

Abortion and the Early Church

An exploration on the official stand of the church in historical context

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Abortion in Pagan context

Often abortion is regarded as a contemporary issue only. However, even before the birth of Christ, in Greek and Roman society abortion was commonplace¹.

Christianity developed in a largely pagan society. In an attempt to understand Christian feelings and attitudes, we first need to observe abortion in its pagan context.

Abortion appears to have been practised extensively, for a variety of reasons. Several methods were available. Medication (“poisons”), surgery, tight waistbands, and punching and kicking appear to have been applied quite effectively². If a child was born, infanticide or child exposure was also a frequently practised option.³

In ancient Greece abortion was not only a medical but also a legal and political concern. Several philosophers, such as Plato, recommended abortion in certain circumstances.⁴

The oath of Hippocrates (460-357 BC) gives evidence that not everyone readily accepted abortion. The oath includes the phrase “...*Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. Similarly, I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion.*”⁵

Plato (428-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC)⁶ supported abortion in their views on the individual related to the state. Both philosophers distinguish between necessary and unnecessary abortion.

Aristotle’s concept of “delayed ensoulment” deeply penetrated into the intellectual world. In his teachings on delayed ensoulment, Aristotle distinguished between vegetable, animal and human

¹ Balsdon, J. P. V. *D Roman women: their history and habits*. Toronto 1977, pg. 190-199

² Gorman Michael J., *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 15-20

³ Balsdon, J. P. V. *D Roman women: their history and habits*. Toronto 1977, pg. 190-199

⁴ 4. Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 15-20

⁵ Hippocrates, with an English translation by W. H. S. Jones, London, 1972, Vol. 1 pg. 299

⁶ 6. Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 20-25

life. He believed that the human soul entered the body when the foetus was fully formed. He placed the human ensoulment at forty days for males and at eighty days for females.⁷

In Roman law, abortion and infanticide were really not distinguished. An infant did not have legal status until the head of the family, the “pater familias”, accepted it. Until accepted, the infant could be destroyed.⁸

Nevertheless, in the Roman Republic and later in the Roman Empire, laws were established to limit abortion. From Christian and pagan side, attempts were made to promote the family.⁹

In general the anti-abortion attitudes do not in the first place reflect concern for newly developed life. Main concern appears to have been population politics and concern for the women undergoing abortion.¹⁰

Abortion in Early Christian view

Around the year 30 AD, Christianity emerged from Judaism, and in the following decades spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire.¹¹ Though no Jewish religious texts are known that explicitly condemn the practice of abortion, Judaism regarded life in its early stage of development as a gift of God.¹² Although not questioned by pagan society at that time, evidence of Jewish love for conceiving children can be found in pagan texts.¹³ Flavius Josephus, a well-known Jewish historian who described the destruction of Jerusalem, wrote: *“The law, moreover enjoins us to bring up all our offspring, and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to destroy it afterward; and if any woman appears to have so done, she will be a*

⁷ Aristotle, *On the soul*; with an English translation by W. S. Hett, 1964, London, pg. 4-5

⁸ Heichelheim, Fritz M., *A history of the Roman people*, Englewood Cliffs NJ, 1984, pg. 35-38

⁹ Gorman Michael J., *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 31

¹⁰ Gorman Michael J., *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 31

¹¹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Markham ON, 1987, pg 54-73

¹² Bible, Authorised King James Version, Psalm 139 “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.”

¹³ Gorman Michael J., *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 34

*murderer of her child, by destroying a living creature, and diminishing humankind.”*¹⁴

A Jewish in-house debate about the proper exegesis of Exodus 21:22-25¹⁵ dealt with life and death of the foetus in its various stages of development. Both poles in the debate disapproved of deliberate abortion.¹⁶

Christians acknowledged most of the Jewish writings and consequently regarded life as sacred. However, pagan practice evoked Christian reply.

Opinions of individuals such as theologians, apologists and jurists, ultimately culminated in legislature in the form of the canons as given above. Before I deal in more detail with the historical context of the various councils, I will briefly explore the opinions of some Christian writers.

If the writings of the New Testament refer to abortion, as some historians suggest, this reference is vague. Among the non-canonical writings of (probably) the first century are the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Apocalypse of Peter. The Didache states: “Thou shalt not slay thy child by abortion, nor kill that which is begotten”.¹⁷ In the epistle of Barnabas we read: “Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born.”¹⁸ Both documents consider abortion murder. In both writings condemnation of abortion is linked to infanticide. The Apocalypse of Peter, much respected among early Christians, paints a vivid picture of the unborn tormenting the women who caused abortion.¹⁹

¹⁴ Josephus, Flavius, *The works of Flavius Josephus translated by William Whiston ; with an introductory essay by H. Stebbing*, Philadelphia, 1966, pg. 374-375

