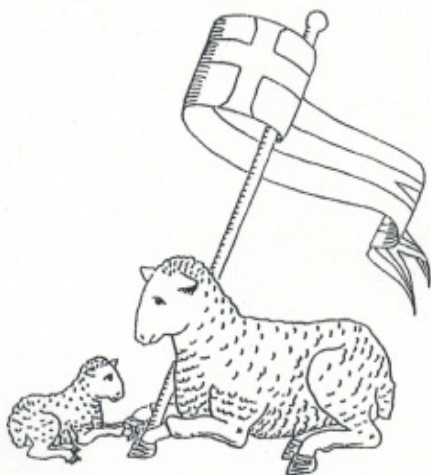


ABORTION AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS



Dael E. Smith, Jr.

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Abortion and the Early Christians

by
Dael E. Smith, Jr.

Second Printing



With Introductory Message
from
The Rt. Rev. Joseph M. Harte, S.T.D.

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Introductory Message

I sincerely commend Dael E. Smith, Jr.'s excellent monograph, "Abortion and the Early Christians."

Our Church has always made its appeal to the Church nearest to our Lord Jesus Christ. This fine booklet carefully details the early Christian Pro-Life stand.

Sincerely, in Christ,
+Joseph Meakin Harte
Bishop

Dael E. Smith, Jr.

The author, a former Franciscan with a background in Latin and Hebrew studies, was educated in Europe, Canada and the United States and was a Technical and was Planning Advisor to The Board of Directors of the NOEL Research and Education Foundation.

Mr. Smith was also President of Envoy International, Ltd., a Washington, D.C., area consulting firm and he served in ministry in the Episcopal Church.

Abortion and the Romans

“The evil best known is the most tolerable.”

—Titus Livius (Livy):

History of Rome

Abortion is not a new issue to confront the Christian Community. Indeed, it was one of the first social problems to have been addressed by the early fathers of the Church. Abortion and infanticide were widespread ancient Roman practices, and in the case of abortion, methods were surprisingly sophisticated and included drug inducement as well as surgery. Killing infants at birth was cruder. Ancient Roman Law prescribed exposure to wild animals and the elements for infants born deformed, crippled or sickly. Even healthy children, commonly girls born to slaves or the poor, were sometimes put to death at birth by midwives and attendants who justified this sort of murder as a social good and service to the mother. To the pagan mind, man was the measure of all things and the secular-humanists of the age saw no moral conflict with prenatal or new-natal killing as a form of birth control, social welfare or a means of quality control of human life—the same position of abortion advocates today! Ironically, some of the strongest pagan denunciations of Christianity were based on rumors of human blood feasts and ritual infant murder among Christians; hence the first Christian statements on abortion and infanticide can be found in surviving works of the early Christian apologists.

Athenagoras, who wrote his famous defense of Christianity in A.D. 117, states:

“How can we possibly kill anyone, we who call those women murderers who take drugs to induce an abortion, we who say they will have to give an account before God one day!”

—Athenagoras:

A Plea Regarding the Christians

Minucius Felix, who wrote around A.D. 175, not only disclaimed the fantastic accusations of the pagans, but went even further to draw a sharp distinction between Christian and pagan morality based on the latter's ac-

ceptance of abortion and infanticide. He writes:

“And now I want to turn to the man who asserts or believes that we are initiated by the murder and the blood of a little child. Can you think it possible that such a tender, tiny body should be gashed with mortal wounds, that any man alive would slaughter a little baby hardly come into being, to spill, drain ore drink its innocent blood? Nobody can believe such a thing unless he is capable of doing it himself. But I do see people among you (the heathen) at times expose newly born children to wild beasts and birds, and at other times put them to death by strangling or other horrible means. Some women destroy the unborn child in their womb by taking drugs, thus committing infanticide before they are delivered. To us it is not even permissible to see or hear of murder!”

—Minucius Felix:

Octavius



Torah—God’s Law

Christian Duty and Sanctity of Life

“Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.”

—Ecclesiastes, 21:13

The early Christians’ abhorrence of abortion and murder was mandated by their belief in God, rather than man, as the measure of all things and was based directly on the moral law of the Holy Scriptures. Unlike their pagan neighbors, Christians understood moral value in terms of man’s ultimate duty to God and his commandments, and followed the Pauline principle that evil might not be done that good may come of it. Pagan humanists based their whole system of thought on man; hence pagan moral concepts were relative to human conditions, social needs, and ambitions of the State. In practice, pagan morality was reduced to the precept: *excitus acta probat*—the end justifies the means. With this in mind it is easy to see why the secular-humanists regarded Christianity as radical, revolutionary and dangerous to Roman order. Celsus, author of the anti-Christian book, *The True Word*, bitterly attacked the Church in A.D. 178 with a diatribe reported by Origen:

“The Christians form among themselves secret societies that exist outside of our system of laws... an obscure and mysterious community founded on revolt and on the advantage that accrues from it.”

