

# Abortion and the Early Church

by Michael J. Gorman

Contemporary Christians neglect the teachings of the Church Fathers on key moral and theological issues to their own peril. The earliest specific written references to abortion in Christian literature are those in the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas. The Didache combines a code of Christian morality with a manual of church life and order, while the Epistle of Barnabas is a more theological tract on Christian life and thought. While both of these probably date from the early second century, they most likely drew on Christian sources which had their origins in the late first century.

Both these writings also contain a section based on a Jewish oral and written tradition known as the "Two Ways." This tradition contrasts the two ways of Life or Light and Death or Darkness. Athanasius notes that it was used extensively in the early church, either as a separate document or as part of the Didache, especially for the training of catechumens and new converts.

The Didache maintains that there is a great difference between these two ways. In an exposition of the second great commandment ("Love your neighbor as yourself") as part of the Way of Life, the author makes a list of "thou shalt not"s; statements obviously modeled on, and in part quoting, the Decalogue of the Septuagint. The list of prohibitions includes murder, adultery, sodomy, fornication, theft, the use of magic and aphrodisiacs, infanticide and abortion. Literally, it declares: "Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion." Similarly, the Epistle of Barnabas, in its practical section on the Way of Light, repeats the same words in a list of "thou shalt (not)" statements including, just before the abortion prohibition, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor more than thy own life." The fetus is seen, not as a part of its mother, but as a neighbor. Abortion is rejected as contrary to other-centered neighbor love.

On the other hand, the Way of Death, according to the Didache, is full of cursing, murders, adulteries, idolatries, robberies and hypocrisies. It is also filled with people who are "murderers of children," an echo of the prohibition against abortion (though it may also refer to infanticide), and "corrupters of God's creatures," rendered as abortuantes in a third century Latin version, reflecting knowledge of the use of the Greek term phthoreus for abortionists. The Epistle of Barnabas uses the same two phrases in its description of the way of "death eternal with punishment." In both writings the immediate context includes both personal vices and more socially oriented evils such as turning away the needy and oppressing the afflicted.

Both texts regard abortion as murder and provide an ethical context within which abortion should be viewed. "Thou shalt not abort" becomes a sub-commandment of the commandment not to murder. It has a status almost on a par with the Decalogue itself. Use of the commandment form provides a succinct continuation of the Jewish condemnation of deliberate abortion. There is no formed/unformed distinction, no elaboration. Abortion is presented also as an offense against humanity, a defiance of the second great commandment "Love thy neighbor" which the Epistle of Barnabas has expanded to say "more than thyself." Furthermore, abortion is depicted not only as a sin like sexual immorality, but as an evil no less severe and social in scope than oppression of the poor and needy and no less dishonorable than the use of poisons.

The Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas were extremely important in two other respects. First, the widespread use of their "Two Ways" teachings among early Christians assured the disseminating of their position on abortion. Second, later writings appropriated the murder definition, the commandment form, the elevation of the status of the fetus and the context of personal and social evils found in these two early works.

Contemporary with or just after these earliest documents was the Apocalypse of Peter, the most important of the noncanonical apocalypses. It was held in great esteem by the early church and was given canonical status by Clement of Alexandria and by the oldest list of the New Testament canon, the Muratorian Fragment, although it was rejected from the canon in the fourth century. Probably under the influence of oriental and Orphic-Pythagorean eschatology, the author of this apocalypse paints a graphic portrait of hell's population, which includes this scene:

And near that place I saw another gorge in which the discharge and excrement of the tortured ran down and became like a lake. And there sat women, and the discharge came up to their throats... And these were those who produced children outside marriage and who procured abortions.

Such texts are important for their powerful presentation of the destiny of aborters and the aborted. It is evident that this picture is drawn, even with apocalyptic imagination, from deep ethical and emotional convictions. The theological basis for the entire text must be seen as an understanding of abortion as the culpable murder of a human being. Unborn children are viewed as living beings destined for immortality, and both men and women responsible for aborting them are guilty and worthy of eternal punishment. Methodius of Olympus and Clement of Alexandria were later inspired by this

apocalyptic perspective.

