

## **Abortion and the Bible**

### **Dr. J. Alan Branch**

There is no specific passage of Scripture that says, “Thou shalt not have an abortion.”<sup>1</sup> However, the Bible does say a great deal about the value of each human life. Allan Moseley summarizes the approach I will take when he says, “As we read the Bible, the point is not to find words of disapprobation against the medical procedure of abortion; the point is the nature and origin of the fetus, and the biblical perspective on ending that kind of life.”<sup>2</sup> So, while the Bible does not address abortion per se, Scripture does speak about pre-born human life in enough detail that God’s thinking on the issue can be clearly discerned. The following survey addresses some of the significant Biblical themes and corresponding passages that inform a Biblical/Christian response to abortion. A Biblical response begins with the truth that God is the author of life and concludes with the value of pre-born human life demonstrated in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The practice of abortion was not unknown in the Ancient Near Eastern world. While abortion is not mentioned in some of the earliest legal codes of the Ancient Near East (Hammurapi’s Code, for example), later legal codes did begin to recognize a certain legal status for the pre-born fetus. Middle Assyrian Laws (Circa 1400 – 1200 B.C.) prohibited self-induced abortion and make the crime a capital offense.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the rise of modern medicine, the most common method of abortion was through abortifacient potions or suppositories. The extinct plant *Silphium*, native to ancient Cyrenaica of the carrot and parsley family, is often suggested to have had abortifacient properties. Surgical abortions were hardly possible and always dangerous in antiquity, though ancient writings do indicate a certain familiarity with various means for attempting surgical abortions. When surgical abortions were attempted, it was frequently the case that the death of the mother was simultaneous with the death of the child. Most ancient abortifacients were simply poisons

---

<sup>1</sup> The only time the word “abortion” is used in the New Testament is in 1 Corinthians 15:8 when Paul uses the self-deprecating term ἐκτρώμα to describe himself prior to his conversion. This is a term that refers to a fetus being expelled from the womb before being fully formed and could be used to describe an aborted fetus.

<sup>2</sup> N. Allan Moseley, *Thinking Against the Grain: Developing a Biblical Worldview in a Culture of Myths* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 218.

<sup>3</sup> C. Horn, III and A. E. Hill, “Abortion,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Walter Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 16.

administered to pregnant women in hopes that the poison would shock the woman's body into miscarriage. These potions attempted to achieve a delicate balancing act: Give enough of the poison to induce premature labor without killing the woman. This procedure has been compared "to playing Russian Roulette with three bullets in the chamber." Infanticide was also very common in pagan societies and this act was specifically condemned in Scripture (Leviticus 18:21). While "abortion" is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, the practice was not unknown in the Ancient Near East. The Feinbergs' excellent discussion of abortion does not give adequate attention to the Biblical view of prenatal human life.

Most cultures in the world place some value and respect on human life, but human life is not valued equally by all. The Biblical emphasis on the sanctity of innocent human life differentiates Biblical ethics from its competitors. In order to justify abortion, one must argue the pre-born baby either is not a human life or it is a human life of lesser value and therefore can be disposed of at will.

## **I. God is the Author of Life**

### **A. Genesis 1:26**

Genesis 1:26: Then God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to our own likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

1. A theistic view of human origins substantiates the sanctity of human life.

This is the definitive passage of Scripture for Christian anthropology. Mankind is unique from the rest of creation because people are made in the image of God. This should give us reason to pause anytime that human life is in danger of destruction. Essentially, the Bible teaches that there is an inherent dignity to every human simply because they bear the image of God. The Bible elevates man above animals.

2. Atheism and its cognate theories of human origin devalue human life.

Theistic theories of human origins entail a certain respect for human dignity. In contrast, purely naturalistic theories of origins inevitably lead to a

devaluation of individual humans. Koop and Schaeffer emphasized this point in their landmark work, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* They said, “Within this worldview [humanism] there is no room for believing that a human being has any final distinct value above that of an animal or of nonliving matter. People are merely a different arrangement of molecules.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, abortion advocates seem determined to lower mankind to the level of beasts. For example, Peter Singer, now of Princeton, has said, “If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, a dog or a pig, for example, we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities, both actual and potential, for rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and anything else that can plausibly be considered morally significant.”<sup>5</sup> Singer makes clear the connection between the rejection of the image of God, acceptance of naturalistic Darwinism, and devaluing human life when he says, “The intellectual upheaval sparked by the publication of the theory of evolution, once the weight of scientific evidence in favor of theory became apparent, meant practically every earlier justification of man’s supreme place in creation and his dominion over animals had to be rejected. . . . Human beings now know that they were not the special creation of God made in the divine image and set apart from animals; on the contrary, human beings came to realize that they were animals themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

Noted atheist Richard Dawkins also demonstrates the way weak and vulnerable baby humans are devalued in the atheistic worldview. In a Twitter exchange, a person from New York expressed concern about the moral dilemma of a baby diagnosed with Down Syndrome in utero. Dawkins responded on August 20, 2014, “Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice.”<sup>7</sup> Dawkins later added, “If your morality is based, as mine is, on a desire to increase the sum of happiness and reduce suffering, the decision to deliberately give birth to a Down’s baby, when you have the choice to abort it early in the pregnancy,

---

<sup>4</sup> C. Everett Koop and Francis Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 5 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 356.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Singer, “Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life?” *Pediatrics* 72.1 (July 1983), 129.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), page #?

