

Commentary: Mohler, abortion abolitionists don't take sin seriously enough

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(RNS)—Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's flagship seminary, recently made comments that drew cheers from abortion abolitionists, a movement of abortion opponents who believe women who get abortions should be prosecuted under the law.

Abortion abolitionists, a movement that has been around since at least [2011](#), distinguish themselves from the larger pro-life movement, which coalesced around *Roe v. Wade*, the ruling that legalized abortion through all three stages of pregnancy until being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022.

The [mainstream pro-life movement](#), which includes numerous national and international organizations, does not believe in punishing women who get abortions.

But in the March 15 episode of his podcast, "[The Briefing](#)," Mohler praised the abolitionists' view that "all persons who are morally and criminally responsible for abortion should be prosecuted," including the women who have abortions.

"I think this is an embarrassing shortfall on the part of many who call themselves pro-life," Mohler said, "where they have just decided to exempt women seeking abortions from really any moral accountability."

While Mohler's remarks carefully elided any distinction between "moral accountability" and legal prosecution, they whipped abolitionists into a

frenzy. "[Let's go](#)," posted one, as though the discussion over prosecuting women who seek abortions is a sports competition. "[You love to see it](#)," exulted another. A more egalitarian abolitionist argued "[both parents should die](#)."

Consistent application

On the surface, it might seem, in order to hold the view elective abortion unjustly deprives an innocent human being of life, one must logically count that act as murder and punish accordingly.

But the natures of human relationships, community norms and social imaginaries have a logic all their own.

Those who believe in the sanctity of unborn human life and who believe life should be protected under the law need not feel pressured or embarrassed about wanting to cultivate a more expansive vision of justice and mercy that is life-affirming for both mother and child and takes into account the embodied nature of human reproduction in our laws.

Indeed, as even Mohler points out, the law makes all kinds of distinctions and exemptions and even makes room for amnesty.

Chattel slavery, for example, which entailed countless murders, rapes and tortures, is one of the greatest human evils enshrined by law and defended to the point of civil war. Yet, slave owners were not prosecuted for their sins, including murder. Some even got [reparations](#).

I even know of a Christian denomination, the largest one in America, that was founded for the express purpose of defending slavery.

Where suicide—once called [self-murder](#)—is against the law, those who attempt it and fail are not tried, imprisoned or executed, but are offered help and assistance.

The same principle is applied in all cases of self-harm and self-mutilation. While the child carried by a pregnant woman is a complete, whole, individual human being, that being is connected to her body. This is a physical and biological reality. It means the child cannot be helped or protected without supporting the mother, too. The child's body is surrounded by the mother's body, which is surrounded by a social and relational world that either supports her or traps her.

Shared accountability

As the pro-life speaker and author Frederica Mathewes-Green famously put it: "[No woman wants an abortion](#) like she wants an ice cream cone or a Porsche. She wants an abortion like an animal caught in a trap wants to gnaw off its own leg."

It should not be surprising someone who felt trapped and suddenly feels free might shout.

The sense of feeling trapped by pregnancy does not originate as much within the woman as it does from her surrounding circumstances—whether her family, her community, her relationships, her economic situation, her health or her support networks.

Abortion is a failure, not just of individuals, but also of the village.

In fact, [data from the Southern Baptist's](#) own research arm indicates many women in the church who have had abortions ([7 in 10 women](#) who have had abortions identify as Christian) find a lack of grace and support from the church. It also has been [reported](#) 1 in 3 women who attend a Southern Baptist church have had an abortion.

When 1 in 3 women within a denomination have committed a sin their denominational leaders say they should be prosecuted and even imprisoned

for, we have a problem much larger than that of individual moral failing. This is a cultural and systemic problem.

True accountability requires communal accountability.

Seriousness of sin

Christians often critique the modernist worldview that exalts the notion of radical autonomy. Yet, punishing the woman whose circumstances make her believe abortion is her best option reinforces the idea she is a radically autonomous being acting on her own apart from the formation of culture and her culture's norms and laws. This view stands starkly against the teaching of the Bible from the Hebrew Scriptures through the New Testament.

The medical establishment that approves of abortion on demand, the politicians and judges who have enshrined it in law, and our impoverished social imaginary all have served to malform our consciences in regard to unborn human life for generations now.

When societies come to grips with those wrongs and seek redress, prevention and accountability through new laws, they must do so while balancing the interests of mercy and justice and those of social order and individual responsibility.

Human cultures throughout history have legalized and normalized countless moral and social evils. Indeed, the Southern Baptist Convention has [changed its stances](#) on abortion over the decades. And like the women Mohler decries for "shouting" their abortions, his institution "[shouts](#)" its slave-owning founders to this day.

Human laws and rationalizations prove to be quite elastic when necessary. This isn't a matter of not taking sin seriously. To the contrary, it is taking

sin more seriously, because we understand just how deep and wide it runs.

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