

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Argument for the Silent: A Biblical Case Against Abortion

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Nowhere in the Bible is abortion mentioned specifically. That silence may seem to leave room for Christians to hold different opinions as to the morality of abortion while remaining faithful to the teachings of Scripture. Yet within Christianity an interesting alignment has developed on this issue. Nearly all churches and groups that view the Bible as the unerring Word of God also view abortion in all or nearly all instances as immoral. By contrast, nearly all churches and groups that view the Bible as a fallible human witness to God view abortion as a matter of personal choice rather than of objective morality.¹ It seems reasonable to conclude that biblical values (at least some of which are shared by some non-Christians) inform the position that abortion is immoral, while the opposing view is in some respects out of keeping with biblical ethics. This article supports this conclusion by setting forth a biblical case against abortion.²

First, a brief comment about terminology is in order. Those who say that abortion is immoral label their position *pro-life*, indicating that for them the issue is not women's rights but the life of the unborn. Those who argue that abortion is not generally immoral label their view *pro-choice*, emphasizing their belief that the issue is the right of women to choose whether to continue their pregnancy or end it by abortion. These terms will be used, since they are the labels each side prefers to use for themselves.

The Basic Pro-Life Argument

The relevance of the Bible to the abortion debate may best be understood by relating it to the basic argument for the pro-life position. The pro-life argument can be stated in various ways. Here is perhaps the simplest and strongest way of stating it:

Premise 1: Intentionally killing an innocent human being is always morally wrong.

¹ J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak On Abortion: Official Statements from Religious Bodies and Ecumenical Organizations* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989).

² Some of the material in this article first appeared in Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *An Unchanging Faith in a Changing World: Understanding and Responding to Critical Issues that Christians Face Today* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 242-47.

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Premise 2: Abortion is the intentional killing of an innocent human being (except when the child's death is not desired but results from saving the mother's life).

Conclusion: Therefore, abortion is morally wrong (except as noted above).

There are only two ways of refuting this argument: (1) Deny the first premise by arguing that intentionally killing an innocent human being for certain purposes is not morally wrong; (2) Deny the second premise by arguing either (a) that the unborn are not *human beings*, or (b) that the unborn are not *innocent*, or (c) that abortion is not *intentional* killing.

Surprisingly, some pro-choice advocates deny the first premise. Here is where the Bible's teaching comes to the fore of the abortion debate: A basic principle of biblical ethics and law is that it is always immoral to kill an innocent human being.

Abortion and the Sixth Commandment

For the Christian, the first premise of the basic pro-life argument is directly warranted in the sixth commandment: "You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13).³ The Bible does not specify all classes of human beings who may not be murdered—that is, it does not bother saying, "You shall not murder women, people of color, old people, infants, deformed people, retarded people," and so forth; it covers all the bases by the universal prohibition against murder. Nor was it necessary for the Bible to say, "You shall not murder the unborn." As Randy Alcorn puts it, "All that was necessary to prohibit an abortion was the command, 'You shall not murder.'"⁴

In biblical teaching, murder is prohibited because humans are created in the *image of God*. The classic text on this point is Genesis 9:6:

Whoever sheds man's blood,
by man shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God
He made man.

This text is extremely important for the abortion debate because it makes certain crucial points explicit. First, *all human beings are made in God's image*. The word translated "man" is *'adam*, a Hebrew word which simply means "human being" or "humanity." The same word is used in Genesis 1:26-27, which says that God created *'adam* in his image—and

³ See also: Deut. 5:17; Matt. 5:21; 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Rom. 13:9; James 2:11. All biblical quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) except as noted.

⁴ Randy Alcorn, *Pro Life Answers to Pro Choice Arguments* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1992), 239.

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states specifically that this includes both male and female. Thus, if the unborn are human beings, killing them is forbidden because it is an attack on the image of God.

Second, *the prohibition against murder does not forbid killing nonhuman animals*. In the immediate context of Genesis 9, God specifically gives humanity permission to kill animals and eat their meat (vv. 2-3). Pro-choice writer Stephen Asma is therefore mistaken when he claims that the person who opposes abortion on the grounds of the “sanctity of life” does not realize that on those grounds he “must now sin nightly as he devours his sacred sirloin.”⁵ It is not *all* life that the pro-life movement regards as sacred, but all *human* life. The Hebrew word for “kill” or “murder” in the sixth commandment, *râtsach*, in some forty occurrences in the Old Testament is never used to refer to the killing of animals, but always to the killing of human beings. The same is true for the Greek word *phoneuô*, which is used in the New Testament whenever it quotes the sixth commandment. Both the Hebrew and Greek languages used other words when referring to the killing of animals for food or in sacrifice (especially the Hebrew *shâchat* and the Greek *thuô*).