<sup>7</sup> “Richard Dawkins: ‘Immoral’ Not To Abort if Foetus Has Down’s Syndrome,” *The Guardian* Thursday, August 21, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/aug/21/richard-dawkins-immoral-not-to-abort-a-downs-syndrome-foetus>.

might actually be immoral from the point of view of the child's own welfare."<sup>8</sup>

The Abortion debate reflects the deeper debate about worldviews. If humans are, as materialists say, only chemicals in motion with no real purpose, then there is no logical reason to oppose abortion. However, if God exists, and He does, then we are held morally accountable for our actions. Bruce Waltke captures the worldview implications when he says, "The replacement of biblical theism with materialistic evolutionism lays the foundation for trade in aborted body parts, genocide, and eugenic engineering. The resulting ethical consequences of the biblical versus modern worldviews cannot be overemphasized."<sup>9</sup> A secular worldview views moral autonomy as the supreme individual right. In this way, abortion is the most violent expression of this autonomy. For many people, children are a burdensome infringement on autonomy – a burden that can be acceptably lifted by killing the child.<sup>10</sup>

## **B. Job 12:10**

Job 12:10: In whose hand is the life of every living thing. And the breath of all mankind? (NKJV)<sup>11</sup>

## **II. The Unique Value of Each Human Being**

Pro-Abortion advocates often mention the tragedy of birth defects as occasions in which abortion should be allowed, if not mandated. For example, Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty make this sort of argument in their influential book, *All We're Meant to Be*. As part of freeing women from the chains of patriarchy, Scanzoni and Hardesty address abortion in the cases of fetal deformity, saying:

---

<sup>8</sup> "Richard Dawkins Apologizes for Causing a Storm With Down's Syndrome Tweet," *The Guardian*, Thursday, August 21, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/aug/21/richard-dawkins-apologises-downs-syndrome-tweet>.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 173-174.

<sup>10</sup> My language here comes directly from Ted Olsen, "Partial Reversal: The Supreme Court's Abortion Decision Shows That The Arguments Have Changed," *Christianity Today* 51.6 (June 1, 2007): 22.

<sup>11</sup> I used to include Isaiah 44:24 at this point: "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, 'I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading out the earth all alone.'" (NASB) In context, Yahweh is talking to corporate Israel, and not to an individual person. With this in mind, I chose to remove Isaiah 44:24 from my notes about abortion. While the imagery certainly affirms the over-arching idea that God values pre-born human life, the specific application is to the entire nation and not an individual.

Yet, at the same time, is abortion entirely out of the question for a Christian couple faced with an unplanned pregnancy at a time when it would be detrimental to the whole family? Or what about an unmarried coed who was carried away in the emotion of a moment she later regrets? What about a Christian couple who learn through genetic counseling that tests show their baby will be a mongoloid, or the wife who contracts rubella early in her pregnancy and knows her child is likely to be malformed? Does Christian morality insist that these pregnancies be carried through, even though bringing the child into the world may cause extreme emotional distress and financial hardships for the family? We think not. A decision to have an abortion in such a case can free the couple to have another child, a healthy, normal child that might otherwise never be born.<sup>12</sup>

What does the Bible say about children who are born with birth defects? How are they to be treated? In the Bible, one finds an approach much different from the authors above.

#### **A. Exodus 4:10 – 11**

Exodus 4:10-11: Then Moses said to the LORD, “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” The LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”

Moses evidently was born with some physical impediment that he felt precluded him from service. In response, God declares his sovereignty in the matter of birth defects. God chose Moses in order to glorify himself. In a similar way, children born with birth defects today can bring glory to God. This is a complete contrast to the parents of “Baby Doe” who did not feel that the Down Syndrome children they had observed experienced an adequate quality of life.

---

<sup>12</sup> Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women’s Liberation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974), 143.

## **B. John 9:1 – 3**

John 9:1-3: As He [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned or his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Jesus Christ affirms the dignity and worth of a person born with a congenital birth defect: blindness. Christ teaches that this man was born blind in order that God might display His power in the blind man’s life.

## **III. The Person Conceived and the Person Born are One and the Same**

### **A. Genesis 4:1**

Genesis 4:1: Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, “I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD.”

The individual conceived, Cain, and the individual who was born are the same person. This is in contrast to many pro-choice arguments that claim the conceptus has no moral standing.

