

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Human Dignity and the Imago Dei

In January of 1973 the Supreme Court handed down two landmark decisions. *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* struck down laws in thirty-one states that restricted abortions. As a direct result it became legal to have an abortion at any time of pregnancy up to birth. The impact of this ruling was dramatic. In 1969, there were 22,670 abortions in America. By 1974 this number had reached almost a million. Between 1973 and 1993 over 20 million *legal* abortions were performed. Over 80 percent of women receiving abortions were unmarried and more than 25 percent were teenagers. Most recent statistics reveal that one in every four pregnancies ends in abortion. This averages out to approximately 4,000 a day. In some major cities like Washington, D.C. abortion outnumbers live births. Abortion is far and away the number one cause of death in our society.¹ “Surely one of the most obvious signs of a pagan society is the practice of aborting fetuses at any stage of pregnancy.”² One of the most disturbing aspects of the pro-abortion group is that it includes people who call themselves Christians. This includes Catholics as well as Protestants, even some who go by the label “Evangelical.”³

I. SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS

You would think that anything *clearly* stated in Scripture would convince those who call themselves “Christian.”

A. THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS

1. THE LIFE IN THE WOMB. Texts like Ecclesiastes 11:5; Psalm 139:13-16; Isaiah 49:1, 15-16; and Jeremiah 1:5 plainly value what is called “fetal life” as a distinctive work of God as opposed to being merely a “piece of tissue.”⁴
2. PROHIBITIONS. The sixth commandment states that murder is strictly forbidden (Exodus 20:13). A few chapters later we read the same in reference to shedding innocent blood (23:7, cf. also Jeremiah 7:5-7). Amos 1:13-15 speaks of the horrible crime of “ripping open expectant mothers.”

B. THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

Like the texts cited from the Old Testament we read Paul’s words in Galatians 1:15 that he was set apart by God before he was born. Luke 1:15 declares that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. In Luke 1:42-44 we read that the baby leapt for joy in his mother’s womb.

II. HISTORICAL WITNESS

This will not carry much clout with many, especially those who debunk the voices of the past as either irrelevant or pre-modern.⁵

A. THE EARLY CHURCH

1. THE DIDACHE (dates from the end of the first century to the middle of the second). “The Teaching of the Lord Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations.” This document linked abortion with another act of violence: “... do not kill a fetus by abortion, or commit infanticide.”⁶
2. THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS (ca. A.D. 120-135. Some date this as early as A.D. 98). One of the Apostolic fathers. The work does not name the author and is probably not from the pen of the companion of Paul (cf. Acts 14). This early Christian document declares that abortion is murder and that perpetrators should be punished as murderers.⁷
3. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (ca. A.D. 165-211) defended Christians against charges of immorality by noting the community’s rejection of abortion. He insisted that life began at conception.⁸
4. THE COUNCIL OF ANCYRA (ca. A.D. 314) prohibited abortion. The Church fathers that followed this council supported this action as binding. These include Basil, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine.⁹
5. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (ca. A.D. 344-407). Bishop of Constantinople. His language is forceful. He called abortion “something even worse than murder.”¹⁰
6. TERTULLIAN (ca. A.D. 200). One of the early Church theological giants. His remarks are revealing: “But, with us, murder is forbidden once for all. We are not permitted to destroy even the fetus of the womb, as long as blood is still being drawn to form a human being. To prevent the birth of a child is a quicker way to murder. It makes no difference whether one destroys a soul already born or interferes with its coming to birth. It is a human being and one who is to be a man, for the whole fruit is already present in the seed.”¹¹

