacher.org/pubs/psrh/full/3711005.pdf](http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/psrh/full/3711005.pdf). It offers the results of a 2004 survey that indicated that 13 percent of surveyed women who had abortions did so, in part, for concern for the fetus' health, and 12 percent in part out of concern for the woman's own health. National Right to Life suggests that the number is actually 8 percent and that the Guttmacher study revealed that 92 percent of women had abortions for reasons other than protecting the woman's health or the fetus's health. See "New Study Examines Reasons Women Have Abortions" by Randall O'Bannon and found at [www.nrlc.org/news/2005/NRL10/NewStudy.html](http://www.nrlc.org/news/2005/NRL10/NewStudy.html).