Third, *the prohibition against murder forbids killing innocent human beings*. In Genesis 9:6, human beings who are guilty of murder are themselves subject to having their life taken away by man. This makes it clear that the prohibition against murder is a command prohibiting the taking of life away from human beings who have not killed and are not threatening to kill other human beings. It does not forbid killing in self-defense or the use of lethal force by police, soldiers, or executioners. Here again, it is worth noting that the Hebrew *râtsach* and the Greek *phoneuô* are never used in the Bible to refer to killing in war. Therefore, pro-life advocates are not being inconsistent when they oppose abortion but endorse capital punishment and military force. The pro-life claim is not that it is always wrong for human beings to kill other human beings, but that it is always wrong for human beings to kill *innocent* human beings. Some pro-life advocates do oppose capital punishment and warfare, and believe this position is a more thoroughly ethical stance, but those who do not take this approach are perfectly consistent with their premise.

Though Christians may disagree whether it is ever morally right to kill murderers, it should be beyond controversy that in biblical ethics killing human beings who have done no harm to others is always morally wrong. This is the first premise of the basic pro-life argument.

⁵ Stephen T. Asma, “The Roman Catholic Church Historically Condoned Early Abortions,” in *The Abortion Controversy*. Edited by Charles P. Cozic and Jonathan Petrikin; Current Controversies series (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1995), 61.

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If the first premise of the pro-life argument cannot be disproved, the only way left to refute it is to disprove the second premise, which is that abortion, except in cases where the mother's life is in danger, is the intentional killing of an innocent human being. Pro-choice advocates rarely claim that the unborn are guilty or that abortion is not intended to kill the unborn. Thus, pro-choice advocates seem to have only one way to escape the argument: to show that the unborn are not (or probably are not) human beings.⁶

The Unborn as Human Beings

As stated here, the basic pro-life argument refers in both premises to human *beings*, not, as is most often done, to human *persons*. It is common for the abortion debate to be framed in terms of the *personhood* of the unborn. Pro-life advocates routinely defend the claim that the unborn are persons, and many pro-choice advocates argue that abortion is morally permissible because the unborn are *not* persons.

The trouble with making personhood the decisive issue in the abortion debate is that contemporary society does not have a consensus view of what personhood is. Some people define personhood in terms of the developed characteristics of self-awareness, individuality, rational thought, the capacity for moral choice, and so forth. Defining personhood in this way virtually guarantees that the unborn will not be considered persons, but arguably six-month-old infants will not qualify as persons either. Others define personhood as the possession of an individual soul or spirit distinct from the body. The trouble with this way of defining personhood is that there is no societal unanimity as to whether such things as souls *exist*, let alone when they become part of the human being.

Although Christians are right when they defend the claim that the unborn should be regarded as persons from the moment of conception, it might be prudent to avoid the term "person" and make the simpler and more direct argument that the unborn should not be killed *because they are human beings*. After all, the Bible does not use the word "person" in Genesis 1:26-27 or 9:6 but speaks instead of human beings, '*adam*, as created in God's image and possessing life that is not to be violated. It is therefore unnecessary to defend a particular view of personhood or to argue its applicability to the unborn at any stage of development (for example, by citing Psalm 139) in order to argue that the law should protect the life of the unborn. All that is necessary is to defend the claim that the unborn are human beings.

⁶ It will not do to show merely that it is *possible* that the unborn are not human beings, since such a conclusion admits that it is also possible that they *are*—and if that is possible, then the morally correct thing to do is to err on the side of caution and not kill them.

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That claim is now easy to defend—which is why many pro-choice advocates want to keep the discussion on the more debatable concept of personhood. It is a scientifically certain fact that the event of conception (or, perhaps more narrowly, fertilization) is the *first* event in the history of the human being. Prior to conception, what exists are a mother's egg and a father's sperm. When fertilization is complete a new human being is brought into existence that is genetically distinct from the mother and father and that exists as a distinct entity. Therefore, from the moment of conception what exists is a human being with potential for growth and full realization.⁷

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Given that the unborn are human beings from the moment of conception, it follows directly that killing them for any reason other than in an attempt to save someone else's life (that is, the mother's life) is forbidden by the sixth commandment. It is unnecessary to prove that the unborn are "persons" in order to claim that their lives ought to be protected by law. The only thing needed is to point out that they are human beings. Let those who would defend abortion as a legal right say, if they can (and if they dare), that it is permissible to kill some innocent human beings. Few pro-choice advocates are willing to say this—at least not directly and openly.

The argument presented here for the pro-life position has made open use of Scripture to define what is meant by "murder" and on what basis pro-life Christians oppose the destruction of the life of the unborn at any stage of development. But the argument is clearly serviceable outside biblical Christianity since the major premise of the argument is simply that killing innocent human beings is wrong and should be prohibited by law. It is not necessary for non-Christians to accept that all human beings are created in God's image for them to see the moral force of the pro-life argument. They need only agree that all innocent human beings should enjoy a legally protected right to life and that the unborn qualify as human beings.

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<https://reasons.org/explore/publications/facts-for-faith/argument-for-the-silent-a-biblical-case-against-abortion>

⁷ Virtually any scientific textbook on human biology will corroborate these facts; an excellent resource is Landrum B. Shettles and David Rorvik, *Rites of Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); see also the excerpt from this book in "Human Life Begins at Conception," in *Abortion: Opposing Viewpoints*. Edited by Charles P. Cozic and Stacey L. Tipp (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1991), 17-22.