B. THE REFORMATION

John Calvin, who along with Martin Luther is considered to be one of the two foremost Reformers, wrote: “[The fetus] is already a human being... and it is almost a monstrous crime to rob it of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man’s house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fetus in the womb before it has come to light.”¹² Calvin grasped with great clarity the Bible’s teaching on deceitful nature of the human heart when he wrote, “For we know that everyone excuses himself on the grounds of ignorance, and if something appears too obscure and difficult, it seems to us that when we fail we can wash our hands of it if [only] we can say: ‘O that was too lofty and profound for me; I didn’t understand it well at all.’ Therefore in order that men might no longer have [recourse] to such subterfuges, God willed to speak in such a way that little children could understand what he says. That is why, in sum, he says: *You shall not be murderers.*”

“In addition, let us note that in order to lead us little by little toward upright living, God confronts us with the most detestable things in order that we might learn to guard against doing evil. For example, he could have easily said: ‘You shall not cause any injury to or violence against your neighbors.’ He could have easily said that. But he wanted to emphasize murder. And why? [Because] it’s a thing against nature for men to confront each other in such a way as to efface the image of God. Thus we hold murderers in horror, unless we are stupid.”¹³

III. THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

As Christians, we should *not* form our ethics as derived merely from the Enlightenment emphasis on personal rights. “The text of the sixth commandment can make clear for us that not every killing is forbidden out of ‘reverence for life.’ The Hebrew text indicates that this commandment is dealing with *unlawful* killing, that is to say, with killing that violates justice. The word used here (*rasah*) never appears in contexts involving God putting someone to death or putting to death an enemy in wartime. Nor does this command prohibit a killing that has been ordered by the court. The sixth commandment is speaking about a very specific kind of killing, one that does not *serve* society, but rather violates society.”¹⁴

A. FROM THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION: WHAT IS MAN?

Man was *created* in the image of God.¹⁵ If man is not an act of special creation but merely dust in the wind, *all* ethics are relative. If I come from nothing and I go to nothing, why *should* I care about anyone or anything? “Who cares,” declares R.C. Sproul, “about undifferentiated masses of protoplasm, if we are nothing but cosmic accidents?”¹⁶

B. FROM THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: WHO IS HE?

God reveals Himself in Scripture as the personal Creator and Redeemer of man. “Where the living God is clouded as the transcendent source of human life and dignity, respect for the meaning and worth of personal existence tends to vanish.”¹⁷

C. FROM THE DOCTRINE OF RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT IS THIS?

Man is a social and communal being. Even in a perfect environment (Paradise), man apart from others like himself, is alone... and this was not good! (Genesis 2:18). This understanding of the fact of our cohumanity is, as Gordon J. Spykman observes, “the biblically animated antidote to all individualistic notions of human rights as well as to every form of racial ideology, ethnic arrogance, and national superiority complex. The right of both Someone (God) and someone else (the unborn) is also radically negated by a legal system which defines abortion in individualist terms, as in the case of a teenager’s right to be ‘boss of one’s own belly,’ divorced from familial and communal concerns.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION: Ursinus, in his masterful commentary on The Heidelberg Catechism, declared, “*The sum and substance of this commandment* is, that we neither hurt by any external act our own life, or the life of another, nor practice any injury upon our own, or the bodily safety of another, neither by force, nor treachery, nor negligence; and that we do not desire, either in thought or will, any injury to ourselves or others, nor signify the same by any signs, or words; but that we, on the other hand, as much as in us lies, preserve and protect our own, as well as the lives of others, and so prove ourselves a blessing to all.”¹⁹ Christians cannot take the abortion issue lightly. They certainly are not free to take either side. When we speak of “rights,” we must always submit our rights to Scripture – and we have no right to simply ignore this issue. May God give us wisdom and boldness as servants to confront in a godless society, for any country that is willing to kill its unborn children for a fee is a godless nation.²⁰

¹ It is also, according to Charles Colson, the most frequently performed operation in America today. Cf. *A Dance with Deception: Revealing the Truth Behind the Headlines* (Word, 1993), p. 235.

