

ABORTION

Abortion was never a topic I intended to discuss in ET&N, nor do I relish doing so now. But I recently came across several web pages that suggested there is a biblical basis for abortion. I found the arguments in these articles so flawed that I felt compelled to respond.

Before I do, I me comment that I find the verbal violence employed by **both** sides of the abortion debate to be reprehensible, particularly from Christians. The very terms employed as descriptors—Pro-life and Pro-choice—are intended to cast dispersions on the opposite camp. Most who advocate “abortion rights” are not anti-life. Out of conviction or convenience, they do not consider the human fetus to be a life. On the other hand, few pro-lifers are anti-choice. Most are certainly in favor of many reproductive choices. If labels are necessary, it would be more honest to simply use the terms anti- and pro-abortion.

Then

The Bible does not contain a specific prohibition on abortion, and the New Testament is completely silent on the issue.. To simply cite “do not murder” does nothing to persuade the pro-abortion camp. But the absence of something does not prove the opposite. The Bible also does not contain a specific ban on burying someone alive, but no one would suggest that God would approve of such a practice.

Very early church documents, however, do contain unequivocal statements about abortion. Here’s a sampling:

1. The Didache (or The Teaching of the Twelve) was probably written sometime between 50 and 120 A.D. and was considered very valuable by many early church leaders, including Clement of Alexandria and Didymus the Blind. It is also included in one of the earliest extant copies (fourth century) of the New Testament, the Sinaiticus Codex.
"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." (Chapter 19)
2. The Epistle of Barnabas (ca 100 AD) was also considered valuable by Clement and others and was also included on some early lists of authoritative Christian writings.
"Thou shalt not commit murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not commit pæderasty (corrupt boys), thou shalt not commit fornication, thou shalt not steal, (Ex. 20:15) thou shalt not practise magic, thou shalt not practise witchcraft, thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is begotten." (2:2)
3. A Plea for Christians (ca 177) is an apology ostensibly written to Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus by Athenagoras of Alexandria.
"And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very foetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care, and when it has passed into life, to kill it; and not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable

with child-murder, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it." (35.6)

4. The Constitutions of the Apostles (late third century), is a compilation of earlier writings.
"Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born. Thou shalt not withdraw thy hand from thy son, or from thy daughter, but from their infancy thou shalt teach them the fear of the Lord." (7.3)

These non-canonical church documents do not carry the authority of Scripture, but what is most striking about these quotes is (1) that they generally lie in the midst of biblical teaching and (2) more importantly, they represent the consistent teaching of the early church, in the case of the Didache perhaps still within the apostolic period. There is no counter-argument anywhere in the writings of the early church, nor in fact for centuries to follow. The flawed arguments you're about to read are completely modern inventions. There were certainly those, maybe even among the *ekklesia*, who practiced abortion, but they made no attempt to fabricate a biblical basis for it.

Now

This comes back to the problem I have mentioned before that occurs when anyone views the Bible as a complete legal code. If it were, the Bible would occupy hundreds of unreadable volumes, just as secular statutes do. God expects us to absorb His word, not examine it for exceptions and loopholes. It would be more comforting, I suppose, if the Bible itself contained language similar to the Didache or the Epistle of Barnabas, but those who wish to justify abortion would undoubtedly still make many of the same claims.

There are many webpages that attempt to use the Bible to justify abortion, but I am going to limit my comments to three because they seem to be replicated over and over (clicking the links will open the source document in a new window):

1. "Why Abortion is Biblical" by Brian Elroy McKinley at <http://www.elroy.net/ehr/abortion.html>
2. "Why Abortion is Moral" by the same Brian Elroy McKinley (under the pseudonym "Elroy" at <http://www.elroy.net/ehr/abortionanswers.html>)
3. "Abortion is not a sin" by Miss Poppy Dixon at <http://www.postfun.com/pfp/blasphemy.html> (this one goes so far as to claim that an anti-abortion stance is blasphemous!)

"Why Abortion is Biblical"

"One-sided. That's the abortion stance of most Christians—one-sided." So McKinley's first article begins, as if one-sidedness is in itself a sin. There are many things in God's Word that are one-sided, starting with Jesus Himself and including charity, family responsibility, hospitality, etc.

Besides the many errors in McKinley's article—some of which I'll address—its very tone is both flippant, illogical, presumptuous, and myopic. Over and over, for example, he uses the word "clearly" as if the term validates his flawed arguments and implying that anyone who disagrees with his positions must be so stupid he or she cannot see what is "clear."