Clement of Alexandria (ca 150 &mdash; ca 215), in his Prophetic Eclogues, quotes an anonymous writer of the mid-second century, perhaps a Christian Platonist, who argues that the fetus has a soul and is a living person. His argument is based on the idea that angels place the soul in the womb at the time of conception and the new embryo has a soul immediately. The main significance of this text, however, is not in its philosophical and theological speculation but in its connection of questions about the life of the fetus to the New Testament. Clement records that this writer's proofs that the embryo is alive are the references in Luke 1 to John the Baptist and Jesus in their mothers' wombs. He makes particular use of Luke 1:41: "And when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb." Though the writer focuses on the Baptist and does not even mention abortion, he laid the groundwork for subsequent theological links between abortion and the Incarnation.

In his own writings Clement brought both theology and ethics face to face with contemporary pagan society. In *The Tutor* (Paedagogus), written about 190-200, Clement addresses Christians concerning the goal of virtue to which the Logos, their tutor, could bring them. In book two, he pictures Alexandrian life in detail in order to warn Christians not to participate in all its luxury and vice and to provide them with a substitute moral code, calling them to extend the Christian spirit throughout the city. In the context of Christian marriage, the goal of which in Clement's opinion is procreation, he writes:

Our whole life can go on in observation of the laws of nature, if we gain dominion over our desires from the beginning and if we do not kill, by various means of a perverse art, the human offspring, born according to the designs of divine providence; for these women who, in order to hide their immorality, use abortive drugs which expel the matter completely dead, abort at the same time their human feelings.

Clement continues the main themes of the Christian community:

Abortion is killing human life that is under God's care, design and providence.

That he considered the unborn to be a human being is clear from the clause "if we do not kill" and is also implicit elsewhere in his thoughts on childbirth and the immortality of the soul. Clement was greatly influenced by the Stoics, but his concern for the child itself goes beyond the Stoic concern for doing what is right and in accord with nature. Clement's own personal and sensitive contribution to the Christian position can be seen in his last clause, where he speaks of the aborting of human feeling. The Apologists

In the ancient world, the new Christian faith had two unavoidable tasks: self-definition and self-defense. Though these two needs were intimately intertwined, the writers we have just examined were concerned principally with self-definition. There was also a need for self-defense, for giving an explanation of and justification for Christian beliefs and practices. As the Christian faith encountered the world around it, there were natural tensions and conflicts due both to real differences and to mutual misunderstandings. The group of Fathers known as the Apologists arose to answer the pagan criticisms of their religion.

Athenagoras (mid to late second century), the ablest of the Greek apologists for Christianity, addressed the emperor Marcus Aurelius and his son Lucius Aurelius Commodus in 177. Athenagoras was concerned to answer three frequent charges made against Christianity &mdash; atheism, incest and cannibalism &mdash; and thus to uphold Christian belief and moral standards. To the charge of cannibalism, stemming from a misunderstanding of the Eucharist, Athenagoras responded that cannibalism implied murder and that Christians would not even watch a murder, for example, a gladiator fight, much less perform one. His defense continues:

What reason would we have to commit murder when we say that women who induce abortions are murderers, and will have to give account of it to God? For the same person would not regard the fetus in the womb as a living thing and therefore an object of God's care [and then kill it]... But we are altogether consistent in our conduct. We obey reason and do not override it.

[Athenagoras, *Legatio* 35]

If Athenagoras's position were not the accepted Christian attitude, his argument would lose all its force. The three important elements in the Christian position appear already in explicit form in this late second century document: abortion is considered murder; the guilty must give account to God; the fetus is a living being, the object of God's care. Athenagoras's contribution is to set the issue of abortion in an argument for Christian practice based on the Christian view of the sanctity of life. He writes that Christians have renounced murder in all its forms &mdash; mentioning the common Roman practices of gladiator contests, animal fights, exposure and abortion &mdash; in order to avoid becoming polluted and defiled. It is this absolute abhorrence of bloodshed in any form which drives them away from even looking at practices such as gladiator fights and criminal executions. This view stood in stark contrast to the prevailing Roman lifestyle.

