

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
May 27, 2017

Is Abortion “God’s Work?”

In a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, columnist Nicholas Kristof gave focus to Dr. Willie Parker, who operates an abortion clinic. Parker has written his autobiography, entitled *Life’s Work*, in which he claims, “I believe that as an abortion provider, I am doing God’s work. I am protecting women’s rights, their human right to decide their futures for themselves, and to live their lives as they see fit.” Dr. Parker is an African-American Christian and an OB-GYN doctor who practices medicine in the South. Both Parker’s memoir and Kristof’s editorial make two claims: That only recently have evangelical Christians come to oppose abortion and that historically Christianity has not opposed abortion. Are these claims true?

First, both Parker and Kristof are accurate in their claim that only recently have evangelical Christians opposed abortion. Tragically, this is true. In the 1960s and 1970s, evangelicals were legitimizing abortion as an option for women (see *Christianity Today* articles in these decades and see the Southern Baptist Convention’s declarations in 1971, 1974 and 1976). But as Frances Fitzgerald argues in her recent book, *The Evangelicals*, and as Barry Hankins argues in his *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, it was Francis Schaeffer who energized evangelicals to think biblically about prenatal life, and its value and its worth to God. With *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 and the pronouncements of Francis Schaeffer, evangelicals began to oppose abortion in America. Long before evangelicals, the Roman Catholic Church had opposed abortion as a sin and a travesty. As with the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, evangelicals did not lead the culture when it came to the moral evils of society. We followed. So, Parker and Kristof are correct in their charge against evangelicals.

Second, however, they are blatantly wrong when it comes to the history of Christianity. Theologian Albert Mohler has thoroughly decimated Parker and Kristof’s claim. In the paragraphs that follow, I extensively quote from Albert Mohler on this question: “The early church was decidedly, vocally, and courageously pro-life and opposed to abortion.”

- “One of the earliest documents of Christianity after the New Testament is the *Didache*, dated to around A.D. 80-120. The teaching describes two ways: the way of life and the way of death. The way of life demands that Christians ‘shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery . . . you shall not murder a child by abortion nor commit infanticide.’ Both abortion and infanticide were common in the Roman Empire. Christians were forbidden to murder any child, born or unborn. The way of life honors the sanctity of life.”

- “Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) made clear the sin of 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.’ Tertullian (A.D. 160-240) taught even more comprehensively: ‘For us, 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 just a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter when you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to birth. That is a man which is going to be one; you have the fruit already in the seed.’ These two are just examples of a pro-life position rejecting abortion that included — at the very least — Athenagoras, Hippolytus, Basil the Great, Ambrose, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Augustine.”
- “As ethicist Ronald Sider commented, ‘Eight different authors in eleven different writings mention abortion. In every case, the writing unequivocally rejects abortion.’ The most comprehensive survey of early Christianity on the question of abortion comes from Michael J. Gorman in *Abortion and the Early Church*. As Gorman states, ‘all Christian writers opposed abortion.’ Every mention of abortion in the early church rejects it, forcefully.”
- “The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a document from the fourth century, asserts: ‘Thou shalt not slay thy child by causing abortion, nor kill that which is begotten. For everything that is shaped, and hath received a soul from God, if it be slain, shall be avenged, as being unjustly destroyed.’”
- “Gorman writes: ‘Writers of the first three Christian centuries laid the theological and literary foundation for all subsequent early Christian writing on abortion. We will see that three important themes emerged during these centuries: the fetus is the creation of God; abortion is murder; and the judgment of God falls on those guilty of abortion.’ Those three convictions lie at the heart of the Christian pro-life consensus that came together after the shock of the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973.”

Abortion is not doing “God’s Work,” as Parker claims. It is an abomination and a moral evil that cannot be condoned or supported in the name of Christ. A quick inspection of Scripture indicates that God values prenatal life and the case can be strongly made that life begins at conception. A cluster of verses in the Bible clearly establish God’s view of prenatal life:

- Exodus 21:22-24--Whatever these difficult verses exactly mean, God views life in the womb as of great value. Whether by accident or by intent, to cause a woman to have a miscarriage demands accountability on the part of the one who caused it. The Law did not treat the fetus frivolously.
- Isaiah 49:1, 5--Referring to Messiah, God called Him for his mission *from the womb*. Life that is prenatal is precious to God.

- Jeremiah 1:5 and Luke 1:15--As with Isaiah, God viewed Jeremiah and John the Baptist from the womb as of infinite value. He even filled John with the Holy Spirit when he was still in Elizabeth's womb.
- No other passage deals with the question of prenatal life more powerfully and conclusively than Psalm 139. In this wonderful psalm, David reviews four phenomenal attributes of God--His omniscience, His omnipresence, His omnipotence and His holiness. In reviewing God's omnipotence, David reviews God's power in creating life which he compares to God "weaving" him in his mother's womb. God made his "frame," his skeleton. Then, in verse 16, he writes, "Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance. . ." Undoubtedly, David is referring to the embryo. The divine perspective on life is that it begins at conception. So awesome is God's omniscience and His omnipotence, that he knew all about David even when he was an embryo! This is God's view of life. This is God's judgment on abortion. It is not doing "God's Work."

See Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* (6 May 2017); Albert Mohler, "Performing Abortion is 'God's Work?' The Real Story of Christianity and Abortion," at www.albertmohler.com (15 May 2017); and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics*, pp. 27-33.