His grotesque misuse of Scripture is the foundation of the theses in the article. He completely misunderstands or misrepresents the nature of the didactic dialogues in Ecclesiastes and Job:

- *"If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a proper burial, then I say, 'Better the miscarriage than he, for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he.'" [Ecclesiastes 6:3-5]*
- *"Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun." [Ecclesiastes 4:1-3]*
- *"And Job said, 'Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' May that day be darkness; let not God above care for it, nor light shine on it...Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me, and why the breasts, that I should suck? For now I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept then, I would have been at rest, with kings and with counselors of the earth, who rebuilt ruins for themselves; or with princes who had gold, who were filling their houses with silver. Or like a miscarriage which is discarded, I would not be, as infants that never saw light.'" [Job 3:2-4, 11-16]*
- *"Why then have You brought me out of the womb? Would that I had died and no eye had seen me! I should have been as though I had not been, carried from womb to tomb." [Job 10:18-19]*

In reference to the Ecclesiastes passages, McKinley flippantly points out that "(w)e're reading the words of the man to whom God gave the world's greatest wisdom," implying that the "world's greatest wisdom" supports abortion. But the "world's greatest wisdom" doesn't hold a candle to God's, and it does not preclude errors in judgment. King David is also called a "man after God's heart," but that didn't stop him from making huge errors of judgment. Human wisdom, and particularly human emotion, are not infallible.

"Clearly," McKinley asserts. "There is a strong argument here that the quality of life is as important if not more important than the act of being born." Solomon and Job, in periods of depression or stress, questioned the value of their lives, but McKinley fails to include the conclusions both of them reached. McKinley himself admits that these passages neither support nor condemn abortion, but in fact, the passages have nothing whatsoever to do with abortion. Americans have built a shrine to "quality of life," but the Bible neither guarantees nor places any particular value of the quality of life from a secular perspective. The kind of "quality of life" McKinley is referring to is a selfish perspective—what one gets out of life rather than what one gives.

In using Exodus 21:22-25, McKinley heaps false premises and unfounded conclusions on his misinterpretation, using an unfortunate mistranslation in the New American Standard Bible (NASB):

- *"If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage, yet there is no further injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty*

life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

McKinley uses this passage to demonstrate that "(w)hat has been so **clearly** demonstrated...(is) that God does not consider a fetus a human person." It's not surprising that he reaches this conclusion given the fact that his premises are all false.

1. The injury in Exodus 21:22 is not a miscarriage, but a premature birth. A literal translation is "*and when men strive, and have smitten a pregnant woman, and her children have come out...*" (YLT). Thus understood correctly, the "any further injury" in verse 23 refers to both mother and child and the penalty is "life for life." Hence, far from providing any support for abortion, the passage underscores that abortion is, in fact, murder of a human life.
2. Another presumptive premise McKinley uses is that "we are forced to accept in all **certainty**, considering the medical knowledge of the time, the premie died. This makes it more **clear** that the 'tooth for tooth' passage refers only to the mother, nor to the miscarried fetus." McKinley asserts that all prematurely-born children died in ancient times, but he is wrong. Tertullian, an influential second century Christian leader, wrote an apologetic to "Rulers of the Roman Empire" in which he included some admittedly curious numerology observations. What is important is his testimony about pre-mature babies: "*A mature and regular birth takes place, as a general rule, at the commencement of the tenth month...But inasmuch as birth is also completed with the seventh month... Human nativity has sometimes been allowed to be premature...*" [Apologetic 9.37]
McKinley's premise (all pre-mature babies died) is categorically disproven, hence so is his conclusion.
3. To underscore his false conclusions, McKinley goes on to butcher the meaning of Leviticus 27:6 ("*But if they are from a month even up to five years old, then your valuation shall be five shekels of silver for the male, and for the female your valuation shall be three shekels of silver*") and Numbers 3:15 ("*Number the sons of Levi by their fathers' households, by their families; every male from a month old and upward you shall number*"), concluding that "a fetus not was counted as a human person." What McKinley fails to understand (or chooses to ignore) is that these passages are not about the intrinsic value of a life. Leviticus 27 is about dedicated service to God, while Numbers 27 is a tax assessment. Unborn children were not dedicated to service, nor would it be appropriate to assess a tax on the unborn.

Incidentally, The Lockman Foundation, publishers of the NASB, have corrected the mistranslation of Exodus 21:22. The revised edition reads: "*If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide.*" It is also ironic that McKinley labels the NIV rendition ("*If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely...*") as "politically correct."

Perhaps the most outrageous concept in McKinley's argument centers on countering anti-abortion use of Psalm 139 and Jeremiah 1 (God knowing a person in the womb). "This is a special event," McKinley asserts. "The birth of the prophet Jeremiah...In essence, to claim this verse applies to anyone other than Jeremiah is to claim that we are all God's divine prophets."

The problems:

First, a picky one...God's prophets weren't divine.