### **B. Job 3:3**

Job 3:3: Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night which said, “A boy is conceived.”

Again, Job 3:3 demonstrates continuity between the person who was conceived and the person who was born.

## **IV. A Fundamental Continuity Between Prenatal and Postnatal Life.**

This section is very important for establishing the value of pre-born human life. As noted above, the Bible does not address the specific act of abortion. Thus, our moral argumentation attempts to find out what the Bible does say about the moral status of pre-born human life and the implications of willfully destroying that type of life. As I will show in what follows, the Bible asserts a fundamental continuity between prenatal and postnatal life: The person conceived and growing in the womb is the person who is born

and subsequently grows to adulthood. Prenatal life is viewed as fully human and, thus, the moral prescriptions against killing innocent human life apply to prenatal human life.

### **A. The Hebrew word בן (*ben*) in the Genesis Narrative**

**Genesis 25:22 (NASB):** But the children [בָּנָי] jostled each other in the womb so much that she [Rebekah] exclaimed, “If it is like this, why go on living!” She went to consult the LORD.”

The Hebrew word translated *children* in Genesis 25:22 is בָּנָי (*ben*). This term is used in Genesis 25:22 to refer Jacob and Esau in utero and is the same term used in Genesis 5:4, 7, and 10 when referring to adult, living sons.

### **B. Psalm 51:5**

**Psalm 51:5:** Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae offer a summary of the relevance of this passage to the abortion debate:

David here is confessing not only his specific sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite (see 2 Sam 11—12), but also his innate inclination to sin. This is a characteristic shared by all persons, and David’s claim is that he possessed it from the point of conception. Thus, an essential attribute of adult persons—an inclination to sin—is attributed to the unborn, underscoring the continuity of identity from conception to adulthood. The same sinful adult began as a sinful embryonic person in the womb.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 233.

### C. Psalm 139:13 – 16<sup>14</sup>

If asked to preach a sermon on the sanctity of human life, I believe Psalm 139:13 – 16 provides the best opportunity for an expository pro-life sermon.

#### Psalm 139:13-16

You formed my inward parts;  
You wove me in my mother's womb.  
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
Wonderful are Your works,  
And my soul knows it very well.  
My frame was not hidden from You,  
When I was made in secret,  
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;  
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;  
And in your book were all written  
The days that were ordained for *me*,  
When as yet there was not one of them.

Psalm 139 praises God for his omniscience and omnipresence. In the middle of this celebration of God's power, the Psalmist uses God's knowledge of his prenatal life as an illustration of these divine attributes. Several descriptive words are used to describe the growth and development of the unborn child.

1. God creates life in the womb.

Psalm 139:13 (NIV): For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

**Inmost being / Inward parts.** The phrase translated “inmost being” by the NIV or “inward parts” by the NASB is the Hebrew word *kilya* (כִּלְיָה) which can be literally translated as “kidneys.” The kidneys were sometimes viewed as the seat of one's emotions and moral character (cf. Pss 7:9; 26:2).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ethics for a Brave New World* does not include an extensive discussion of Psalm 139 in relation to abortion. This omission is a weakness in the textbook.

<sup>15</sup> NET Bible translator notes. [www.bible.org/netbible](http://www.bible.org/netbible). (Accessed February 1, 2011).



**Knit Together.** The Hebrew verb סָכַךְ (*sakhakh*, “to weave together”) is an alternate form of סָכַח (*sakhakh*, “to weave”) used in Job 10:11. God is pictured as a master-weaver at work.

2. Life in the womb evokes wonder at God’s power to create.

Psalm 139:14 (NIV): I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

The Hebrew of Psalm 139:14 can legitimately be translated, “I am awesomely wonderful!” In contrast to worldly approaches that place value on people based on subjective concepts of beauty or value, the Bible affirms here that each baby should cause us to be amazed at God’s ability to create in the womb.

3. God is present even in the womb.

Psalm 139:15 (NIV): My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

**Frame.** The word “frame” can be translated “bones.”

**Woven Together.** This phrase picks up on the idea introduced in verse 13. The HCS simply translates this term as “*formed* in the depths of the earth.” While “formed” is not a wrong translation, it misses the vivid imagery of the Hebrew and the intended parallelism with verse 13.

**Depths of the earth.** This phrase is a metaphor for deepest concealment, i.e., the hiddenness of the womb.<sup>16</sup> The growth of a child was mysterious and awe-inspiring to the Psalmist. Yet even in this most unknown place, God is present.

---

<sup>16</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries Psalms 73 – 150* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 466. The NET Bible offers this comment and says, “The phrase *depths of the earth* may be metaphorical (euphemistic) or it may reflect a prescientific belief about the origins of the embryo deep beneath the earth’s surface (see H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 96-97).” This comment is needless and misses the obvious poetic imagery of Psalm 139 and assumes an unproven level of stupidity among people in the ANE. As the case of Onan in Genesis 38 reveals, ancient people were quite aware that sex resulted in babies.