The most eloquent apologist in the West was Tertullian (ca 160-ca 240), who ranks second only to Augustine for his Latin contributions to the church. His most important work is the Apology, written in 197 and directed to governors of Roman provinces and to the emperor Septimus Severus. Like Athenagoras in the East, Tertullian sought to defend Christianity against charges of immorality, atheism and treason. In refuting accusations of secret crimes (chapters 7-9), he dismisses as a rumor the charge that "we are accused of observing a holy rite in which we kill a little child and then eat it." Later, to strengthen his case, he adds:

That I may refute more thoroughly these charges, I will show that in part openly, in part secretly, practices prevail among you which have led you perhaps to credit similar things about us.

After citing mythological and historical cases of child sacrifice and exposure in the Greco-Roman world, Tertullian writes:

In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the fetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth. That is a man which is going to be one; you have the fruit already in the seed.

His comparison of the seed and the fruit conveys with imagination the universal Christian concern for life. It also has a parallel, probably independent but coming from the same ethical roots, in Philo's comparison of the embryo to a statue ready to be removed from the artist's studio.

Tertullian reveals that the basis of the early Christian position on abortion was the commandment not to murder. Like earlier Christian writers, he considers the fetus a human being, though still dependent on the mother. Speaking for the Christian community, he consequently condemns abortion as "speedier" homicide. For Tertullian, dependence on the mother did not mean, as it did for pagan thought and for Jewish and Roman law, that the fetus is merely a part of the mother. In another work he appeals to the mother — not to the father, the philosophers or Roman law — to make the pronouncement about a fetus's status:

In this matter the best teacher, judge, and witness is the sex that is concerned with birth. I call on you, mothers, whether you are now pregnant or have already borne children; let women who are barren and men keep silence! We are looking for the truth about the nature of woman; we are examining the reality of your pains. Tell us: Do you feel any stirring of life within you in the fetus? Does your groin tremble, your sides shake, your whole stomach throb as the burden you carry changes its position? Are not these moments a source of joy and assurance that the child within you is alive and playful? Should his restlessness subside, would you not be immediately concerned for him?

[De anima 25. 3.]

Writing in about 210-13, in this essay Tertullian attempts to refute all the misunderstandings of the soul which he perceived in pagans and Christians alike. Among these were ideas of the pre-existence of the soul, God's creation of the individual soul at conception, and the infusion of the soul after birth. Tertullian had a notion of the soul as material and argues throughout chapters 23 to 37 that the act of procreation produces both soul and body and that life, therefore, begins at conception. He adduces arguments from medicine, logic and Scripture — including references to Luke 1:41 and 46 and to Jeremiah 1:5:

They [John and Jesus] were both alive while still in the womb. Elizabeth rejoiced as the infant leaped in her womb; Mary glorifies the Lord because Christ within inspired her. Each mother recognizes her child and each is known by her child who is alive, being not merely souls but also spirits.

He continues:

Thus, you read the word of God, spoken to Jeremias: "Before I formed thee in the womb, I knew thee." If God forms us in the womb, He also breathes on us as He did in the beginning: "And God formed man and breathed into him the breath of life." Nor could God have known man in the womb unless he were a whole man. "And before thou camest forth from the womb, I sanctified thee." Was it, then, a dead body at that stage? Surely it was not, for "God is the God of the living and not the dead."

Tertullian is the first Christian to make the explicit connection between these biblical passages and the issue of abortion. Though his main purpose is to prove his particular view of the soul, one of the motives for so doing is to criticize the practice of abortion and to show that even therapeutic abortion is the taking of a human life. For Tertullian, the witness of the Incarnation and of Scripture is to the humanity of the fetus.

