



## Contending for a Culture of Life: Abortion in the Work and Witness of the Early Church

**Nathan Tarr\***

*\*Nathan Tarr is the pastor of missions and discipleship at Christ Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is the author of *The Fruit of Lips That Acknowledge His Name: The Witness of Pastor Paul Schneider, the first pastor martyred by the Nazis*. The following essay appeared in the Spring 2020 issue of *Eikon*, a publication of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and is printed here by permission.*

The issue of abortion is never far out of the news. This perennial discussion provides believers with regular opportunity to articulate our convictions as well meaningfully engage those with different convictions. Certain opinions, such the claim that the right to “terminate one’s pregnancy” is “fundamental to one’s humanity” published in America’s paper of record, may sadden us but are no longer surprising.<sup>1</sup> They are immediately

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1 West took to the op-ed pages of the New York Times to decry the “morally putrescent” idea that Democrats should support anti-abortion candidates in order to contest elections in conservative districts. She championed a vision of the Democratic Party that views abortion as just such a litmus test: “It is true that the left will have to choose (and soon) between absolute ideological purity and the huge numbers required to seize the rudder of the nation...But abortion is not valid fodder for such compromise.” Abortion, West argued, cannot be a fringe issue. “Abortion is liberty.” Lindy West, “Of Course Abortion Should be a Litmus Test for Democrats,” *New York Times* Op-Ed, 8–2–17.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/opinion/trump-democrats-abortion-litmus-test.ht>. Accessed May 4, 2020.

recognizable as a distortion, and indeed a rejection, of the biblical anthropology which roots our humanity in the *imago Dei*.

But what of arguments in favour of abortion that lay claim to the history of the church itself? This approach can be both surprising and, for believers unfamiliar with the convictions of their forebears in the faith, even disorienting. Christiana Forrester, founder and director of Christian Democrats of America, attempted to formulate such an argument in the *Huffington Post*. Forrester advanced the claim that, “for hundreds of years Christians weren’t concerned about abortion.” In fact, she continued, there is “a lack of interest in the topic in early Christian teaching.” She concluded that because “there is little to no mention of abortion as a topic of great alarm,” from the Old Testament through to modern history, there is therefore “no case to be made for a definitive Christian stance throughout history on the spiritual or moral aspects of abortion.”<sup>2</sup>

Forrester’s wholesale revision of the historical record — suggesting that Christians first began to care about abortion after *Roe v. Wade* — smuggled in a payload of lying implications. She used her claim first to deny pro-life arguments any biblical and historical legitimacy, then to diminish the moral significance of abortion, placing it well beneath the mandate to excise xenophobia and alleviate poverty, and finally to reduce resistance to abortion to the level of political pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> Most troubling, for the purposes of this article, Forrester’s claim that her conclusions “simply bring the biblical and

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2 Christiana Forrester, “The Truth About Christianity and Abortion,” *Huffington Post* 4/19/2017. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-truth-about-christianity-and-abortion\\_us\\_58f52ed7e4b048372700dab5](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-truth-about-christianity-and-abortion_us_58f52ed7e4b048372700dab5). Accessed May 4, 2020.

3 It is now a commonplace to suggest that the New Testament writings do not speak directly to the issue of abortion, with Exodus 21:2 as the lone, and malleable, Old Testament passage carrying any direct relevance. Michael Gorman, however, alerts us to the implicit teaching of the New Testament in the use of *pharmakeia* (and its cognates) in Galatians 5:20 and Revelation 9:21, 18:23, 21:8, and 22:15. This word, often translated “sorcery,” was also used to refer to the poisons given to women as abortifacients. Michael Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 48. O.M. Bakke follows Gorman in his *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 114. An example of just such an interpretation can be seen in Jerome’s Epistle to the Galatians. Commenting on Galatians 5:20, Jerome takes the point of the apostolic injunction to be “so that poisoning and sorcery might not appear to be condoned in the New Testament.” Quoted in Mark Edwards ed. *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 8* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 88. For a discussion of the Old Testament Scriptures, see Bruce Waltke, “Reflections from the Old Testament on Abortion,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (1976): 3–13.

historical record to light,” forfeited the very sources contemporary Christians so desperately need in order to formulate and practice a biblically faithful, relationally sensitive, historically informed response to the cluster of issues surrounding abortion.