#### 4. God has a plan for unborn children.

Psalm 139:16 (NIV): Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

**Unformed Body.** The phrase translated “unformed body” by the NIV “unformed substance” by the NASB is the only occurrence of the Hebrew word *golem* (גֹּלֶם), the Hebrew word for embryo or fetus. The NET Bible tries to capture the personal interest of the Psalmist and translates Psalm 139:16a as follows: “Your eyes saw me when I was inside the womb.”

**All the days ordained for me.** Derek Kidner says the Hebrew of Psalm 139:16 is somewhat cryptic and may mean either that “the days of my life” were mapped out in advance, or that “my embryonic members” were likewise planned and known before the many stages of their development. Kidner says, “In either case the stanza so far has laid its main emphasis on our pre-natal fashioning by God . . . a powerful reminder of the value He sets on us, even as embryos, and of His planning our end from the beginning.”<sup>17</sup>

It is of some interest to note that Psalm 139:19 – 20 includes a cry to God for justice against evil, “bloodthirsty” people. We should pray for God’s mercy and justice.

#### 5. Continuity between prenatal and postnatal life.

**Me / Me / My.** The repetitive use of personal pronouns accentuates the Psalmist’s identification with the pre-born child. A fundamental continuity between prenatal and postnatal life is asserted. Moreland and Rae capture the significance of this passage for a Biblical approach to the moral status of pre-born human life when they say, “Psalm 139, which is often cited in the abortion debate, strongly suggests that King David is the same essential person from conception to mature adult.”<sup>18</sup>

#### 6. Summary

Psalm 139 engages in powerful poetic imagery. God is described as a master weaver knitting together a new human life in the womb, a theme captured in

---

<sup>17</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, vol. 14b, *Psalms 73 – 150*, 466.

<sup>18</sup> Moreland and Rae, *Body & Soul*, 232.

the NIV translation of verse 15, “I was woven together in the depths of the earth.” Taken as a whole, Psalm 139:13 - 16 underscores God’s activity in forming the entire pre-born child, including both the child’s organs (*kilya*) and skeletal frame. Most significantly, this passage shows a significant personal continuity between prenatal and postnatal life.<sup>19</sup> John Stott comments on the relevance of Psalm 139 to the morality of abortion and says, “Though not intending to give a scientific account of fetal development, the biblical authors are nevertheless affirming (in the familiar imagery of the ancient Near East) that the process of embryonic growth is neither haphazard nor even automatic, but a divine work of creative skill.”<sup>20</sup>

Taken as a whole, Psalm 139 mitigates against a moral stance favoring abortion, especially pro-abortion arguments based on the premise that the pre-born human has no worth or is not “a person.” Stott offers a helpful outline of Psalm 139 for preaching:

The Psalmist was **created** by God.

The Psalmist’s **continuity** between prenatal and postnatal life.

The Psalmist **Communion** or **Covenant** with God.

#### D. Jeremiah 1:5

Jeremiah 1:5: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.

This passage does not infer the pre-existence of Jeremiah prior to his conception. Instead, God in His sovereign foreknowledge already set Jeremiah apart as a prophet before he was born. Again, there is a fundamental continuity between the prenatal and postnatal life. The text also makes clear that *God* formed Jeremiah in the womb. In popular vernacular we can truly say, “God doesn’t make any junk!” God had a plan for Jeremiah *before* he was born. One can then infer God has a plan for children before they are born and abortion destroys that plan.

\

---

<sup>19</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from “Report of the Committee to Study the Matter of Abortion,” Presented to the Thirty-Eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, May 24-29, 1971; in John Frame, *Medical Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), 93.

<sup>20</sup> John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell Co., 1990), 315.

## **V. Innocent Human Life is Categorically Granted Protection**

### **A. The Sixth Commandment**

Exodus 20:13: You shall not murder.

The Hebrew word for murder is *rasah* (רָצַח). Murder is the more precise reading than the much too general KJV “thou shalt not kill.”<sup>21</sup> In the sixth commandment God declares the sanctity of innocent human life as a timeless principle. I contend that the Bible does make allowances for taking human life in cases of capital punishment by a legitimate state authority, just wars, and self defense. This commandment protects innocent humans such as babies. Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented on abortion and said, “To kill the fruit in the mother’s womb is to injure the right to life that God has bestowed on the developing life. Discussion of the question whether a human being is already present confuses the simple fact that, in any case, God wills to create a human being and that the life of this developing human being has been deliberately taken. And this is nothing but murder.”<sup>22</sup>

### **B. Attempts to Circumvent the Sixth Commandment**

Advocates of liberalizing abortion laws attempt to circumvent the sixth commandment by one of two tactics. First, like Blackmun in *Roe*, they define the pre-born child as a “non-person,” therefore society is free to destroy any pre-born. Second, the pre-born child is described as a threat in order to justify its destruction. Andrew Lester, former director of pastoral care at North Carolina Baptist Hospital, used this second approach in a 1971 article titled “The Abortion Dilemma.” According to Lester, the “conceptus, by its very presence, occasionally becomes a menace to the rights of others – the mother’s mental and physical health, the welfare of a family, the survival of a society – and in that sense must be dealt with as a threat.”<sup>23</sup> He vilifies the child in order to justify its destruction.

