

ABORTION AND THE EARLY CHURCH

by R.J. Rushdoony

Although some writers today would have us believe otherwise, neither the faithful of Israel in the Old Testament times, nor the early church, were in any doubt about abortion. In terms of Exodus 21:22-23, abortion was murder, and the earliest records of the church indicate severe penalties for those who secured abortions. An early document, called the Apostolic Constitutions (VII, iii) declared, "Thou shalt not slay thy child by causing abortion, nor kill that which is begotten; for everything that is shaped, and has received a soul from God, if it be slain, shall be avenged as being unjustly destroyed, Ex. 21:23."

The early church, although a small handful in the Roman Empire, made a major impact because of its stand. Child murder took two casual forms in the Empire. First, abortion was readily and freely practiced. The right to forbid abortion could be exercised by the state if more workers or soldiers were needed. Also, by the father, if he wanted children. But both the state and the father were believed to have the right also to require abortion. It was not believed that any law of God forbade abortion. Second, if abortion failed, and the child was born, the baby could be abandoned, exposed either to the elements or to wild animals to be killed. Quintillian said, "to kill a man is often held to be a crime, but to kill one's own children is sometimes considered a beautiful action among the Romans." Seneca defended, as the course of reason, the drowning of deformed babies or weak children.

Most of the exposed children died. Some were gathered up by witches, their bodies to be used as material for incantations, or picked up by slave dealers who reared the girls to be prostitutes and slaves.

There were some Romans who condemned the practice of abandoning children, but little or nothing was accomplished by their agitations. It was the Christians who acted, first, to condemn abortion as murder and an offense against God's law, "Thou shalt not kill," and second, to gather up the abandoned babies and care for them. Both tasks were difficult. The newly converted Christians were still prone to maintain their old ways, and the church leaders waged a steady battle, with very severe penalties, against all offenders within the church.

The Council of Ancyra, 314 A.D., barred all who procured abortions or made drugs used to further abortions, from the Lord's Table for ten years. Earlier, the ban had been for life, and, in some areas, continued in that manner. Only at the hour of death was the guilty party permitted to receive communion. In 692 A.D., the Council of Quinisext insisted, "Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the foetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder." The church was now demanding of the state that God's law be enforced. Basil of Caesarea, like other church fathers, called abortion "willful murder," and to be punished as such.

The same insistence on the protection of newly born children marked the early church. Constantine, in 315 and 321 A.D., legislated against the abandonment or sale of children. Valentinian in 366 A.D. restated this legislation, and Justinian in 529-534 A.D. declared exposure to be more cruel than murder; he also founded homes for the care of these children.

The problems of abortion and child abandonment met the church everywhere. As the missionaries moved into France (or then known as Gaul), Britain, Germany and elsewhere, they met this same issue. The problem again confronted the missionary church of the modern era, in Asia (especially in China), Africa and elsewhere.

In every situation, the impact of the church's stand was a notable one. The Christian stand was emphatic and clear-cut. God, as the Creator of all things, alone has the power of life and death over all things. No life can be taken except in the terms of His Word. Otherwise all such offenses or transgressions are cited as capital sins by Scripture. To take human life, from the fetal stage to old age, apart from the warrant of God's Word, is murder.

Thus, whereas in some pagan cultures abortion had at times been contrary to the policy of the state, the ground of opposition to it was now shifted. It was no longer a question of expediency but a theological question. Legal or illegal, abortion the church held, is a sin. It is a murder, and it involves a particularly vicious form of murder. The church fathers were vehement in their condemnation of it. It was not an accident that the medical practitioner who engaged in abortion came to be regarded as the lowest kind of humanity. The horror which the theological view engenders for abortion is a logical and necessary one.

This, then, was basic to the position of Christians through the centuries; the issue is theological. It is precisely at this point that the modern attack is launched. The pro-abortionists argue that the question is a medical, social or personal one. They deny that the fetus is a living person. They speak glibly about overpopulation and "wanted" children, as though man's determination and choice are ultimate. They insist that a woman has a right to do as she pleases with her own body, and so on. The Bible makes clear that our bodies belong first of all to God, and we do not even have the right to mark or tattoo our bodies (Deut. 14:1-2), let alone kill an unborn child. We are not our own, for we have been bought with the price of Christ's blood (1_Cor. 6:19-20).

Very early, as far back as our historical records go, the early church confronted the Roman world with this theological stand. Thus, by the mid-second century or earlier, the Epistle of Barnabas and Didache declared it to be against the Word of God to have anything to do with abortion. Their declarations are similar and reflect earlier church laws. The Didache says, "Do not murder a child by abortion, neither kill it at birth," and Barnabas reads, "Do not murder a child by abortion, nor again, destroy that which is born." Barnabas does not speak of a new covenant with Christ; rather, Christians have received THE ONE covenant in Christ. God prepared not a new covenant but "the new people for himself." These new people are not "murderers of children, corrupters of God's creation, turning away from the needy, afflicting the oppressed; advocates of the rich, lawless judges of the poor -- sinful through and through!" Rather, the new people are obedient to their Lord in all things: "You shall love Him who made you, fear Him who formed you; glorify Him who redeemed you from death" by obeying Him by faith, which means among other things standing against abortion.

This then is the true ground, the theological ground. God is the total and sovereign God, and His claims and powers are absolute. He requires us to condemn abortion, and to condemn it supremely on the ground that He condemns it, for there is no true law apart from the law-word of God.

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