The purpose of this article is to resource just such a robust Christian response by revisiting the historical record of the church’s encounter with the practice of abortion and by re-presenting the culture of life for which these believers faithfully contended. In order to be helpful as well as brief, this study focuses on the period beginning with the death of the last Apostle (c.90 ad) and extending for roughly three hundred years thereafter. Leaders in these earliest centuries of Christianity regularly faced — and articulated a univocal response to — the practice of abortion amid the moral decadence of the Roman empire.<sup>4</sup> As we observe the way the believing community mingled the radiant warmth of divine grace toward those who were hurting together with an unflinching conviction regarding the image of the God in the life of the unborn, we can be encouraged and equipped in our own labors to contend for a culture of life.

### **A Culture of Death: Abortion in the Greek and Roman World**

Michael Gorman opens his seminal book, *Abortion and the Early Church*, with words that may surprise some: “abortion was not at all uncommon two thousand years ago.” The prevalence of this practice meant that “early Christians were forced to develop both an appropriate attitude to their culture’s practice and a standard for life within the Christian community.”<sup>5</sup> Before turning to examine the different aspects of the Christian response to abortion, this first section considers the cultural context in which Christianity emerged and distinguished itself as a growing religion within the Roman empire. This engagement with the Græco-Roman world must be brief, but it should be sufficient to reveal that a broad tolerance of abortion did in fact exist, along with the more common practice of exposing unwanted newborns. Furthermore, where cultural mores did come to discourage abortion as unlawful or illegitimate, the reasoning behind this

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4 For the growth of Christianity within the decline of the Roman empire see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), especially pages 15–52; Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), especially pages 143–182; Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), especially pages 35–92; Edward Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); and Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

5 Gorman, *Abortion*, 14.

pagan resistance was very different than the motivation guiding the Christian response.<sup>6</sup>

Greek medical practice largely opposed abortion. *The Oath of Hippocrates*, dating from the fifth-century BC, includes an explicit promise not to perform an abortion; “I swear...I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion.”<sup>7</sup> This rejection owed largely to the fact that the poisons prescribed were dangerous to the life of the mother, and therefore in violation of the same oath to “keep them from harm.” The surgical procedures used for abortion were likewise horrifically dangerous to the mother; therefore, exposure of new-borns became the preferred method for controlling the quantity and quality of the population in the family or *polis*.<sup>8</sup> Many doctors, however — including Hippocrates himself it seems — were willing to perform abortions and “women who wanted abortions, for whatever reason, had a great variety of means available to them.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, leading Greek philosophers such as Plato (428–348bc) and Aristotle (384–322bc) endorsed abortion in cases where the child would threaten the welfare of the state. This endorsement was in keeping with their subjection of all individual rights to the good of the community. In Plato’s case, it came in spite of his conviction, against Aristotle, that life began at conception.<sup>10</sup>

Roman attitudes toward abortion were a similar mixture. Legally, abortion was viewed as a violation of the *patria potestas*. Children were vital to the security both of the community and family line. The father of a Roman household held the future of his family, and therefore the lives of those under his roof, in his hand. This power meant that a woman who sought an abortion apart from her husband’s consent could face severe repercussions, including

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6 For the Græco-Roman attitude toward abortion, see Gorman, *Abortion*, 13–32; Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 15–55; Richard Harrow Fein, “Abortion and Exposure in Ancient Greece: Assessing the Status of the Fetus and ‘Newborn’ from Classical Sources” in William Bondeson, et. al. ed. *Abortion and the Status of the Fetus* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 283–300.

7 Gorman, *Abortion*, 20.

8 For several ancient descriptions of the procedure, see Gorman, *Abortion*, 17.

9 Gorman, *Abortion*, 15.

10 See Gorman, *Abortion*, 20–24, 35. Aristotle held that the fetus acquired a kind of vegetable life at conception, which was then replaced by an animal soul, and finally a rational mind after a long developmental course. The Stoics held that life only begins as the fully developed infant takes its first breath, but their philosophers did nevertheless condemn abortion as detrimental to the common good. Most likely they had the population of the polis in mind. For a discussion of the way the body could be used as a metaphor for society in antiquity, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