---

<sup>21</sup> Harris, Archer, and Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 860.

<sup>22</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 206.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Lester, “The Abortion Dilemma,” *Review and Expositor* (1971): 230.

### **C. Should we use the language of “murder” when discussing abortion?**

Should we use the language of murder when discussing abortion? If we do so, are we then saying that abortive parents or abortionists are murderers? Some consider such language too harsh and caustic an unhelpful in moral discussions with people either considering an abortion or wrestling with the consequences of having caused an abortion. Most evangelicals land at a stance that says something like this: “Yes, abortion is a form of murder. No, we do not want to prosecute the woman who aborts. Under laws prior to *Roe*, it was the abortionist who was prosecuted and something like this still reflects our stance.”

## **VI. Infanticide is Categorically Condemned**

Though abortion is not mentioned in Scripture, the ancient practice of infanticide is mentioned and is condemned in the strongest possible terms.

### **A. Exodus 1 and the Hebrew Midwives**

Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew babies. The midwives are praised for *not* killing the babies.

### **B. Leviticus 18:21**

Leviticus 18:21: You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.

The precise identification of the “Molech” worship condemned in the OT is a hotly debated issue. Students are sometimes confused because the same word can variously be translated as “Molech,” “Molek,” “Moloch,” “Milcom,” or “Milkom.” The most common opinion is that Molech was a pagan Canaanite deity whose worship was connected to a cult of the dead involving divination and to some extent child sacrifice.<sup>24</sup> Evidence indicates that children were incinerated as part of worship to this god, though it is not clear if they were killed first.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> E. Ray Clendenen, “Religious Background of the Old Testament,” *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, Dockery, Matthews, Sloan, eds. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 298.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus in New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 259.

### C. Jeremiah 19:4 – 5

Jeremiah 19:4 – 5: Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers or the kings of Judah had *ever* known, and *because* they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it *ever* enter My mind. (NASB)

Note that in both Leviticus and Jeremiah, infanticide is irrevocably tied to a pagan worldview. Is pagan child-sacrifice analogous in any way to modern abortion? Allan Moseley argues that it is. First, Moseley points out that both pagan child sacrifice and modern abortion have to do with the intentional killing of children. Second, child sacrifice in ancient paganism was related to the worship of fertility gods or goddesses. The goal of the worship was to ensure the prosperity of the worshipper. In a similar way, many children are aborted today for financial reasons related to material prosperity.<sup>26</sup> The forthright Biblical injunctions against infanticide support the inference that a Biblical ethic will be opposed to abortion.<sup>27</sup> Koop and Schaeffer affirmed that ancient infanticide was somewhat analogous to abortion because, “People who destroy their own children and others’, so that they can maintain their life-styles, are also sacrificing to the gods – the gods of materialistic world-view and practice, and the god of the “self” as the egotistic center and measure of all things.”<sup>28</sup>

A resurgent paganism is at the heart of at least some pro-abortion arguments. Ginette Paris is one example of someone who grounds pro-abortion arguments in a pagan worldview. In *The Sacrament of Abortion* she argues that women should abandon a Christian worldview and worship Artemis instead. In fact, she considers abortion a sacrifice to Artemis. She boldly states, “Our culture needs new rituals as well as new laws to restore to abortion its sacred dimension. . . . What if my religious beliefs are pagan?”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Allan Moseley, *Thinking Against the Grain*, 230 – 231.

<sup>27</sup> Horn and Hill, “Abortion,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 16.

<sup>28</sup> Koop and Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, 347.

<sup>29</sup> Ginette Paris, *The Sacrament of Abortion* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1992).

## **D. Amos 1:13**

Amos 1:13: Thus says the LORD, “For three transgressions of the sons of Ammon and for four I will not revoke its punishment, because they ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their borders.

Amos critiques the Ammonites and deplores the heinous nature of murdering the mother *and* the child.

## **VII. The Incarnation Leads to The Sanctity of Pre-born Life**

Examining the birth narratives of Jesus Christ leads to a pro-life moral stance regarding pre-born human life.

### **A. Matthew 1:20-21**

Matthew 1:20 – 21: But after he [Joseph] had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

This passage clearly emphasizes that the Jesus was the Messiah at conception. Jesus did not *develop into* the Messiah. This strikes at the developmental view of personhood related to most pro-abortion arguments. As the Messiah, Jesus possessed personhood at conception. If it is true that Jesus possessed personhood at conception, it seems to follow that it would be true for other preborn children as well.