Minucius Felix was the only third-century apologist which the West produced. His Octavius (ca 200-225), written in Rome in a period of persecution, is in the form of a Ciceronian dialogue in which a lawyer mediates between a proponent of Christianity and a proponent of paganism, the latter eventually being converted. After demonstrating the falsehood and immorality of paganism, the Christian addresses himself to the charge that Christian initiations take place by slaughtering

a baby. His answer parallels Tertullian's Apology. He protests that no one could kill a "tender and so tiny" baby, and that whoever thinks someone could do such a deed must be capable of it himself. Minucius Felix proceeds to accuse the pagans of infanticide and abortion:

And there are women who swallow drugs to stifle in their own womb the beginnings of a man to be — committing infanticide before they give birth to the infant.

The Latin word translated "infanticide" is parricidium, the Roman legal word for intentional killing, especially of a relative. Abortion, of course, was not considered parricide in Roman law; Minucius opposes his culture's legal view of abortion. His subsequent assertion that Christians do not procure abortions is necessarily apologetic, but it must have been an accurate generalization of Christian practice to have been of any value to his defense of Christianity.

Abortion in the Church  
Although all Christian writers opposed abortion, pagan influence on the church was unavoidable, and abortion was not unknown among "so-called Christians" (the term is Origen's). The situation was recognized as a serious problem by Origen, Hippolytus and Cyprian.

While the apologists praised Christians' refusal to imitate pagan practice, Hippolytus (ca 170-ca 236) was aware of subtle Roman influence on the church and of the church's failure to criticize that influence. Pope Callistus himself approved of a Roman law allowing concubine marriages, even though such marriages often resulted in unwanted pregnancies. Sometime after 222 Hippolytus wrote about the effect of Callistus's laxity:

Women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility, and to gird themselves round, so to expel what was being conceived on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth. Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by inculcating adultery and murder at the same time!

[Refutation of All Heresies (Philosophumena) 9.7]

In the face of growing immorality, especially among wealthier believing women, Hippolytus continued to hold forth the orthodox belief that abortion is murder.

Similarly, for Cyprian (ca 200/210-258), orthodox belief and practice were closely related. This popular writer was not at all surprised to learn that Novatian was not only schismatic but also immoral, abusing widows, orphans, his father and even his wife:

The womb of his wife was smitten by a blow of his heel; and in the miscarriage that soon followed, the offspring was brought forth, the fruit of a father's murder. And now he dares to condemn the hands of those who sacrifice, when he himself is more guilty in his feet, by which the son, who was about to be born, was slain?

[Cyprian, Letter 52.2, numbered 48 in some editions]

The theme of guilt and judgment reappears in apocalyptic texts of the third century. Methodius of Olympus alludes to unnamed "inspired writings," probably the second-century Apocalypse of Peter, which promise life to infant victims of abortion and infanticide, and judgment before Christ to the aborters:

Wherefore have we received it handed down in Scriptures inspired by God that children who are born before their time, even if they be the offspring of adultery, are delivered to care-taking angels . . . How could they have confidently summoned their parents before the judgment seat of Christ to bring a charge against them, saying, "Thou, O Lord, didst not grudgingly deny us the light that is common [to all], but these have exposed us to death, despising thy commandment."

While the text may refer only to infanticide, a widespread practice among the Romans, the phrase "born before their time" was an idiom for abortion. A theology embodying a high view of life is present in this passage: life is under God's will and providence from its inception and that are we responsible for the care of life "before the judgment seat of Christ."

The author is Dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland. In addition to many articles on abortion, he is the author of two forthcoming books, *The Elements of Exegesis* (Hendrickson) and a work on St. Paul's spirituality (Eerdmans). This is a shortened version of a chapter in *Abortion and the Early Church*. Citations have been removed in most cases. Originally published by InterVarsity Press and Paulist Press in 1982, Gorman's book has been reissued by Wipf & Stock, 150 W. Broadway, Eugene, Oregon 97401. The book is available at a reduced price directly from the author for \$8.50 including shipping within the US (\$10 outside the US with a check drawn on a US bank). Send a check made out to Michael Gorman at the Ecumenical Institute of Theology, 5400 Roland Avenue, Baltimore,

MD21210.

The text is copyright by the author and may not be reprinted without his permission