finer, divorce, and even exile.<sup>11</sup> In the *Twelve Tables*, Roman law also provided that husbands who pressured their wives to abort without cause were to be censured in view of the danger abortion posed to the woman. Actual penalties were not set, however, and these legal injunctions did not translate to the protection of children inside or outside of the womb. Furthermore, the *Twelve Tables* extended the authority to the *paterfamilias* to expose or abort any infant he deemed unsupportable. Such an action was not considered murder since Roman law did not recognize the fetus as a person, but only as part of the mother, and even newborn children were not considered a part of the family until they were formally acknowledged by the father as his child. According to a Roman euphemism, to abort or expose was simply “the refusal to admit to society.”<sup>12</sup> By the time of Christ’s birth, abortion was widespread and had reached the point of being practiced, despite its dangers, as a personal convenience.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, even where poets, philosophers, or politicians came to decry the practice of abortion, their motive for such a stand derived from a desire to maintain the rights of the father, or the future population of the empire. This perspective was strikingly different from the explicitly theological convictions on which Christians would take their stand for life.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Gorman, *Abortion*, 25–32, 35. Plutarch, and later Cicero, called for divorce and the death penalty, respectively, as fitting punishment for deliberate abortion. In both cases, the concern was to maintain the power of the father.

12 Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 80–81. Gorman states, “that the fetus is not a person was fundamental to Roman law”, *Abortion*, 32. For a discussion of the religious ceremony constituting the reception of a newborn, see H. J. Rose, *Religion in Greece and Rome* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 30–31, 189–90.

13 Juvenal (c.55–127ad) comments on how rarely a “gilded bed” contained a pregnant woman. The rich frequently made use of their access to abortion, and often in order to maintain a standard of living, sexual appeal, or to cover up illicit activity. Juvenal, *Satire* 6:592–601. Cited in Gorman, *Abortion*, 14. The poet Ovid (43bc–43ad) suggests a popular motivation for seeking abortion when he asks, “Can it be that, to spare your bosom the reproach of lines, you would scatter the tragic sands of deadly combat?” Ovid, *De nuce*, 22–23. Cited in William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, (New York: Appleton and Company, 1872), 2:23.

14 Christians were able to draw on a long-standing Jewish tradition in their theological rejection of abortion. For a presentation of this tradition see Gorman, *Abortion*, 33–45; and Andreas Lindemann, “‘Do Not Let a Woman Destroy the Unborn Babe in Her Belly’: Abortion in Ancient Judaism and Christianity,” *Studia theologica* 49 (1995): 253–271. See also, John Frame, “Abortion from a Biblical Perspective” in R.L. Ganz, ed., *Thou Shalt Not Kill* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1978), 50–57.

### **The Two Ways: Defining a Christian Identity**

The culture in which the church cut her moral teeth was coarsened by violence of many kinds, including violence against the unborn. It was in this world that followers of Jesus worked both to define themselves and to defend themselves as they caught increasing attention from the empire. To accomplish this twin task, the image that dominated the Christian ethical imagination, as seen in the earliest post-canonical writings, was that of the “two ways.” Drawn from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, as well as from Jewish oral tradition, these alternatives were opposed to one another as the way of life and the way of death. For example, the *Didache*, a manual for Christian morality and church order dating from the first half of the second century, opens with these lines, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.”<sup>15</sup> The contemporary *Epistle of Barnabas* shifts the image slightly to “one of light and one of darkness,” but stresses again the “great difference between these two ways.”<sup>16</sup> The main thrust of this difference, in the context of both works, is ethical. These authors were attempting to shape the daily behavior of their fellow believers.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly, both the *Didache* and *Barnabas* served as instruction manuals for baptismal candidates in the early church. This period of catechesis and character formation, often prolonged over several years, carried the purpose of “alter[ing] the habits of perception and standards of judgment of novices coming out of a pagan lifestyle.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the

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15 Michael Holmes, trans. *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 345. Holmes’s introduction provides a helpful discussion of the debates regarding the date, place, and purpose of this “most fascinating yet perplexing document.” It also includes a helpful bibliography for further study.

16 Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 433. The majority of The Epistle of Barnabas is a storehouse of Christian interpretation of the Old Testament as providing types and shadows of the person and work of Christ. Where it speaks to Christian morality, it tracks closely with The Didache. For a discussion of the relationship between these two documents, and their possible shared dependence on a common source, see Jonathan Draper, “Barnabas and the Riddle of the Didache Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 58 (1995): 96–99.

17 Nevertheless, the biblical connection between a life that bears good fruit and a root of true and vital faith was never totally out of view. The way of life was the way to life. In the words of Barnabas, “This, therefore, is the way of light; if any desire to make their way to the designated place, let them be diligent with respect to their works.” Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 435. Contrast this with, “But the way of the black one is crooked and completely cursed. For it is a way of eternal death and punishment.” Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 439.