### **B. Luke**

#### **1. When did the Incarnation Begin?**

Luke 1:30-31: The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

The crucial question here is: “When did the incarnation begin?” The text makes clear that the child in Mary’s womb was already the Messiah at

conception. If Jesus was fully human and the Messiah at conception, the conclusion follows that the rest of humanity is fully human at conception.

## 2. The term *bréphos* – this will be on the exam

Luke 1:41 – 44 (NASB): When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the **baby** [*bréphos*] leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed *are* you among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of your womb! And how has it *happened* to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby [*bréphos*] leaped in my womb for joy.

Luke 2:16: So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the **baby** [*bréphos*] as He lay in the manger.

The same Greek word, *bréphos*, is applied both to John the Baptist while in the womb of his mother Elizabeth and to Jesus after he was born. This indicates that pre-born human life and postnatal human life have the same moral value from a Biblical perspective.

Furthermore, when Mary comes to visit Elizabeth, Mary is perhaps at two weeks of pre-natal development for Jesus. Yet, even at this early stage of pregnancy, Elizabeth calls Mary the “mother of my Lord.” Jesus was already considered the Lord and Messiah prior to birth. Again, this strikes against the secular notions of developmental personhood central to secular arguments for abortion.

## VIII. God Condemns Cultures Which Exploit the Weak and Defenseless

### A. Exodus 23:6 – 7

Exodus 23:6 – 7: Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.



## **B. Amos 2:6 – 7a**

Amos 2:6 – 7a: This is what the LORD says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.

It is difficult to imagine a human more poor and defenseless than a pre-born human or a newborn human. Furthermore, they are innocent of any crime since they are only here because of other people’s choice. A consistent Biblical theme is that one can gauge the moral health of a culture by the way that culture treats the weakest and most defenseless people. A culture with a callous disregard for destroying innocent human life tends to be less egalitarian, less democratic, and more likely to declare some people “expendable” for the sake of the greater common good (utilitarian ethics).

## **IX. God’s Forgiveness**

Proclaiming the evil of abortion can leave people feeling broken and guilt-ridden with no chance of hope. Preaching the full counsel of God means we also urge people to ask Christ forgiveness, fully confident that Christ shows mercy to sinners.

### **A. God can cleanse even the most evil sin.**

Isaiah 1:18 (KJV): Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

### **B. Confession and Repentance**

1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God can and does forgive the sin of abortion.

## **X. Biblical Passages That Pro-Choice Advocates Attempt to Utilize**

### **A. Exodus 21:22 – 25**

Exodus 21:22-25 (NKJV): 22 “If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. 23 But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Some pro-choice advocates claim that Exodus 21:22 – 25 places a higher value on the life of the mother than the life of the unborn child. The Feinbergs call the pro-choice argument the “miscarriage” interpretation. The pro-choice interpretation of Exodus 21:22 - 25 rests on two interpretive keys.

1. According to Pro-Choice advocates, verse 22 describes an incident when two men are fighting near a pregnant woman. Inadvertently the two men strike the pregnant woman causing a miscarriage: the child is lost, but the woman lives. Central to the Pro-Choice interpretation is that when verse 22 says that “she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury,” the reference is only to injury to the mother. Whether the child lives or dies is not important. A miscarriage that results from an accidental shove or push only merits a fine. The RSV favors this approach and translates verse 22 as “there is a miscarriage, but no harm follows.” Several other English translations mention the “miscarriage” translation in footnotes.

2. According to Pro-Choice advocates, verses 23-25 discuss a case where not only is there a miscarriage, but the mother is injured as well. If the mother dies, then the death penalty is imposed.

3. Pro-Choice Conclusion: Based on these interpretive keys, pro-choice advocates infer that aborting an unborn child must not carry the same moral approbation as taking the life of an adult since the miscarriage only merits a fine but death of the mother merits the death penalty.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> In 1971 Evangelical author Norman Geisler advocated a similar interpretation of Exodus 21:22. Commenting on the passage, he said, “the unborn baby was not considered fully human and, therefore, causing its death was not considered murder.” Norman Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1971), 218. In the rest of his discussion, Geisler clearly takes a dim view of

## B. A Response to the Pro-Choice Interpretation of Exodus 21:22 – 25

I believe the Pro-Choice interpretation of Exodus 21:22 – 25 is wrong on four counts.