—Origen:

Against Celsus

Christianity was indeed revolutionary in the sense that its objection of moral relativism and positivism, central to secular-humanism, struck at the heart of pagan society and the moral authority of the Roman State. Why else would the pagans have been so threatened by the Church as to move the Empire to violent persecution of Christianity? Surely the introduction of one more god to the Roman pantheon would not have brought about such a reaction. Obviously, something more elemental was at stake.

Christians taught that God was the author of all order and law in the universe and that the laws men devise for themselves—**Jus Gentium**—are only valid when they are in harmony with nature—**Jus Naturale**—

and the higher law of God—**Jus Divinum**. For Christians, murder was forbidden by the commandments, the part of God’s law revealed to man. The Noachidic Code, found in the 9th chapter of Genesis, taught that this precept was universal for all mankind and demonstrated the relationship between natural, divine and human law in God’s plan for creation. The Scriptures were clear that life was a gift from God and that human life was sacred and inviolate from its inception in the womb. Ancient Jewish law held deliberate and willful abortion to be murder and even provided for punishment, based on Exodus 21:22, for those responsible for causing accidental miscarriage through mischievous injury of an expectant mother—similar to today’s statutes on negligent homicide. When Christianity emerged from Judaism, the Church affirmed the moral law of the Old Testament—Torah—as binding on all Christians: only the ritual and civil laws of the Jews, the “yoke upon my neck,” being abolished in Christ. Free of the legalism of the Pharisees, Christianity took a distinctly spiritual approach to the commandments and Torah. In fact, in Christ, the Law transcends the limitations of legalism to its fulfillment in the Cross. Christians saw in Jesus the completion of God’s revelation of Himself to mankind and a crowning of the Law with hope of eternal life in the world to come.

The sanctity of all human life was glorified and magnified in the Incarnation where God, the Logos, the eternal Word, “was made flesh and dwelt among us!” The motherhood of the expectant and the personhood of the unborn are beautifully manifested in the Holy Gospel, where at the Visitation, Elizabeth is moved by the Holy Spirit to address the Virgin as “mother of my Lord,” fully *eight* months before Mary is delivered, and declare that her child, the unborn John the Baptist, “leaped in my womb for joy” at the words of Mary’s salutation! That this was not intended to be taken for mere casual conversation or hyperbole is attested by the fact that these words are recorded to have been spoken by the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Abortion was not an issue for the Hebrew church. To those first Christians, steeped in the tradition of the Scriptures, God’s Law was clear and as long as the Church was part of the Jewish community, abortion and infanticide simply never required attention. But when the Church directed itself away from the synagogue and into the Gentile masses, abortion, infanticide and a host of other immoral practices common to pagan culture were met head-on and utterly condemned by the Apostolic fathers. The instructional writings of the early Christians are clear proof of this. These were written

mostly for the great throng of Greek and Roman converts to the faith and are accurate accounts of early Christian instruction.

The **Didache**, or **Teaching of the Twelve Apostles**, is an anonymous church treatise of the latter part of the first century or first part of the second century, A.D., which was widely circulated in the early Church as a true rendering of Apostolic teachings. Some modern scholars date its composition during the life time of Saint John the Divine. It contains practical instructions in faith, morals and personal behavior as well as directions for Holy Baptisms and the celebration of the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper. The Didache condemns abortion and infanticide as sins for which a Christian can lose his or her salvation. It warns:

“Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not practice pederasty; do not fornicate; do not steal; do not deal in magic; do not practice sorcery; do not kill a fetus by abortion or commit infanticide.”

—**Didache**

It continues with a list of deadly sins, including abortion once again, and describes the murder of innocent children to the destruction of God's image. Another early work widely circulated in the Church is known as the **Epistle of Barnabas** and is dated around A.D. 138. Like the Didache, it is primarily instructional and gives the following admonishment concerning abortion and infanticide:

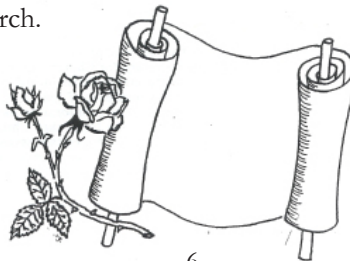
“Do not waver in your decision. Love your neighbor more than yourself. Do not kill a fetus by abortion or kill the newborn child. Do not withdraw your hand from your son or your daughter, but from their youth teach them the fear (awe) of God.”