¹⁵ Bible, Authorised King James Version, Exodus 21:22-25 “If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

¹⁶ Gorman Michael J., *Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world*, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 45

¹⁷ The Ante- Nicene Fathers, *Didache 2:2* “Thou shall 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.” Grand Rapids, 1971

¹⁸ The Ante- Nicene Fathers, *Epistle of Barnabas* “Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born.” (dated 70-138 AD) Grand Rapids, 1971

¹⁹ The Ante- Nicene Fathers, *The Apocalypse of Peter 25* “And near that place I saw another strait place into which the gore and the filth of those who were being punished ran down and became there as it were a lake: and there sat women having the gore up to their necks, and over against them sat many children who were born to them out of due time, crying; and there came forth from them sparks of fire and smote the women in the eyes: and these were the accursed who conceived and caused abortion.” Grand Rapids, 1971

Tertullian in his “Apologetics” calls abortion murder, based on the idea that “He is a man, who is to be a man; the fruit is always present in the seed.” In rejecting abortion, not only the woman whose child is aborted is condemned, but also those who aid with either manufacturing abortifacients or performing surgeries.²⁰

Apologetists defended themselves against accusations of cannibalism using the argument that Christians don’t kill, “not even the foetus of the womb.”²¹

Another argument used against abortion is that not only the foetus is destroyed but also in the foetus all the possible offspring the future adult could have produced.²²

Writers such as John Chrysostom and Jerome related abortion not only to murder, but to fornication as well. Jerome adds the sin of suicide to the list, since he perceived that abortion was often fatal.²³

Abortion was seen as murder and subsequently condemned unanimously.

Abortion among Christians

Though abortion and infanticide were considered murder, this did not mean that it did not occur among Christians. Church leaders did not approve. The Pauline writings give sufficient evidence that fornication and adultery have been issues playing a major role in the Early Church.²⁴

Pregnancies were inevitable. However, disciplinary measures were taken immediately.²⁵

Women aborting their foetus were not considered to be genuine. Other writings associate abortion with heresy.²⁶ Persecution under various emperors, such as Lucius in the East, forced the church to deal with the problems related to apostasy. Also, the explosive growth of the

²⁰ The Ante- Nicene Fathers, Tertullian, Treatise on the Soul, Chapter XXXVII. On the Formation and State of the Embryo, “The embryo therefore becomes a human being in the womb from the moment that its form is completed. The law of Moses, indeed, punishes with due penalties the man who shall cause abortion, inasmuch as there exists already the rudiment of a human being”, Grand Rapids, 1971

²¹ The Ante- Nicene Fathers, Athenagoras, Plea for Christians, 35, Embassy Chapter 5, Tertullian 9,8) Grand Rapids, 1971

²² The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Augustine, On Marriage and Concupiscence, Grand Rapids, 1968

²³ The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, St. Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, (384) “Some, when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when (as often happens) they die with their offspring, they enter the lower world laden with the guilt not only of adultery against Christ but also of suicide and child murder.” Grand Rapids, 1968

²⁴ Bible, Authorised King James Version, I Corinthians 6:12-20

²⁵ Bible, Authorised King James Version, I Corinthians 5

²⁶ The Ante- Nicene Fathers, Epistle XLVIII., Cyprian’ s Answer to Cornelius, Concerning the Crimes of Novatus, Grand Rapids, 1971

church after the Constantine's conversion in 312 AD caused an influx of new converts.²⁷

Abortion (especially among the rich) and exposure and infanticide among the poor occurred regularly. The very fact that legislature had to be produced implies that abortion was an issue in the church.

Councils, canons and their context

The first council to officially deal with abortion was the council of Elvira in modern Spain. The exact date of this local council is much debated. It was held early in the 4th century, possibly 306 AD. Nineteen bishops and twenty-six priests attended the council. During this meeting 81 canons were produced, mostly dealing with disciplinary measures.²⁸ Canon 63 states:

*“If a woman conceives in adultery and then has an abortion, she may not commune again, even as death approaches, because she has sinned twice.”*²⁹

The council of Ancyra was held in 314 AD and was attended by twelve to eighteen bishops. Ancyra was the capital city of Galatie (modern Turkey). Nine of the twenty-five canons deal with the problem of the lapsed, the others with marriage, sexuality, church property etc.³⁰ Canon XXI states:

“Concerning women who commit fornication, and destroy that which they have conceived, or who are employed in making drugs for abortion, a former decree excluded them until the hour of death, and to this some have assented. Nevertheless, being desirous to use somewhat greater lenity, we have ordained that they fulfil ten years [of penance], according to the prescribed degrees.”