1. First, even if one grants the pro-choice interpretation, the text still places some value on the pre-born child. Pro-Abortion advocates do not even do this! The unborn babies that are aborted are treated in a most ruthless manner. As Beckwith notes, at a minimum the text indicates the unborn are worth *something*, while modern pro-abortion advocates seem to say that the unborn only have value that their mother's place on them.<sup>31</sup>

2. The Feinbergs rightly note that even if the pro-choice “miscarriage” interpretation of Exodus 21:22 – 25 is correct, the passage describes the *accidental* death of a child while abortion is the *intentional* death of a child. The two circumstances – and accident as opposed to an intentional death – are not morally equivalent.<sup>32</sup>

3. Third, the *premature live childbirth* interpretation is a better understanding of Exodus 21:22 – 25. Central to this understanding is the Hebrew word *yeled*: The word in Exodus 21:22 – 25 to describe what issues from the womb is יָלֵד (*Yeled*); Walter Kaiser says this is the normal word for “child,” making it clear that a human being is in view here.<sup>33</sup> The Feinbergs add, “This word [*yeled*] is never used elsewhere for a child who lacks recognizable human form or cannot exist outside the womb.”<sup>34</sup> Walter Kaiser also points out that that Hebrew does have a regular word for miscarriage (שָׁבַל). This verb means “to be bereaved [of children] or to be childless. In the *piel* participle, this verbal root [שָׁבַל] is used in Exodus 23:26 to refer to women who miscarry: “And none will miscarry in your land.”<sup>35</sup> This word *is not* the word used in Exodus 21:22 – 25.

---

abortion, but he basically arrives at a position allowing for abortion of pre-viable children. In later works, Geisler took a decidedly hard turn away from this position.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Beckwith, *Politically Correct Death*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> John S. Feinberg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 106.

<sup>33</sup> This is the opinion of Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 170.

<sup>34</sup> John S. Feinberg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 107.

<sup>35</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 170.

4. Finally, a literal translation of verse 22 is something like “so that her children go (or come) out.” The Hebrew verb in question here is *yatza*, which is the verb used ordinarily for live births. Compare two different translations:

NKJV	“gives birth prematurely”
RSV	“there is a miscarriage”

In short, verse 22 is referring to a live birth. Just as verse 22 has the mother *and* the child in mind, so do verses 23-25. Feinberg and Feinberg offer a good summary of this passage when they say: “When the baby is born prematurely, but unharmed, a fine is assessed. When there is harm to either mother or baby, the law of retaliation is required. And both stipulations apply in a case where what happens is totally *accidental*. In fact, this is the only place in the Mosaic Law and Scripture as a whole where the death penalty is required for *accidental* homicide.”<sup>36</sup> Archer concurs: “There is no second-class status attached to the fetus under this rule; he is avenged just as if he were a normally delivered child or an older person: life for life.”<sup>37</sup>

Evangelical author Peter Enns takes a somewhat mediating position between that of pro-abortion advocates and pro-life proponents in reference to Exodus 21:22-25. Though I disagree with some of his conclusions, he is probably right when he says, “Although this law is clearly meant to maintain the dignity and worth of human life, it is ambiguous in its details.”<sup>38</sup> Granted that a certain amount of ambiguity may in fact exist, I suggest that the non-ambiguous truth found in this passage be affirmed: Human life deserves protection.

### C. Joshua’s Holy War

Joshua 6:20 – 21: When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall [of Jericho] collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city.

---

<sup>36</sup> Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 248. John Calvin also affirmed that this passage was referring to the death of *both* the mother and the baby. See John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 3, *Calvin’s Harmony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 42.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 447. Stassen and Gushee reflect a similar opinion and say the passage is “murky” and should not be foundational for any particular view on abortion. See Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 218.

They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

This passage is typical of several places, particularly in Joshua, in which God commanded a Crusade against the Canaanites, including the killing of innocent children. Some pro-abortion advocates point to these passages and say, “See, even God allows the killing of children on occasion. The Bible is more ambiguous on this topic than you admit.”

It is beyond my purpose here to offer an extensive response to the ethical problems presented by the divinely-sanctioned Crusade in Canaan. I will give a brief response:

1. The Crusade in Canaan was a unique command and not a universal one. For reasons ultimately known only to Himself, God authorized this action for a specific place at a specific time. It seems clear that most Christians have approached these passages as a unique command for the children of Israel and not as an ongoing and universal command for Christians to exterminate non-believers (The Crusades of the Middle Ages are a sad exception).
2. In the passages of Scripture which are clearly didactic, God instructs societies to protect children and condemns the killing of innocent children.
3. It makes sense to interpret less clear passages (i.e., Joshua’s crusade) in light of more clear passages (i.e., The Sixth Commandment).

## **XI. What Should the Church Do?**

More than just rejecting abortion, there are several pro-life steps a church can and should take.