—**Epistle of Barnabas, Part II**

It should be noted that discipline among the early Christians was quite severe. In the early days, Christians who fell into serious sin after baptism could never again be received into full communion. In view of the sporadic persecution of the Church from its earliest days, and the attempt in A.D. 250 at universal annihilation by the Emperor Decius, it was obviously necessary for Church leaders to maintain tight control of the Christian communities in order to lessen the danger of habitually lapsing members of the Church being used by authorities of the State to trap or inform on more stable Christians and their leaders. Also, the belief that Christ would return in judgement of the world carried a certain severity into the practice

of Christianity at the time. However, even in later times, in relaxing the policy for re-admitting lapsed Christians to communion after serious sin, the Church did not in any way lessen the gravity of the sin itself. Even after the Constantinian settlement and the establishment of the Church of Christ as the official state religion of Rome, basic moral precepts were never significantly altered to allow for the practice of abortion and until the latter part of this [20th] century abortion and infanticide were illegal in countries influenced by Christianity.

With the exception of the New Testament, these writings of the early fathers are our closest link to the Apostles themselves and the churches founded directly by them and make up what is commonly known as the sacred or apostolic tradition of the Church. To be sure, the early fathers were not infallible: some, like Tertullian, defected to other religions or Gnosticism; others, who stayed in the Church, got caught up in controversies that today seem petty and ridiculous. They fought against the corruption of the world and to preserve the Apostolic faith and unity of the ancient catholic Church and in so doing they sometimes misread the faith, shattered what unity existed and replaced catholicity with parochialism. But, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Ghost, they were able to pass on the Faith of the Apostles to a new generation and a new age. Their writings have always played an important part in the development of Christian thought from Augustine to Tillich and continue to be relevant to our understanding of Apostolic and Post-Apostolic teaching and practice. Because of their great antiquity, representing the pre-Constantinian and Ante-Nicene Church, the early fathers are of common interest to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant theologians and scholars. Anglicans and Protestants have a special interest in them because so much of classical Reformation Theology is based directly on interpretation of Holy Scripture and study of the early fathers. All major reformers, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Cranmer and even radical reformers went back to the early fathers in their efforts to re-discover the ancient catholic Church.



Abortion and the Church Today

“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith.”

—Saint Paul

Ecclesiastes, 21:13

Abortion for the Church today is not just a social issue. It is a moral and theological problem with profound implications on the faith itself. Those who would advocate abortion from within the Church demand a change in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity to accommodate their position. Abortion advocates outside the Church have been more honest at defining their position as a direct attack on Christianity. Seeing their cause hopelessly lost if argued from Christian ethics or moral theology, they discount all religious objections to abortion as superstitious and reactionary and try to limit the debate to social theory and civil rights.

The Church has always defined the faith and taught moral values from a balance of Holy Scripture, Apostolic Tradition and reason. Pro-abortionists, including those in favor of “pro-choice,” reject the Scriptural definition of man, oppose the Sacred Tradition of the Church and confound reason with sophistry and secular-humanistic ideology. As the Church of Christ, in all its branches, faces this hideous holocaust of abortion and neonatal killing, we can only hope and pray that Christians will look to their spiritual roots and the faith of the Apostles and direct the Church to action. The alternative is for the Church to remain silent and risk not being believed at all!

Prayers *for* **The Innocents** *and* **The Church**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We remember this day, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by the order of King Herod. Receive, we beseech thee, into the arms of thy mercy all innocent victims; and by thy great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish thy rule of justice, love and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Good Lord, deliver us from all false doctrine, heresy and schism; from hardness of heart and contempt of thy Word and commandment.
Amen.**

* From *Collect for the Holy Innocents*, BCP

** Adapted from *The Great Litany*, BCP

ADDENDA

“The most merciful thing that a large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it.”

—Margaret Sanger
Founder of Planned Parenthood



Orthodox Jewish Resolution

Judaism regards all life—including fetal life—as inviolate. Abortion is not a private matter between a woman and her physician. It infringes upon the most fundamental right of a third party—that of the unborn child.

The concern with which Jewish tradition views the destruction of a fetus is reflected in the provisions of the Noachidic code. Judaism teaches that abortion for the sons of Noah is a capital crime. The Talmud renders Genesis 9:6 as, “He who sheds the blood of a man within a man, his blood shall be shed.” “Who is a man within a man?”, queries the Talmud. “This is a fetus in its mother’s womb.”