The ancient epitome reads: *“Harlots taking injurious medicines are to be subjected to penance for ten years.”*³¹

²⁷ Hinson, E. Glenn, *The Early Church, Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, Nashville, 1996, pg. 218-219

²⁸ The Catholic Encyclopaedia, Council of Elvira, Electronic Edition of the 1917 version, 1997

²⁹ <http://www.bu.edu/religion/courses/syllabi/rn301/canons.htm>

³⁰ The Catholic Encyclopaedia, Council of Ancyra, Electronic Edition of the 1917 version, 1997

³¹ The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Vol. 14, Grand Rapids, 1968

Finally, the Council in Trullo, often called the Quinisext Council, was held in 692 AD in Constantinople. At the council 215 oriental bishops were present. The West never recognised the council.³² In canon XCI we read:

“Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the foetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder.”

Ancient Epitome: *“Whoever gives or receives medicine to produce abortion is a homicide, See Canon XXI. of Ancyra, and Canon II. of St. Basil; to wit, “She who purposely destroys the foetus, shall suffer the punishment of murder. And we pay no attention to the subtle distinction as to whether the foetus was formed or unformed. And by this not only is justice satisfied for the child that should have been born, but also for her who prepared for herself the snares, since the women very often die who make such experiments.”*³³

During the Quinisext council several older councils and many older canons of individual church leaders were approved for church wide use, where formerly their binding power was limited to the jurisdiction of the church leader. To these approved canons belonged also the first canonical epistle of Basil of Caesarea and the Epistle of Barnabas. Around 370 AD Basil wrote in canon II:

*“Let her that procures abortion undergo ten years’ penance, whether the embryo were perfectly formed, or not.”*³⁴

The question arises: How did the view on abortion in the Early Church develop, if at all? What disciplinary measures were applied?

Analysing the canons

Looking at the canon of the council of Elvira, a strict stand is obvious. Excommunicated till death draws near is the penalty for a twofold sin. The sins mentioned are adultery and abortion. It appears that sexual sin is an important issue of the council. Abortion of the child of a married woman is not mentioned. The women talked about in this canon are baptised members. Canon 68

³² The Catholic Encyclopaedia, Quinisext Council, Electronic Edition of the 1917 version, 1997

³³ The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Vol. 14, Grand Rapids, 1968

³⁴ The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Vol. 14, Grand Rapids, 1968

deals with a similar issue: “*A catechumen who conceives in adultery and then suffocates the child may be baptised only when death approaches.*”³⁵ In this case the adulterous woman is not yet baptised and the child is not aborted but killed after birth. The penalty was similar. It is noteworthy that the woman is mentioned only. Therefore it is possible to read that conceiving in adultery was regarded as more serious than adultery, since the product of lust is contemptible.³⁶ The in the canon mentioned offence, translated as “has an abortion”, can also be translated as “destroys”. However, the early church understood the canon as referring to abortion. Except for the already mentioned association with adultery, the canon provides no detailed explanation for condemning abortion.

The council of Elvira did not necessarily represent the view of the entire church at that time. The canons may only reflect the attitude of the “Spanish” churches.

The council of Ancyra provided more detail. Again abortion is associated with fornication.³⁷ In Ancyra’s canon a clause is included condemning the manufacturers of aborting medicine. Contrary to a “former decree”, which possibly refers to the council of Elvira, penance is limited to ten years. The disciplined were to go through a period of repentance, divided in different stages. After going through the stage of weeper, kneeler, hearer and stander, reconciliation was obtained.³⁸

Initially the ancient epitome seems puzzling. Penance was only applied to the baptised.³⁹ Being a harlot was condemned in the Pauline writings and in the many canons rejecting fornication.⁴⁰ Therefore, “harlot” should not be understood as the profession, but as referring to any woman committing fornication.

Penance included a change in lifestyle, and not just ceasing to take the injurious medicine that

³⁵ The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, Grand Rapids, 1968

³⁶ The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Recognitions of Clement, Book IX, Chapter IX, “For while lust is wholly gratified, and no care is taken in the copulation, undoubtedly a weak generation is affected with the defects and frailties of those demons by whose instigation these things are done. And therefore parents are responsible for their children’ s defects of this sort, because they have not observed the law of intercourse.” (possibly 3rd century), Vol. VIII, Grand Rapids, 1968

³⁷ Tertullian saw the words “adultery” and “fornication” as synonymous. Ante- Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, book VII, Tertullian XII, Chapter IV, Grand Rapids 1971

³⁸ Brug, John F., The Terminology of Church Discipline: Excommunication, Suspension, Removal, Etc. Grove City, Ohio, 2002, <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/b/BrugDiscipline/BrugDiscipline.htm>

³⁹ The Catholic Encyclopaedia, Penance, Electronic Edition of the 1917 version, 1997

caused either infertility or abortion.