Second, how does one know who a prophet before s/he is born?

Third, God is sovereign in all things, including human life. The Bible is replete with evidence that God has a purpose for each of us. Therefore, McKinley's implication that it would be wrong to abort Jeremiah actually supports the claim that it is wrong to abort any fetus.

McKinley concludes his hopelessly flawed logic and exegesis with a valid point: "It is time to stop the anger and hatred being heaped on abortion doctors and upon women who have abortions." I agree with that, but not for the reason McKinley suggests. His reason is the final irony in his article: "...because the act of making a judgment against people in God's name when God is not behind the judging is nothing short of claiming that our own beliefs are more important than God's." Unfortunately, that's exactly what McKinley does.

"Why Abortion is Moral"

Apparently, McKinley was not satisfied with just spewing outrageous biblical misinterpretation across the web, so he added a pseudo-scientific article that exhibits similar illogic and presumptiveness. He addresses and answers six questions:

1. "Is (a fetus) alive? Yes." (It's encouraging that he can at least acknowledge the undeniable.)

2. "Is (a fetus) human? Yes", although he claims a fetus is no more human than a hair follicle, the opening misrepresentation.

3. "Is (a fetus) a person? No.

And here we go. The argument about "personhood" is the linchpin of the pro-abortion debate, but it's a fallacious argument. There is no evidence whatsoever that God distinguishes between a human and a person. The term "human person" is redundant. McKinley's conclusion is based on the assumption that the fetus is not conscious—that, in fact, "individual personhood doesn't occur until well after birth." I am forced by this to conclude that McKinley has never had children. Who could look in the eyes of a newborn child and not see a person?

Beyond that, McKinley's argument is circuitous—use a definition of consciousness that precludes consciousness in a newborn, then use that definition to prove that a baby doesn't have consciousness.

And just how does McKinley (or anyone for that matter) really know when consciousness begins. He seems to base his argument on memory—we don't remember anything from our first year or two; therefore, we must not be conscious. I can't even remember what movie I saw last week!

Finally, it is axiomatic to the scientific method that a single exception is sufficient to disprove a theory. By McKinley's logic, a person in a coma would be presumptively unconscious and therefore not a person.

By McKinley's logic, the United States government cannot enforce laws regarding the destruction of eagle and sea turtle eggs. If a fetus growing in a womb is not a person, one growing in an egg isn't a creature. The implication that eagles and sea turtles are more important than human life is a tragic commentary on America.

4. "Is (a fetus) physically independent? No", he correctly concludes, but again his premises are flawed. Are Siamese twins non-persons because they are physically dependent on one another? Physical dependence does not render one a non-person. McKinley doesn't seem to understand the nature of proof itself.

5. "Does (the fetus) have human rights? Yes and no."

McKinley makes sweeping, unfounded assertions in this section: "...the potential person must always be given full human rights unless its existence interferes with the rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness of an already-existing conscious human being." Notice one of his subtle techniques, capitalizing "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness," effective enshrining these human concepts so that they presumptively supersede the life of the unborn. To him, pursuit of happiness trumps any rights of the unborn.

"You cannot have two entities with equal rights occupying one body. One will automatically have veto power over the other—and thus they don't have equal rights." Again, Siamese twins illustrate the flaw in this argument (perhaps this is why God permits this biological oddity). By McKinley's argument, one of the twins has more rights and would therefore be justified in killing the other.

He concludes that a fetus' "lack of personhood and its threat to the women (sic) in which it resides makes abortion a completely logical and moral choice." The position, far from being one based on medical facts or ethical considerations, has now degraded to the point that a mere threat to a woman (and he's not just talking about the life of the mother here) contributes to the justification for abortion.

6. "Is abortion murder? No. Absolutely not."

This final assertion is, of course, pre-determined by the faulty conclusions that precede it. He calls this last question the crux of the issue, but it is not—the crux comes much earlier and lies in the modern invention of personhood. Given, according to McKinley, that a fetus is not an independent conscious person, abortion comes down to a matter of personal convenience.

Much is made in his and other arguments that a woman has a right to control her own body, but from a Christian perspective, even that contention is flawed. The body is described as the "temple of the Holy Spirit," hence we are not free agents if we acknowledge God's sovereignty, and in the case of a married couple, husband and wife share control over their bodies in sexual matters.

I am staunchly pro-choice—a woman's choice to get pregnant or not. Choosing to have sex is choosing the possibility of becoming pregnant. Once that choice is made and a living human (remember that McKinley concedes that a fetus is both alive and human) is created as a consequence, McKinley and his kind want a woman to get a second choice. Arguments about the consciousness and physical independence are biological and ethical hair-splitting that only serve to obfuscate the fact that abortion destroys an innocent human life.

