



Appendix

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Abortion Then/Now: What We Can Learn From How the Early Church Dealt With Abortion & Infanticide

January 31, 2019 By James Hein

Without God and the future life? How will man be after that? It means everything is permitted now.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov (New York: Vintage, 1991), pg. 589

Communist Russia, Communist China, and Nazi Germany eliminated an incredible amount of human life. Stalin was responsible for around 20 million deaths. Mao Zedong's regime is credited with a staggering 70 million deaths. Hitler comes in third with around 10 million murders attributed to his name. The twentieth century was the world's great experiment in seeing what intentionally godless governments would produce. The end result was a century with more slaughter of human life than all other centuries combined.

Without question, the saving grace of the western world has been the presence of an inherited Christian worldview. Abraham Lincoln, William Wilberforce, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were able to make assertions about human rights and usher in civil rights reform based solely on a belief in the biblical *Imago Dei* (i.e. "the image of God") – the idea that all humans have value because God himself imbued humanity with special value.

As the faith of a nation goes, so goes its perception of personhood.

Consequently, if you've been following trends of Christian religious activity over the past 20 years, it was no surprise to you that the New York State legislature passed the Reproductive Health Act on January 22, the 46th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. The act allows abortion at any point during a pregnancy (24 weeks had been the prior limit) if it is deemed "*necessary to protect a woman's life or health.*"

If you've ever read Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker's famous article in the *NY Times* from over two decades ago, you knew this was coming. If you realized that the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) targeted New York upon its founding in 1969, you knew this was coming. If you were aware that over a quarter of all pregnancies in New York already end in abortion, you knew this was coming.

When you're raised in the United States, it's perhaps easy to forget that abortion and infanticide have been quite common in world history. The reason they have been



forbidden in the West for centuries is only because Western values were shaped by Christianity. Author Benjamin Wiker makes the case in *Moral Darwinism*:

The laws against abortion and infanticide in the West are only intelligible as a result of its Christianization, and the repeal of those same laws is only intelligible in light of its de-Christianization.

Benjamin Wiker, Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), pg. 100.

A fairly apples-to-apples comparison of what we see happening today in America is what was seen in the Roman Empire. The Twelve Tables—the earliest known Roman legal code, written about 450 B.C.E.—permitted a father to expose any female infant and any deformed or weak male infant to the natural elements to let them die in the fields. Philosophers Plato and Aristotle, both recommended infanticide as legitimate state policy. (cf. Plato, *Republic* 5; Aristotle, *Politics* 2,7) Seneca regarded the drowning of children at birth as both reasonable and commonplace. Tacitus stated that the Jewish mindset: “it is a deadly sin to kill an unwanted child,” was but another of the Jews’ “sinister and revolting” teachings (cf. *The Histories* 5.5). The famous Roman medical writer, Celsus, goes into great detail in *De medicina* (cf. 7.29) about how to surgically carry out an abortion. Etc.

Some of these thoughts are new to America. But they’re not technically *new*.

So, the relevant question then is: How did the early Christians, with very little political, educational, or financial clout, react to the tragedy taking place around them?

For starters, we know without question that Christians viewed abortion and infanticide as wrong. The *Didache*, a manual/catechism of church teachings written in the late first century, states in the second chapter: “Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born.”

Similarly, Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century, wrote:

We have been taught that it is wicked to expose even newly-born children . . . (for) we would then be murderers.

Martyr, First Apology, pgs. 27-29

While we do have some records of Christians writing letters to government officials in hopes of persuading them, this seemingly created little, if any, changes in government policy. Rather, historian Rodney Stark says that what truly influenced the Roman Empire to eventually become sympathetic to Christianity’s pro-life stances was the Christians’ willingness to provide relief for the poor and taking in and supporting babies which had been left to die by their pagan parents. Historian Will Durant wrote:

In many instances, Christians rescued exposed infants, baptized them, and brought them up with the aid of community funds.

Durant, Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their Beginnings to A.D. 325, Vol. 3, pg. 598

The Roman Emperor Julian, writing in the fourth century, regretted the progress of Christianity. He saw that it was causing Roman paganism to crumble. Why? From his perspective:

[The Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.

Letter to Arsacius, High-priest of Galatia (362), in The Works of the Emperor Julian, Volume III (1913)

And here's the main takeaway. Yes, Christians should experience righteous anger at the thought of the slaughter of more unborn innocents. Anger is a mechanism that appropriately rises to defend what is right. But when anger, even righteous anger, transforms into repaying evil with evil, we forget that God alone justly brings wrath, and that our job is simply to overcome evil with good.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21

I see no allowance in here for self-righteous social media tirades. I see no godliness in calling names like "idiots" or "psychopaths." I see the Apostle Paul telling us that the path to Christlikeness is showing the same grace to enemies that God showed to us. I see Paul similarly telling the church in Corinth "***What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside***" (1 Cor. 5:12-13). I see the Early Christian Church, with minimal resources, actually influencing their pagan society by adopting children, providing charity to the poor, and confounding the culture by a demonstration of humble, sacrificial love.

Social media rants cost nothing and can ruin everything. On the other hand, picking up crosses to follow Christ costs dearly but helps save the world and lifts up the name of Jesus.

Interestingly, Steven Pinker cited in his *NY Times* article that "*The women who sacrifice their offspring tend to be young, poor, unmarried and socially isolated.*" If provided adequate human resources – godly men who were willing to stay with them and help them raise kids, Christian friends who encourage them towards the beauty of God's will, a church that is willing to financially come alongside a young pregnant woman and give her grace instead of shame – many of these young, poor, unmarried, marginalized women would make different decisions. The quick jab, sanctimonious social media post doesn't move the needle an inch. Sacrificial love brings forth life.

This is not to say that wisdom brought forward in videos like this one aren't enormously helpful. Being able to defend your Christian values using arguments from the Natural Knowledge of God are an important part of your Christian witness as well. Former NARAL co-founder, Bernard Nathanson, became a pro-life activist upon viewing the undeniable evidence before him with the advent of the ultrasound (chronicled in educational film *The Silent Scream*). He later became a Christian. Calm, logical arguments are an essential part of the public dialogue.

But the group Steven Pinker was identifying as prime candidates for abortion is shockingly close to the group of people in society that God, throughout Scripture, is constantly compelling his nation (OT) & Church (NT) to watch out for – the widows, orphans, foreigners, and poor. The Lord does not tell his people to rage against the evils of the world, but rather to keep their own lives free from evil and be a light to the world.

Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.

Zechariah 7:9-10

In the recent history of American politics, when Christians shout, the country gets angry. But historically, when God's people calmly point to the truth and lovingly sacrifice like Christ to lift up life and personhood, the world has been changed.

The good news is that we ALL have been forgiven and saved by a child whose life was unfairly taken. It was a costly tragedy for which we're all equally guilty. But in his infinite wisdom, God used this horror to bring forth spiritual life. He can do it again.