Whereas Elvira only knew penance for the adulteress, Ancyra includes men as well.⁴¹

The Quinisext council (692 AD) condemned both those who administer and those who use abortifacients. For the first time the word murder or homicide is used. Technically the canon does not say that abortion *is* murder, but that it is *subject to* penalty of murder. Considering the character of the council and the contents of earlier writings that have been approved during the council in Trullo, we may safely conclude that it was seen as murder.

The decisions of the council of Ancyra are reversed. The reference to fornication in relation to abortion has disappeared.

Thoughts on development of the foetus have undergone a change. The including of Basil's canon reflects the discussion as to whether the foetus possesses a human soul. The canon refers to the distinction between formed and unformed. Basil discards this distinction that has been supported by some church fathers as "subtile". The foetus is regarded as "*a child that should have been born*".

The danger involved in the practice of abortion becomes apparent in the conclusion of Basil's canon: women often die as result.

Developing views

Canons of councils usually reflect the opinion of the majority of the bishops present. The fact that few bishops have attended the councils of Elvira and Ancyra, make deducing a uniform viewpoint difficult. However, examination of the councils and the writings of the church fathers clearly show that in most cases abortion is viewed as murder, though not always mentioned in official canons.

The Quinisext council takes place in a period wherein the church is well established.⁴² "Ancyra" and Basil are quoted with approval. The fact that the word "murder" is used for the first time does not necessarily imply a shift in official thought. It should be seen as a summary of earlier discussions.

⁴⁰ Bible, Authorised King James Version, I Corinthians 6,15-18

⁴¹ Canon XX: "If the wife of anyone has committed adultery or if any man commit adultery it seems fit that he shall be restored to full communion after seven years passed in the prescribed degrees" Ancient Epitome of Canon XX: An adulteress and an adulterer are to be cut off for seven years.

⁴² Established naturally does not mean that the church was not faced with challenges of all sorts, such as the new Muslim religion, East West conflict, etc. It merely means that the church has survived its initial growth period.

Although little development can be found in the charge of the offence, development can be noticed in arguments to back up murder charge. Early writings unanimously condemn abortion. With the establishment of Christianity and an increasing influence of philosophy, questions were raised about the moment the foetus received its human soul. Athenagoras merely states that the foetus is a living being and object of God's care.⁴³ Tertullian places the ensoulment at the moment of conception.⁴⁴ Augustine remarks that one cannot kill that which is not alive.⁴⁵ The influence of Aristotle is noticed since several church fathers placed the moment of ensoulment at the point the embryo was fully formed. Augustine admits his ignorance in regards to the issue of humanity of the unformed foetus when dealing with the resurrection of the body.⁴⁶ From theological and philosophical viewpoint the distinction between "formed or unformed" and "soul or no soul", may have been valuable in the development of a doctrine on the soul. The general feeling appears to be that this distinction was somewhat irrelevant directly to the issue of abortion.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, development of the doctrine of the soul and the thoughts on sexuality cannot be detached from abortion. Issues surrounding sexuality emerged almost simultaneously with the start of Christianity.⁴⁸ Emphasis on sexual purity resulted in the opinion that sexual intercourse for mere pleasure was sinful. Procreation should be the main purpose.⁴⁹ Both the view on sexual purity and the frequent reference to fornication in relation to abortion may be seen as a reaction on the lax morality of the time. Some influence of Platonic thought regarding issues of sexuality is likely.⁵⁰

Disciplinary measures have always been strict. The lenity shown in the council of Ancyra is related to the reconciling character of the council. The main concern of the council was to deal with the lapsed.

⁴³ Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II, Athenagoras, A Plea for the Christians, Chapter XXXV, '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.' Grand Rapids, 1971

⁴⁴ Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV Tertullian (after he joined the Montanists,) De Anima, XXIV, Grand Rapids, 1971

⁴⁵ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. III, Augustine, Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love, Chapter 85

⁴⁶ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. III, Augustine, Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love, Chapter 86

⁴⁷ Early texts discussing abortion do not reject abortion from the perspective that a child has an immortal soul

⁴⁸ Bible, Authorised King James Version, I Corinthians 5-9

⁴⁹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. III, Augustine, On the Good of Marriage, Grand Rapids, 1971

⁵⁰ Gorman Michael J., Abortion & the early church: Christian, Jewish & pagan attitudes in the Greco-Roman world, Downers Grove, 1982, pg. 81

Conclusion

Abortion in the early church cannot be seen as an isolated issue. Developing views on sexuality and ensoulment, influence of classic philosophy and morality at the time in which Christianity developed, all contributed to the view as expressed in the Quinisext council.

Both Ante- and (post) Nicene fathers agree that abortion should be regarded as murder.

Initially the charge of murder was not backed up with arguments. The maturing process of Christianity inevitably resulted in more refined doctrines. The murder charge had to be backed up.

The main concern has shifted from concern for the soul of the women committing fornication to concern for the foetus itself.