² Harold Lindsell, *The New Paganism: Understanding American Culture and the Role of the Church* (Harper & Row, 1987), p. 149. “Current practices,” Lindsell adds, “even go beyond the limits set by some of the earlier pagan peoples. Hippocrates (fifth century B.C.) is known as the father of modern medicine. In the Hippocratic Oath, which until recently was taken by virtually all graduates of medical schools in America, the following statement appears: ‘I will give no deadly drug to any, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such, and especially I will not aid a woman to procure an abortion.’”

³ Within Catholicism, there is a very vocal group known as Catholics for Free Choice (CFFC). This group is linked with the like-minded Protestant and Jewish groups that go by the name Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR). Mainline denominations like the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the United Methodist Church, the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the American Baptist Convention all provide for pro-abortion platforms within their respective churches or urge toleration for such views.

⁴ Harold O.J. Brown (one of my former professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) describes how people, even in church, ignore the Bible on this subject. “In one congregation where I presented the biblical position on abortion, a woman objected that the fetus is not a human being. When I quoted Jeremiah 1:5 to her, she replied, ‘that’s just Jeremiah’s opinion.’” *Death Before Birth* (Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 131. Listen to the words of Walt Kaiser: “The value that God sets on the fetus can be from the text we quoted earlier from Psalm 139:16. The clause is ‘your eyes saw my unformed body (i.e. my embryo)’... God, it was then, who ‘knit me together in my mother’s womb’ (Psalm 139:13, cf. Job 10:18) and knew me in my prenatal state (Jeremiah 1:4-5). The value and worth of the forming child is clearly established.” *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan, 1983), p. 172.

⁵ Christian feminist Beverly W. Harrison not only dismisses the Scriptural arguments but debunks the whole history of the Christian tradition by accusing the theologians of repute with being biased and “vitriolic towards women.” “Augustine,” she says, “was racked with ambivalence about sexuality. Jerome was ‘sexphobic in the extreme.’ Calvin, even more so than Luther was a sexual prude. Therefore, anything that they said about abortion can be safely dismissed.” *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Beacon, 1983), pp. 135, 137, 138, 147.

⁶ As cited in Mary Meehan. “Theologians and Abortion: Not Their Finest Hour,” *The Human Life Review* (XII, 4, Fall 1986), p. 57. This is an excellent article and provides a penetrating critique of contemporary attempts to justify abortion from a Christian point of view.

⁷ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers I: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, American edition (Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 148-149, Ch. 19:10; 20:5.

⁸ *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. E. Ferguson (Garland, 1988), p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers XI*, ed. Philip Schaff (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 520.

¹¹ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 24-25. Mary Meehan comments: “Today many anti-abortion writers avoid using the word ‘murder’ for abortions because it is not murder in a legal sense and because many women who have abortions, since they have been misinformed or coerced, are not subjectively guilty or murder in a moral sense. Abortionists, however, do not necessarily have the same excuse.” *Op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹² As cited in Meehan, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹³ *John Calvin’s Sermons on The Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. B.W. Farley (Baker Book House, 1980), p. 153.

¹⁴ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (P&R, 1996), p. 214.

¹⁵ The Hebrew for the expression “in our image” (Genesis 1:26) may be rendered “as our image,” that is, man is created to function as God’s image. This rendering would make the understanding of the term “image” relational and revelational rather than primarily ontological. This would stress the essential dignity of the image, a dignity which is not obliterated as a result of the fall, and as such put murder in its proper light, i.e. the destruction of God’s image. Cf. W.J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament* (Baker, 1988), p. 17.

¹⁶ R.C. Sproul, “The Christian and the Sanctity of Life,” *Transforming Our World: A Call to Action*, ed. James Boice (Multnomah, 1987), p. 74.

¹⁷ C.F.H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority: Vol. V God Who Stands and Stays, Part One* (Word, 1982), p. 150.

¹⁸ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 247.

¹⁹ Z. Ursinus, *Commentary on The Heidelberg Catechism* (rpt. P&R, 1979), p. 584.

²⁰ This last remark is taken verbatim from R.C. Sproul, *op. cit.*, p. 78.