



Study Guide

Living Wisely with the Church Fathers

Chapter Six—"From the Cradle to the Grave": Life and Death

By Chris Hall

As I mention in the introduction to chapter six, it is difficult for modern, Western Christians to imagine how cheap life was considered in the ancient world, and even in the ancient Roman family.

The *paterfamilias*, the male head of the Roman family, held tremendous power over the family circle. When a new child was born, it was up to the *paterfamilias* whether the child would be accepted into the family and often, into life itself. The ancient church's values were counter-cultural to the Roman consensus, and resistant to the idea that any image-bearer should be treated as less than human. *All God's image-bearers were our neighbors, including the unborn.*

There were many reasons why pregnancies and children were frequently considered more of a burden than a benefit:

- **Financial hardship;** some families simply could not feed another mouth.
- **Financial gain.** There was a lively and profitable black market for abandoned children and the sex trade especially sought girls and boys.
- **Embarrassment.** Perhaps an affair or rape had occurred with an unwanted and unwelcomed conception.
- **The dangers of childbirth in the ancient world.** Many women died in childbirth. Abortion was dangerous, but less so than giving birth at full-term.
- **Convenience.** Abortion, child abandonment, and child exposure appeared to some as a convenient way to deal with a problem that seemed to have no other solution.

Abortion was *universally opposed* in the ancient church and in the ancient Jewish community. You find no Christian or Jew defending the practice. I summarize the reasons for this strong response to abortion on pages 189-190. I think the bullet points you'll find there are worth careful study.

The church fathers' strong language concerning abortion – they are not reluctant to call it "murder" – is based on the conviction that the developing child is a human being, an image-bearer, our neighbor. I quote Basil to illustrate this strong conviction: "*to serve our brother or sister is to serve God himself*" (p. 193). The developing child was our brother or sister, and hence to be protected from all harm. One finds little—if any—debate in ancient Christian circles concerning this proposition.

It is important to note that the ancient church's concern for the unborn *is embedded in its broader concern for the sick, the poor, and the helpless*. Their concern for the lives of image bearers extended from conception to old age. Among other things, the fathers view the church as a hospital, with Christ the great physician. Do you think the church is understood in the same way today?