18 Thomas O’Loughlin, “The Missionary Strategy of the Didache,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 28.2 (2001): 84.

goal was to take men and women whose lives had been saturated with the world and inculcate an explicitly Christian identity, both in terms of doctrine and practice. Recognizing that a verbal confession could come more quickly than a corresponding change in behaviour, early Christian catechesis emphasized what it looked like to live according to the teachings of Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

The result of this intentional discipleship was that the lives of Christ-followers began to take on an identifiable moral stamp in the midst of their culture. The ethical behaviour of believers was just as noticeable and unique, if not initially more so, as the doctrinal beliefs that drove it. Recalling the image of the “two ways,” these paths were sufficiently close in terms of relational proximity, but sufficiently divergent in terms of behavioural practice, that travellers could recognize who was who along the road. And because this way of life issued ultimately from allegiance to Christ, who is king over all, this distinctly Christian morality forged a community across social classes and ethnic barriers, from the eastern to the western reaches of the Roman empire. As Wayne Meeks recognizes, “making morals means making community.”<sup>20</sup> Whatever their prior background, believers in Jesus were now a new *ethnos* with a correspondingly unique *ethos*. As the author of the early letter *To Diognetus* understood,

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom...But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities...and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as non-residents; they participate in everything as citizens, but endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign.<sup>21</sup>

The Athenian apologist Aristides (fl.110–130) argues in a similar fashion. He begins his *Apology* to the emperor by boldly announcing that the

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19 This was because, in the words of Justin Martyr, “Those who are found not living as he taught should know that they are not really Christians, even if his teachings are on their lips.” Justin, First Apology 16.8 in C. C. Richardson ed., E.R. Hardy trans., *Early Christian Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 161–82. For a helpful discussion of the purposes and processes of both catechesis and baptism in early Christianity see Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 133–84. For a helpful engagement with Kreider’s main thesis, see Bryan Litfin, “Was the Early Church ‘Patient’?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-patient-ferment-of-the-early-church>. Accessed May 4, 2020.

20 Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

21 Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 701–703.

Christians “are the ones, beyond all the [other] nations of the earth, who have found the truth.” At least three claims are made in this brief introduction. First, Christians, as a whole and wherever they are found, are presented as a distinct nation (*ethnos*) among all the other nations — Aristides juxtaposes this identity with the Babylonians, Greeks, Egyptians, and even the Jews.<sup>22</sup> Second, the fundamental or underlying Christian distinctive, as Aristides presents it, is theological; “For they know the God who is creator and maker of everything and they worship no other God but him.”<sup>23</sup> Third, and from this theological foundation, Aristides goes on to stress the way Christians, in contrast to other philosophical schools of the day, refuse to espouse teaching they had no intention of embodying. Rather, what follows in the *Apology*, as in *Diognetus*, is a lengthy discussion of Christian morality. This conviction that orthodoxy and orthopraxy belongs together fits with the biblical insistence, to use Meeks’s words, that “the things one believes about God affect the way one behaves.”<sup>24</sup>

In developing a distinctly Christian identity within these new converts, therefore, the Christian community drew heavily on the doctrinal and ethical implications of the “two ways.” And these two ways often divided along the issue of the sanctity of the life of unborn children.

### **The Way of Life: The Early Christian Position on Abortion**

The Christian rejection of abortion differed fundamentally from that of their pagan neighbors because they carried the personhood of the unborn child always in view. The grid of implications through which their culture considered the practice of abortion — the power of the father, the population of the empire, or even the safety of the mother undergoing the procedure — were, for believers, secondary considerations. The primary conviction motivating the Christian stand for life was that the unborn child was a human being, created by God, and therefore was included under the divine commands against murder and for the love of neighbour.

The *Didache*, for example, in unfolding the steps along the way of life, calls believers to the love of God and neighbour. This neighbour-love is then developed, after the pattern of the Ten Commandments, through a series of prohibitions against murder, including “you shall not abort a child or

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22 Aristides, *Apology* 15.3–7 in J. Stevenson trans., *A New Eusebius* rev. W.H.C. Frend (London: The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1987), 53–55.

