

## **Holy Nation Part 10**

### **Abortion: How Christians apply the Scripture**

In this series we are examining how Christians apply the Scripture to politics. Abortion is much more than politics but politics seems to be the flashpoint for most of the discussion around the issue. Christians have been remarkably consistent in applying the Bible to this topic over the last 2,000 years. Christians have consistently taught that abortion is a sin, the sin of murder. How to address that sin and what punishment, if any, should be applied has varied over the centuries. Examining the history of the issue within Christianity will inevitably take us back to the Scriptures.

It surprises some people to know that abortion has been an issue for thousands of years. The Hippocratic Oath, named for the ancient physician Hippocrates, (c. 460-380 B.C.) contained the following pledge: "I will prescribe regimen for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone. To please no one will I prescribe a deadly drug nor give advice which may cause his death. Nor will I give a woman a pessary to procure abortion." As of 1993, a "content analysis" of the oaths administered at 147 US and Canadian medical schools showed that only 14 percent of oaths still prohibited euthanasia, and only 8 percent prohibited abortion. Even if abortion has been recently dropped, medical doctors for the last 2,400 years pledged not to perform an abortion so as not to do harm. Christianity and doctors have been on the same page for centuries.

The earliest Christian document other than the Bible, the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles was an early Christian discipleship manual containing the code of Christian morals and a set of rules of the Church order. In Didache II, 2 is the following: "Do no murder; do not commit adultery; do not corrupt boys, do not fornicate; do not steal; do not practice magic; do not go in for sorcery; do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant."

Murder is how abortion was characterized before the Apostle John had even died. It was what new Christians were taught from the beginning. As such abortion would be covered under the sixth of the Ten Commandments.

Josephus, a Jewish writer around 100 AD wrote "The (Jewish) law orders all the children to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus; a woman convicted of this was regarded as an infanticide because she destroys a soul and diminishes the race." What the early Christians were saying was consistent with what was being taught in Judaism.

Another early Christian document was the Epistle of Barnabas written between AD 70 and 132. The Greek epistle is preserved in the Codex Sinaiticus, a 4th-century manuscript. In XIX, 5 it reads: "You shall love your neighbor more than your own life. You shall not slay the child by abortion. You shall not kill that which has already been generated."

This Epistle speaks to two issues. First, that life is generated in the womb and not merely at birth. Second, that abortion is the killing of a child. In both these early documents the fetus is called a "child" rather than some lesser description.

The Apocalypse of Peter probably written about the same time as the book of Revelation, saw a pit of torment for sinners. In that pit were women "who caused their children to be born

untimely and have corrupted the work of God who created them...they forsook the commandments of God and slew their children.” A much later work in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Apocalypse of Paul, used similar language condemning women who “defiled the creation of God when they brought forth children from the womb,” that is by abortion.

Another very early document was from the apologist Athenagoras. He revealed Christian views on abortion as he defended the new faith against those who charged it with cannibalism. Christians were being charged with killing a man and eating him because of how some outsiders misunderstood communion. Athenagoras wrote to Emperor Marcus Aurelius defending Christians from these false charges around 176-177 AD. As a way of showing how ridiculous the cannibalism charge was he made use of the Christian view on abortion as evidence to refute the claim. “What reason would we have to commit murder when we say that women who induce abortions are murderers, and will give account of it to God? For the same person would not regard a fetus in the womb as a living thing and therefore an object of God’s care, and at the same time slay it, once it had come to life.” (“A Plea for the Christians, XXXV)

Clement of Alexandria wrote *The Paedagogus* (Tutor) around 198 AD. In Book II, X, I, he wrote, “Those who use abortifacient medicines to hide their fornication are causing the outright destruction, together with the fetus, of the whole human race.” His argument is that the aborted child’s death is not just of one child but a destruction of the entire human race. If we apply the rest of the Scripture from what Jesus taught we have harm to the Lord himself. “As you did to the least of these, you did to me.” (Matthew 25:45)

Writing around 197 AD, Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity, wrote in Apology ix, 8 a clear definition of abortion as murder. “For us, since homicide is forbidden, it is not even permitted while the blood is being formed into a man to dissolve the conceptus in the uterus. For to prevent its being born is an acceleration of homicide, and there is no difference whether one snuffs out a life already born or disturbs one that is in the process of being born. For he also is a man who is about to be one, just as every fruit already exists in the seed.”

Tertullian made a similar point in Treatise on the Soul (De anima, xxxvii, 2) “By this very fact that its form is complete, the fetus in the uterus is a man. For the law of Moses also judged abortion to warrant “life for life,” since already it is a case involving a man, since already it is considered alive though it still lives in the mother and for the most part shares her fortune.”

