

# Abortion

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In the last half of the 20th century, abortion laws were liberalized in Canada and the United States. Examples of these changes are the amendment of the Canadian Criminal Code, Section 251, of 1969, and the Roe v. Wade decision of the United States Supreme Court of 1973. The intent of the former was to balance the need to protect unborn human life with the need for safe, legal abortions where there was a significant threat to the life or health of the mother. This opened the door to new interpretations about abortion and women's rights.

The biblical principle from which Christians draw for its teaching concerning abortion is that God is the author of life and human life is sacred because each person is made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27, James 3:9, Psalm 8:4-5). The development of a fetus within the womb is predictable. By the twenty-second day after conception, the heart begins to beat, and during weeks four and five, brain regions are actively forming. Neuronal links are formed so well that by seven weeks, the human embryo responds to touch by moving. By week twelve a human fetus can move arms and legs independently. The marvel of a developing fetus reflects the creative work of God in the unfolding of a unique individual.

In Jesus's ministry, he always sided with healing and preservation of life. Jesus's life reveals that expense, inconvenience, or embarrassment cannot be more important to God's people than an unborn life.

The Old Testament provides the clearest applicable teaching related to this principle.

While the Old Testament does not refer to the practice of abortion, it does speak clearly to the practice of infanticide and condemns those who practice it. (Leviticus 20:2-5). The Mosaic law speaks in Exodus 21:22 of a pregnant woman being injured so that she miscarries. The law represents the miscarriage to be a loss to the family with the family being legally entitled to compensation - thus indicating that value has been placed upon this developing child in the womb. In a few very personal passages, several Hebrew personalities looked back in time to the point when they were in their mother's womb. They acknowledged that even then God knew them and was caring for them (Job 10:8-12; Psalms 51:5-6; 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:4). The New Testament also has inferences of life and personality of the fetus within the womb. John the Baptist leaped within the womb in the presence of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:41).

While the biblical text does not specifically mention the practice of abortion, Jewish writings from the time of Christ do speak in opposition to this practice. These include the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides (50 B.C.-50 A.D.), Philo (25 B.C - 41 A.D.), and Josephus (38 -100 A.D.). The early church leaders were clear in their teaching that God's people were not to resort to abortion. The Didache (ca. 150 A.D.) states: "Do not murder a child by abortion, nor kill it at birth" (2:2).

Other second-century writings state the same prohibition. These include the Epistle of Barnabas (19:5) and Clement of Alexandria

who wrote in *Pedagogus*: “For those who conceal sexual wantonness by taking stimulating drugs to bring on an abortion wholly lose their own humanity along with the fetus.” Tertullian wrote in *The Problem of Abortion*, “For us, since homicide is forbidden, it is not even permitted, while the blood is being formed into a person, to dissolve the conceptus in the uterus. For to prevent its being born is an acceleration of homicide, and there is no difference whether one snuffs out a life already born or disturbs one that is in the process of being born. For (s)he is also a person who is about to be one, just as every fruit already exists in the seed.” This witness of the early church against the practice of abortion is significant for two reasons. First, the Anabaptist movement, of which the Brethren in Christ are a part, has always paid serious attention to the early witness of the church to help them clarify their understanding of faith and practice. Second, at an early date, the church leaders were already able to speak with clarity on abortion.

There is yet another Old Testament scripture that must be considered in this discussion. These scriptures which uphold the sacredness of life do make sexual morality a higher priority than potential life within the womb. In Deuteronomy 22:20-23, a man and woman who were found to be sexually immoral were to be executed by stoning. While conception would have been possible, the life of the man and the woman were to be taken rather than allow for potential of life to be brought to full term in the woman before her execution. This example of a biblical prioritizing of principles would allow for latitude when confronted with pregnancies which are a result of rape, incest, or a pregnancy which seriously jeopardizes the health of a mother. When one is not personally facing an unwanted pregnancy, it is easy to say “no” to abortion as a method of birth control. However, if the church is to say no to abortion, it needs to address the larger context which makes abortion seem

like the most viable option. This proactive work includes:

1. Practice giving value to each living individual. When a person looks for affirmation, acceptance, or intimacy, one of the activities to which a person can turn is to a sexual relationship. Such a relationship is not for the procreation of a new life but rather an affirming of present life, hence a pregnancy in such a circumstance is often viewed by the individuals involved as a liability. The Christian community should provide these self-affirming attributes to its own people and offer these to its surrounding community.
2. Uphold the biblical teaching on premarital chastity and marital fidelity for God’s people. Sexual intercourse is an act that signifies the ultimate union between a man and a woman, to be practiced in the committed relationship of marriage (I Corinthians 6:12-20). These standards rarely create situations in which abortion is considered a necessary option.
3. Provide emotional, social, and financial support for bringing the baby to full term birth to persons who consider abortion as an attractive option. Abortion seems like an attractive response for the person who is financially destitute or socially abandoned. The church must be committed to stand long-term with those who face the hard realities of bringing a child into the world in difficult and unhappy circumstances.
4. Work with and support parachurch organizations such as crisis pregnancy centers, Christian adoption agencies, and other organizations that actively support sanctity-of-human-life issues.

Hence, the Brethren in Christ Church opposes the practice of abortion and affirms the sanctity of human life from conception to physical death.