23 Aristides, *Apology*, 53. Everett Ferguson issues a helpful reminder at this point. Namely, that the authority of Christianity rests, and has always rested, not on the absolute originality of its teachings and practices, but “on whether it is a revelation from God.” Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 619.

24 Meeks, Origin, 16. Or to use the words of the apostle James, that “faith without works is dead.”



commit infanticide.”<sup>25</sup> The *Epistle of Barnabas* situates the same prohibition even more immediately in the context of a Christian’s sacrificial love, “You shall love your neighbour more than your own life. You shall not abort a child, nor, again, commit infanticide.”<sup>26</sup> Both documents return to the issue of abortion when describing the path of death. Down this dark road, abortion made one liable to divine judgment because it was the culpable destruction of God’s creation.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that these early manuals of Christian thought and practice describe abortion both as the murder of children and as the corruption of God’s creation is significant. The conclusion Christians drew from this connection is that the unborn child, as God’s creation, is the object of his protection. Abortion, in other words, had to do with God. This theological starting point carried direct ethical implications for God’s people; namely, that the unborn child was not considered to be at the disposal of his father, nor again as part of the body of her mother. Rather, as the handiwork of God, the unborn were not to be violated and, as a human being, they were to be protected, even preferred, as a neighbour.<sup>28</sup> Remembering that the Lord Jesus locates a believer’s enemy in the place of a neighbour must have caused this teaching to take on a special poignancy in the face of difficult pregnancies. Women who found themselves abandoned, impoverished, or impregnated by a man they detested could easily have considered their growing child to be an

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25 Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 347. For more on the early Christian position, see Harold O.J. Brown, “What the Supreme Court Didn’t Know: Ancient and Early Christian Views on Abortion,” *Human Life Review* 1 (Springs, 1975): 5–21.

26 Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 435.

27 The Apocalypse of Peter, written around the same time as the Didache and Barnabas, contained a graphic vision of the tortures experienced in hell. Included, in “a very great and very deep pit,” are “women swallowed up to their necks and punished with great pain” who “have procured abortions and have ruined the work of God which he has created.” Cited in Bakke, *Children*, 117. This document carried significant weight in the earliest Christian communities, with both Clement of Alexandria (150–215) and the Moratorian Fragment giving it canonical status. Though it was ultimately recognized as non-canonical in the fourth century, the Apocalypse of Peter provides a vivid picture of the seriousness with which the church took the issue of abortion. It was the culpable murder of God’s creation. Significantly, the men who assisted these murders by procuring the poisons, or pressuring the women, are also condemned. As Peter pictures it, they are condemned by the voices of the very children they have murdered, who themselves live in the presence of God.

28 See the discussion in Bakke, *Children*, 114–115.

enemy.<sup>29</sup> But the Christian gospel carried, and still carries, sufficient power to transform the heart of a believer from hatred of one's adversary to self-sacrificial love.

Driven by the conviction that life was the gift and prerogative of God, the Christian community was governed by an ethic that drew on these twin commands: "though shalt not murder" and, "thou shalt love your neighbour, even an enemy, as yourself." Combined, these laws led the church to contend for a culture of life and extend a sacrificial welcome toward the unborn.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Question of the Beginning of Life**

Given the significance of this call to serve and protect the life of their unborn neighbour, the early church wrestled with the question of when life began inside the womb. The church largely rejected adaptations of Aristotle's progression from non-life to life *in utero*, arguing instead that life began at the moment of conception. In his *De anima*, for example, the Latin theologian Tertullian (c.160–240) continued to develop this idea, expressed in his earlier *Apology*, that "that is a man which is going to be one; you have the fruit already in the seed." He deploys arguments from medicine, logic, and biblical passages such as [Luke 1:41, 46](#) and [Jeremiah 1:5](#) to argue that even though a fetus does not take a fully human form until just before birth, it is nevertheless to be considered, and so treated, as a living being from the moment of conception.<sup>31</sup> This view continued to hold sway even after the conversion of the emperor Constantine (272–337AD) released an influx of "nominal believers" into the church. When writing his *On the Soul and Resurrection* in 379, Gregory of Nyssa (335–394AD) argued that the "soul and body have one and the same beginning." For Gregory, life must begin at conception because soul-less beings do not possess "the power of movement and growth." Yet the unborn child clearly developed.<sup>32</sup> Basil of Caesarea

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29 The emperor Justinian recorded the case of a woman who aborted her child after suffering a divorce so that she would not have to endure a child by the man she now despised. Alan Watson ed. *The Digest of Justinian* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 4:48.19.39.