In the fourth century the great voices of Christianity were also equally clear. St. Basil the Great affirmed what earlier leaders had said. He wrote: “Those who give potions for the destruction of the child conceived in the womb are murderers, as are those who take potions which kill the child.” (Letters, CLXXXVIII, Canon 8)

St. John Chrysostom, the great pastor and preacher of Constantinople was even handed in giving blame to the men as well as the women. “You do not let a harlot remain a harlot, but make her a murderer as well.” With regard to the abortionist who provided the abortifacient he spoke of them as “even worse than a murderer.” (Homilies in Romans, XXIV) So the men who caused the problem, along with the women who participated, and the doctors who facilitated it were all sanctioned in his sermons.

These views and writings of the Church Fathers were handed down within the church and became a part of the Photian Collection which the Orthodox Church adopted in 883 as its official ecclesiastical law book. So these were not random sermons and books by renegade preachers.

These were the official positions of the church. What is notable is how early they came to these views and how clear and consistent they were in them.

Many more of the Church Fathers could be cited similarly. Among those would be Minucius Felix, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Lactantius, Ambrose, and Augustine.

Augustine made an interesting point in that no matter when a person dies he has an interest in the resurrection. For him that meant those still in the womb. A major feature of my ministry has been observance of the Annunciation on March 25 when Gabriel announced to Mary that she was with child which indicates that human life begins at conception. Jesus was Jesus from the moment of conception not just the moment of birth.

There are three key ideas. First, the teaching against abortion is grounded in the sixth of the Ten Commandments which would make it a core idea. We see this by how unequivocally they label abortion as murder. “Thou shalt not kill” is equally translated “Thou shalt not murder.” For them it is not a question of freedom or “choice” because murder is never a viable “choice” because it always involves a coerced victim who had no choice. Abortion is murder.

The second idea is that the life within the womb is not less of a person than one who has been born. It was not half-murder as if the baby in the womb was not fully human. In the Epistle of Barnabas referenced earlier the terminology clearly has in view the baby in the womb. “You shall not kill that which has already been generated.” The baby has been generated in conception and it has full humanity in that moment. Clement of Alexandria saw an attack upon the fetus as an attack upon all humanity.

We referenced the Didache as the earliest document. In the “Two Ways: the Way of Life and the Way of Death,” a contrast is made between the two. The way of death is the one followed by sinners among whom were “killers of the child, who abort the mold (plasma) of God.” By mentioning both the “mold” and the “child” any distinction between the fetus and a born child, between an unformed fetus and a fully formed fetus, would not stand.

What these writings show is the abortion has always been regarded as sin. Starting at the Council of Elvira in Spain in Canons 63 and 68 specific penance was required. The Council of Ancyra in 314 required penance lasting ten years. The Council of Trulla, held at Constantinople in 692 in Canon 91, imposed penance for homicide both on those who give abortifacients and on those who take them. Over the centuries the most common length of penance upon any participants in abortion was ten years.

In addition to being a sin abortion was historically defined as a murder. In the United States the various states passed laws outlawing abortion in the same way they made other actions as criminal. It was simply another of the hundreds of behaviors which were against the law.

By 1950, the Washington State Legislature passed a law stating that a woman who had an abortion or actively sought to have an abortion, regardless of whether she went through with it, was guilty of a criminal offense. Abortion was made legal in 1970. Prior to that, it was illegal in the state, with a therapeutic exception if the life of the mother was at risk. In 1971, the state repealed its statute that said inducing an abortion was a criminal offense.

Everything changed when the US Supreme Court issued its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling which said that the state laws against abortion could not be enforced because a woman had a constitutional right to have an abortion. America still had laws against abortion in almost all the states but they could not be enforced. Legislative efforts to get around the *Roe* ruling were

systematically blocked by the courts. Very few states followed Washington's lead with votes on abortion. Instead access to abortion without legal penalty was imposed upon the nation by the courts. In 2022 the Dobbs decision overturned Roe and returned the matter to the states for their adjudication as they had done in the decades prior to Roe. But by that time the media and educational systems had cemented the right to abortion although still only 60% of Washingtonians believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Washington allows abortions up to the time of viability.

Our topic is the Bible and Politics. In this case, the Bible forbids murder which included the murder of a baby in the womb. That has been the Christian consensus for two thousand years. Christians have supported and continue to support criminalizing the killing of a human being including in fetal form.