In pre-internet days, I wouldn't be very concerned about articles like McKinley's. Few people would read them, and they would have little impact. But McKinley's "Is Abortion Biblical?" article has spread like a cancer across the web—referenced and quoted by numerous other sites. On Google, his article comes up second among 324,000 hits in a search for "Abortion and the Bible." Unsuspecting Christians might stumble across his writings and be seduced by them. They need to know that McKinley has renounced his belief in "the Jesus of the Bible" (what other one is there?). Having done so, we know who's side he's now playing on.

"Abortion is not a Sin"

Miss Poppy Dixon opens with the profane suggestion "that to believe (abortion is a sin) is nothing short of idolatry and blasphemy..." I'll leave you (if you're interested) to read how she reached that pompous conclusion, but her argument hinges on the "breath of life."

"Not until God gave man his first BREATH (emphasis hers) did he become a living soul." She's referring to Adam, of course, who was not born in a womb, so he isn't

instructive about when a fetus becomes a living soul. In addition, she is effectively anthropomorphizing God by equating His breath with human breath. "Life comes from God," she correctly asserts, but she presumes to know authoritatively when God acts on the fetus.

Like McKinley, she goes on to misinterpret Exodus 21:22-25 and adds Hosea 9:16. She also claims that Mary could have chosen not to carry Jesus (or presumably, if she changed her mind, to abort Him). In saying, "*Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word,*" (Luke 1:38) Mary is acknowledging, as a slave, God's total control over her life, not making a choice to accept her pregnancy. In contradiction to the idea that a woman has a right to control her body, Mary acknowledges God's right to use it for His purposes. Mary's choice to follow the Lord had been made long before that evening.

People like McKinley and Dixon are seriously deluded but there is a big difference between them. Dixon purports to be a Christian (one apparently victimized by a judgmental, literalist charismatic sect), but her article is posted on a site called "Adult Christianity," which is apparently designed to tear down the church, whose logo includes suggestive little female figures, and which offers (among other things) "Christian" thong panties emblazoned with off-color sayings (some of which I chuckled at, despite myself). McKinley, on the other hand, is vehemently anti-Christian—his website includes many profane (and almost certainly equally flawed) articles about Christian doctrine.

But in the final analysis it doesn't matter. Both chose to post lies on the internet where unsuspecting people encounter them and those with obviously base motives latch onto them. Their lies amount to claiming that God says to women, "That thing growing in your womb is just a DNA life form. I created it, but if it's inconvenient for you, just get rid of it." Can anyone really imagine God saying that? They are teachers who will have to account for these lies when they face God.

Similarly, it is time to stop the violence, verbal and physical, employed by misguided anti-abortion militants. Murdering abortion doctors, attacking clinics, labeling women who have abortions as "murderers"—none of these are things Jesus would do under the circumstances. In taking such actions, the militants are as guilty as the abortionists. Instead, show people the love of God through Christ Jesus. That has immeasurably more power to change lives!

I genuinely pray that Poppy Dixon will disavow her false teachings and turn to the truth, which is that God values all human life and neither He nor His church makes any distinctions between life in and out of the womb. I have a harder time saying a similar prayer for McKinley—He has turned from the truth and maligned Jesus and His church. Perhaps he is still redeemable, but it appears He may have committed the unforgivable sin.

Discussion

A subscriber from Missouri sent this note:

I am a Christian who believes in the sanctity of life and opposed to abortion; I also believe that Jesus taught a great deal on how we are to care for others, among them being children in general, and orphans specifically. This has lead me to the following response to those who are arguing against abortion:

What is our responsibility to all those children who will likely be born into poor families? If one is to oppose abortion and thus add to the numbers of children living in poverty, or as bad, in

orphanages and foster homes, unwanted by almost everyone after the endearing age of infancy to four or five years, I believe we have a Christian duty to assume some caring responsibility toward these children.

That Christian responsibility can be served in several ways: adopt these children, or, where the parent(s) do not want to give them up, provide — collectively, if necessary due to the high cost — for their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. I have neither heard nor observed any great swell of support for this idea!

I am 74 years old and, while growing to manhood and beyond, I did not hear of abortions at all. As a Christian, I did not knowingly do anything to fulfill God's will to "visit the fatherless." So, it is not in arrogance or pride that I say we must do more than just oppose a abortion. We must respond to those children that are given birth instead of aborted.

Where do you stand on this?

I responded that I certainly agree. We have an adoptive daughter, although she was not a rescue from abortion, and we contribute to a local abortion-alternative organization. I acknowledge, however, that these are paltry efforts in the face of the abortion problem in America.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Ephesus (February 17)

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