30 This welcome included Christian efforts to rescue and adopt infants who had been exposed. For the work of believers such as Beningus of Dijon, who nourished and sheltered abandoned children, including those deformed by unsuccessful abortions, see "The Beginning of Life and Abortion," in *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2537–2539.

31 Toward the end of his *De anima*, Tertullian, wrestling with Exodus 21:22–25, used the language of an embryo "becom[ing] a human being from the moment when its formation is completed." See the discussion in Gorman, *Abortion*, 55–59.

32 Catharine Roth trans. *On the Soul and Resurrection* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 99–100.

(329–379), a fellow Cappadocian Father, was able to sweep away all considerations of whether the fetus was formed or unformed, claiming that “among us there is no fine distinction between a completely formed and unformed [embryo].” Rather, “the woman who has deliberately destroyed [her fetus] is subject to the penalty for murder.” The reason for this guilt, according to Basil, was that a human soul is present in a developing fetus from the moment of conception.<sup>33</sup> Gorman’s conclusion regarding Basil’s *Letter to Amphilochius*, from which these lines come, provides an apt summary of the position taken by the early church as a whole toward the unborn at any stage of development: “[the church] dismisses as irrelevant all casuistic distinctions between the formed and the unformed fetus. For [them], intention matters above all because all life — that of the fetus and that of the mother — is sacred.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Way of Life: Defending Christian Morality**

When the Christian community turned from defining its community ethic for new members to the work of defending this “way of life” to the broader culture, abortion featured prominently in its apologetic. It may be fair to say, in light of the available documents, that the conviction regarding the unborn as God’s creation, and therefore of abortion as murder, was heard more frequently when the church faced outward than when she faced inward. Such frequency should not surprise us given how unanimous this conviction — to eschew violence of all kinds — was within the church and how far it set them apart from their culture. What was significant, however, was that Christian apologists could assume that their pagan audience was familiar with the church’s position on abortion, and therefore could draw on this common knowledge to alleviate confusion over behaviour at other rites, such as the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

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33 See Joseph Donceel, “Immediate Animation and Delayed Homogenization,” *Theological Studies* 31 (1970):76–105. See also the discussion in Michael A. G. Haykin, “Basil of Caesarea on Those who Commit Abortion” in Haykin, *The Church Fathers as Spiritual Mentors* (Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2017), 95.

34 Gorman, *Abortion*, 67. An example of the sacredness of all life sweeping distinctions before it comes in the thought of Augustine (354–430). In Gorman’s words, “Speculation about the origin of the soul, about the human and nonhuman fetus, about the meaning of original sin now gave way [in the mature thought of the Enchiridion] to his long-held conviction that all human life is ‘God’s own work.’” See the discussion in Gorman, *Abortion*, 70–73.



Marcus Aurelius

The Athenian apologist Athenagoras (c.133–c.190), for example, wrote to the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180) to answer charges of Christian cannibalism stemming from a misunderstanding of the “flesh” eaten at the Lord’s Supper. In his defence, Athenagoras asks, “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.”<sup>35</sup> For this argument to carry logical force, Athenagoras must have been confident that the Christian position on abortion was known even to the emperor. In the West, Tertullian combatted the same accusation — “we are accused of observing a holy rite in which we kill a little child and then eat it” — by adopting the same approach. He wrote, “In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not even destroy the fetus in the womb.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, these apologists would often turn the tables on their pagan inquisitors, refuting the charge of Christian immorality by pointing out that only a pagan mind, deformed by so many moral travesties, could have conjured up such an idea in the first place. For example, in his *Octavius*, Municius Felix (d. c.260) rejects the idea that Christian initiation rites included drinking the blood of infants, arguing instead that, “It is a practice of yours, I observe, to expose your very own children to birds and wild beasts, or at times to smother and strangle them — a pitiful way to die; 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.”<sup>37</sup>

In fairness, the historical record demonstrates that abortion was known to exist within the early Christian community. The practice of abortion, interpreted by the church’s pastors as pagan influence on the people

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35 Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 35. Cited in Gorman, *Abortion*, 54. Evaluating the effect this Christian witness had on their culture, Gorman asks, “Is it only coincidental that the apologetic writings of Athenagoras and Tertullian immediately preceded the first Roman laws against abortions?” Gorman, *Abortion*, 62.

