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January 29, 1973

Abortion Court Decision
Interpreted by Attorney

By Robert O'Brien

DALLAS (BP)--A Southern Baptist attorney who activated the legal machinery resulting in the Supreme Court decision overturning abortion statutes in some 30 states said here the "Supreme Court decision does not absolve anyone of individual moral or religious responsibility."

Linda N. Coffee, a 30-year-old brunette sat in her Dallas law office and pondered the contrasting complexities of her stance on abortion--legal vs. personal.

It's a stance which would legally allow more constitutional freedom for others than she would exercise as an individual, she said in an interview.

She expressed fear "the emotional reaction to the ruling will result in failure to distinguish between the legal principle of the decision and the moral implications now left to the doctor-patient relationship."

"The abortion decision could be as widely misinterpreted as the Supreme Court's prayer decision, but I hope not," said Miss Coffee, daughter of Nellene Coffee, a secretary in the Texas Baptist Christian Education Commission.

"From my personal perspective as a Christian," she said, "It would tear me up to have to make a decision on abortion except in the early stages."

"And I would have to have a compelling reason even then" she emphasized, speaking as a person.

But, as lawyer, Miss Coffee, with another young attorney, Sarah Weddington of Austin, Tex., authored a series of legal proceedings which led to the 7-2 Supreme Court decision.

Crux of the pleadings, drafted originally by Miss Coffee for argument before a three-judge federal court in Dallas, centered on whether the state has a right to interfere in a doctor-patient decision.

The eventual decision, she explained, declared the state may not interfere with the decision to terminate a pregnancy until the fetus becomes "viable" sometime between the beginning of sixth and seventh months of pregnancy.

"But the decision does not say any doctor has to perform any abortion--or that any patient has to have one," Miss Coffee said.

During the "viable" period, the court said, the state may impose rules which prevent abortion except to protect the mother's health or life.

The decision also granted state government the privilege of regulating facilities where abortions may be performed during the second and third three-month periods of pregnancy, Miss Coffee said.

She observed that the decision also denied the fetus status as a legal person under the due process clause of the 14th amendment.

"But the ruling does not relieve each individual of standing firmly behind his or her moral or religious viewpoint about what a person is or when life begins," she emphasized.

"Legal personhood is separate entirely from a moral or religious view of personhood," added Miss Coffee, a member of Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas.

Although "troubled" that few laws now exist throughout the country on abortion in the aftermath of the decision, Miss Coffee hasn't decided "what laws, if any, should be drawn to cover the final three months of pregnancy.

"I tend to feel the state should be neutral on abortion because it should never appear either to sanction an abortion or to interfere improperly with a doctor-patient relationship.

"But I would have little personal sympathy for use of abortion as a contraceptive or to avoid personal responsibility," she emphasized.

Miss Coffee was originally retained to handle the case of a young, unmarried woman in Dallas, who was denied an abortion because Texas law allowed it only in cases where the prospective mother might die.

In early 1970 she agreed to represent "Jane Roe," who revealed her identity as Norma McCorvey in another Baptist Press interview.

The three-judge federal court in Dallas overturned the Texas abortion statute in June, 1970, but denied Miss Roe (Miss McCorvey) an injunction to prevent its enforcement, pending any appeal.

Since failure to grant injunction left the plaintiff in the same situation she was in prior to the suit, the case was appealed to the Supreme Court.

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Abortion Case Plaintiff
Sheds "Jane Roe" Identity

1/29/73

By Robert O'Brien

DALLAS (BP)--The young, unmarried woman whose pregnancy resulted in the sweeping U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning abortion laws in some 30 states shed her "Jane Roe" legal identity here and told Baptist Press why she sought legal relief.

Some three years ago when Norma McCorvey of Dallas retained Linda Coffee, a young Southern Baptist attorney, she was unemployable and greatly depressed, she said in an exclusive interview and her first public statement.

"I was a woman alone with no place to go and no job. No one wanted to hire a pregnant woman. I felt there was no one in the world who could help me," she said.

Her despair and mental anguish multiplied, she said, then she learned that Texas law would not allow an abortion unless the pregnancy endangered her life.

"Many times," she said, "I felt 'Why should I go on?'. No one showed me any compassion except my doctor and lawyers," said Miss McCorvey, now 25.

Dallas Attorney Linda Coffee, then only 27 and one year out of the University of Texas Law school, filed suit in federal court seeking overturn of the Texas abortion law.

Crux of the arguments by Miss Coffee and her co-counsel, Sarah Weddington of Austin, centered on whether the state has a right to interfere in a doctor-patient decision.

Pleadings drawn by Miss Coffee said also that Miss McCorvey--or "Jane Roe"--sought an abortion "because of the economic hardship which pregnancy entailed and because of the social stigma" involved in bearing an illegitimate child.

Miss McCorvey later gave birth to the child and placed him for adoption during the long drawn out legal proceedings.

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Miss McCorvey hailed the 7-2 decision handed down by Justice Blackmon as a "wonderful thing."

"It's great to know that other women will not have to go through what I did. I'm glad the court decided that women, in consultation with a doctor, can control their own bodies."

Asked about her views on the morality and timing of an abortion, Miss McCorvey said, "It's hard to determine when life begins. I wouldn't want to wait over three months for any abortion, because I might be ending a human life after that time."

She said news of the decision had vividly recalled memories of the grief. "I want to think about the future now, not the past."

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Arizona Baptist Paper
Names Pair New Editor

1/29/73

PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)--C.L. Pair, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Kingman, Ariz., for the past five years, has been elected editor of the Baptist Beacon, weekly newspaper published by the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention.

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Pair succeeds Irving Childress, who has held joint responsibilities as editor of the paper and director of evangelism for the convention. Childress will devote full time to evangelism with the addition of Pair to the convention staff.

A native of Texas, Pair was pastor of Columbia Street Baptist Church, Tucson, before going to the Kingman church in 1967. Previously, he was pastor of several churches in east Texas, and was a public school teacher in Monroe, La. He attended East Texas Baptist College, Marshall, Tex.

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