### **A. The Pro-Life Stance and Church History**

The church must take an unashamedly pro-life stance. The Bible upholds the unique value of pre-born humans and affirms that violence towards the weakest and most defenseless is particularly heinous. Respect for human life has always been at the heart of Christian ethics. For example, the *Letter to Diognetus* (100-150 A.D.) says, “[Christians] marry like the rest of men

and beget children, but they do not abandon their babies that are born.”<sup>39</sup> Another Second Century Christian document known as *The Didache* contrasts the way of life with the way of death. One aspect of the way of life is that Christians do not “abort a child or commit infanticide.”<sup>40</sup> For early Christians, “thou shall not abort” becomes a sub-commandment of the sixth commandment, “Thou shall not murder.”<sup>41</sup> When we stand for the sanctity of human life, we stand in the rich tradition of Christian ethics.

## **B. Proactively Pro-Life**

A multitude of factors leads people to choose an abortion. Sexual promiscuity contributes to out-of-wedlock pregnancies which compounds the abortion dilemma. The answer to widespread abortion begins with a comprehensive approach to sex education. Furthermore, the data available indicates that a disproportionate number of women seeking abortions are poor. Therefore, the church must offer tangible and real support for these crisis situations. This calls for a response that does two things: One, our stance should affirm that sex outside of marriage is wrong and, two, our stance should affirm that children conceived outside of marriage have a right to live.

While Christians should advocate significant changes in abortion laws so that public policy will affirm the value of human life, we must understand that there are limits to the amount of change that laws can bring. During the nineteenth century, abortion laws did become more rigid, but abortion still took place. We must not deceive ourselves into thinking that a transformation of law will eliminate abortion as a problem. Olasky’s comments are helpful here when he says, “A pro-life activist who believes a change of law will eliminate abortion ignores the late nineteenth-century lesson that law by itself avails little unless programs emphasizing prevention and offering true compassion are in place and effective.”<sup>42</sup>

The ERLC offers another proactive way to plead on behalf of the unborn via the “Psalm 139 Project.” Financial gifts to the Psalm 139 project are used to

---

<sup>39</sup> *The Letter to Diognetus*, in *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition*, Beach and Niebuhr, eds. (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 68.

<sup>40</sup> Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Didache*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 347.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998, 1982), 50.

<sup>42</sup> Marvin Olasky, *Abortion Rites*, 283.

place sonogram machines in crisis pregnancy centers around the United States. If women considering an abortion are given the opportunity actually to see their unborn child, many of them will choose not to abort the baby.

### **C. Pastoral Counsel Concerning Abortion / Crisis Pregnancies**

I once received a phone call from a young man who claimed to be a Christian. It was around 3 PM on a Friday afternoon. About two months earlier he asked me about the morality of abortion and I explained from Psalm 139 that abortion destroys an innocent human life. Sadly, earlier that Friday morning, he had taken his ex-girlfriend to an abortion clinic and he paid for her to have an abortion. Suddenly, the awfulness of his deed encompassed him and he called me in desperation. My advice was this: “You are in the pigpen and you need to run home to the Father.”

A young woman in your church who has an out-of-wedlock pregnancy has four choices: Abort the baby; raise the baby by herself; marry the father of the baby and raise the child together; place the baby with a Christian adoption agency.

Around 1% of pregnancies wind up in adoption. Abortion has depleted the number of adoptable babies in the United States. As a result, many couples adopt children from outside our country (a very noble thing).

In your appeals to young women, you might encourage them to consider that abortion and adoption both have many of the same results. Both abortion and adoption save a young woman from the financial burden of raising a child. Both abortion and adoption allow a young woman to continue her education and career. Both abortion and adoption allow a young woman to start a family with a man she will marry someday. Both abortion and adoption relieve the young woman’s family from the stress of raising a grandchild. Both abortion and adoption relieve the father of the child from financial responsibility. The major moral difference is that *only adoption is a choice that honors and celebrates life!*

I advise that a young woman who is pregnant out-of-wedlock think very carefully before marrying the father. To quote Dr. Land, “A lot of people who have sex together shouldn’t get married! It’s like painting yourself into

a corner. Then, after painting yourself into a corner, you apply a second coat!”<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, we want to challenge young men to marry (and stay married!) the women who bear their babies.

The decision to marry or not marry depends a great deal on the age, maturity, and stability of the boy and the girl.

There are no easy choices in a crisis pregnancy: there are only right choices and wrong choices.

## **D. Ministries in Crisis**

### **1. Crisis Pregnancy Centers**

Crisis pregnancy centers offer an option as opposed to Planned Parenthood centers which want women to abort. Does your community have a crisis pregnancy center? Does your church support it?

### **2. Christian Life Homes**

Christian Life Homes are church-supported ministries that offer a place for pregnant women to stay if they have a crisis pregnancy. The Life Homes can help women determine if they should raise the child or place the baby for adoption.

### **3. Children's Homes**

Children's Homes / Orphanages are ministries to provide a safe place for children to stay if their parents do not want to raise them. Thus, Christians can encourage the sanctity of life and tell parents, “We will take care of your baby.”

All three of these ministries are an important part of being pro-life.

*Last updated September 6, 2016*

---

<sup>43</sup> Class lecture on January 18, 2011 at MBTS.