36 Tertullian, *Apology*, 9.6. Cited in Gorman, *Abortion*, 55.

37 Municius Felix, *Octavius*, 30.1. Cited in Bakke, *Children*, 124.

of God, was admitted as cause for significant concern.<sup>38</sup> Even where individual Christians did not live up to the ethical standard their theology required, the church as a whole was known, by insiders and outsiders alike, to stand for life in all stages. The final section of this article considers the church's response to those who claim the name of Christ yet still procure an abortion.

### **Returning to the Way: The Opportunity of Repentance and Reconciliation**

Surveying the sea-change in the church created by Constantine's consequential edict, as well as the legal and theological disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries, Michael Gorman was still able to affirm that the fifth-century church "maintained the earliest Christian stance against abortion." The conviction that life begins at conception, and therefore that the unborn is a neighbour and abortion is murder, was not adjusted to fit a changing moral climate inside or outside the church. But Gorman does note an addition to the church's witness in these later centuries of the ancient period; namely, "they introduced the theme of forgiveness and grace for those who had obtained abortions."<sup>39</sup> This focus on forgiveness opening a door back to the way of life is a vital, but often overlooked, aspect of the church's holistic response to abortion in her midst.

In his survey of *The Church Fathers as Spiritual Mentors*, Michael Haykin recommends the example of Basil of Caesarea as an appropriate blend of this truth and love: "[Basil] recognizes the heinousness of this sin in the eyes of God, but at the same time, he is cognizant that this sin is not beyond the pale of God's forgiveness."<sup>40</sup> Several church councils before Basil's day had codified the Christian response to abortion within the church by means of penance, or even being put out of the church. According to the Council of Elvira (305/306AD), a woman who sought and received an abortion was placed under the ban for the remainder of her life. In 314 AD, the Council of Ancyra reduced the period of excommunication to ten years, after which a repentant woman might be restored to the church. Basil joined these councils, and the Christian consensus they represented, in condemning abortion as "something worse than murder."<sup>41</sup> But he moved then to

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38 See the discussion of the responses of Origen, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Chrysostom in Gorman, *Abortion*, 59–73. Gorman concludes that "the Christian position first articulated in the early second century survived through the fourth. Despite an increasing problem with its borders, which now included much of the populace [after Constantine], the church managed to maintain its ethical position." Gorman, *Abortion*, 70.

39 Gorman, *Abortion*, 73.

40 Haykin, *Mentors*, 95.

41 The language is that of John Chrysostom (349–407), preaching in Constantinople on Romans 13:11–14. Chrysostom, Homily 24 on Romans. Cited in Gorman, *Abortion*, 72–73.

prioritize not penance but the power of the gospel to bring a sinner to repentance. Basil argued, “their restoration should be determined not by time, but by the manner of their repentance.”<sup>42</sup> Following this repentance, the door was open to healing and reconciliation with the church.

This balance of truth — abortion is murder — and love — the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin — is captured in an ancient prayer that is still used today in the Eastern Orthodox church. It provides a good summary of the early church’s work to contend for the life both of the unborn and those who sin against them: “Lord our God...according to your great mercy, have mercy upon [name], who today is in sin, having fallen into voluntary or involuntary murder, and has aborted that conceived in her; and be gracious unto her willing and unwilling iniquities, and preserve her from every diabolical wile, cleanse her defilement and heal her suffering.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The regularity with which abortion is given a place in our national conversation means that Christians are regularly required to articulate both what we believe, and why. Thankfully, we are not left without either biblical teaching or historical precedent as we cultivate a response that holistically addresses the exigencies of such a complex issue. In defining and defending Christian moral values, the early church drew on the biblical conviction that, from the moment of conception, unborn children are created by God in his image. This theological foundation calls the church, as an ethical corollary, to welcome the unborn as a neighbour, even preferring them above ourselves, rather than to destroy them as an enemy. Significantly, in contending for this culture of life, the mother is not asked to bear this cost alone. Rather, both mother and child are to be welcomed, served, and protected by the Christian community. Such service includes extending grace and forgiveness to facilitate healing and restore fellowship even after grievous sin.

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42 The translation is that of Haykin, *Mentors*, 92. Gorman considers Basil’s letter to be “one of the most profound theological and ethical statements on abortion” produced by the early church. Gorman, *Abortion*, 66.

43 John Kowalczyk, *An Orthodox View of Abortion* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1987), 36–37.