For Jews, fetal life is inviolate unless continuation of pregnancy poses a serious threat to the life of the mother. The life of the mother takes precedence over that of the unborn child. Situations in which maternal health, rather than maternal life are involved, pose complex problems requiring rabbinic adjudication. Similarly, situations involving psychiatric components require authoritative determination in each individual case. Performance of an abortion cannot be sanctioned unless the relevant medical facts are submitted to a competent rabbinic authority who will review the medical data and render advice in accordance with Jewish law.

The incoming administration of the Orthodox Union is mandated to undertake steps to develop a program dealing with the Torah community’s response to the abortion issue.

(Resolution adopted at the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregation of America’s 76th Anniversary Biennial Convention, November, 1974.)

Episcopal Church Resolution 1994

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, that this 71st General Convention (1994) reaffirms Resolution C047 of the 69th General Convention (1988):

All human life is sacred; hence, it is sacred from its inception until death.

The Church takes seriously its obligation to help form the consciences of its members concerning this sacredness. Human life, therefore, should be initiated only advisedly and in full accord with this understanding of the power to conceive and give birth which is bestowed by God.

It is the responsibility of our congregations to assist their members in becoming informed concerning the spiritual, physiological and psychological aspects of sex and sexuality.

The Book of Common Prayer affirms that lithe birth of a child is a joyous and solemn occasion in the life of a family. It is also an occasion for rejoicing in the Christian Community", (p. 440). As Christians we also affirm responsible family planning.

We regard all abortion as having a tragic dimension, calling for the concern and compassion of all the Christian community.

While we acknowledge that in this country it is the legal right of every woman to have a medically safe abortion, as Christians we believe strongly that if this right is exercised, it should be used only in extreme situations.

We emphatically oppose abortion as a means of birth control, family planning, sex selection, or any reason of mere convenience.

In those cases where an abortion is being considered, members of this church are urged to seek the dictates of their conscience in prayer, to seek the advice and counsel of members of the Christian Community and where appropriate, the sacramental life of this Church.

Whenever members of this church are consulted with regard to a problem pregnancy, they are to explore with grave seriousness, with the person or persons seeking advice or counsel, as alternatives to abortion, other positive courses of action, including, but not limited to, the following possibilities: the parents raising the child; another family member raising the child; and making the child available for adoption.

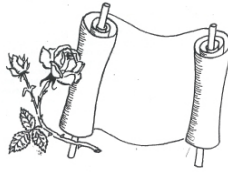
It is the responsibility of members of this church, especially the clergy to become aware of local agencies and resources which will assist those faced with problem pregnancies.

We believe that legislation concerning abortions will not address the root of the problem.

We therefore express our deep conviction that any proposed legislation on the part of the national or state governments regarding abortions must take special care to

see that individual conscience is respected, and that the responsibility of individuals to reach informed decisions in this matter is acknowledged and honored.

And be it further resolved, that this 71st General Convention express it's unequivocal opposition to any legislative, executive or judicial action on the part of local, state or national governments that abridge the right of a woman to reach an informed decision about the termination of pregnancy, or that would limit access of a woman to safe means of acting on her decision.



From The Western Journal of Medicine

The process of eroding the old ethic and substituting the new has already begun. It may be seen most clearly in changing attitudes towards human abortion. In defiance of the long-held Western ethic of intrinsic and equal value for every human life regardless of its stage, condition or status, abortion is becoming accepted by society as moral, right and even necessary. It is worth noting that this shift in public attitude has affected the churches, the laws and public policy rather than the reverse. Since the old ethic has not yet been fully displaced, it has been necessary to separate the idea of abortion from the idea of killing, which continues to be socially abhorrent.

The result has been a curious avoidance of the scientific fact, which everyone really knows, that human life begins at conception and is continuous whether intra or extra uterine until death. The very considerable semantic gymnastics which are required to rationalize abortion as anything but taking a human life would be ludicrous if they were not often put forth under socially impeccable auspices. It is suggested that this schizophrenic sort of subterfuge is necessary because while a new ethic is being accepted the old one has not yet been rejected.

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Did you know that abortion was one of the first social problems addressed by the early Church? Anglicans for Life originally published this booklet under our former name: the National Organization of Episcopalians for Life (NOEL), when the author, Dael E. Smith, Jr., was an advisor to the NOEL Board of Directors. We are reissuing it because the Sanctity of Life needs to be protected, today, more than ever.

The purpose of this booklet is to represent a concise, readable and authoritative exposition of the historical opposition of the early Christian Church to abortion and neonatal killing, documenting the facts with primary sources from the 1st and 2nd century Church. It includes clear, up-to-date translations of early Christian writings accepted in all branches of the Church of Christ: Anglican, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

This work is intended to serve as a basis for sermons, discussions and study as well as a statement of reaffirmation of the ancient teachings of the Church of the Martyrs on the sanctity of all human life.

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