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A SUMMARY  
**BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR  
PRO-LIFE ENGAGEMENT:**

PERSONHOOD, SCRIPTURE,  
AND CHURCH HISTORY

by David Closson

Abortion is one of the most contentious and sensitive moral and political questions facing America today, pitting those who believe in a woman's "right to choose" ("pro-choice") against those who believe the sanctity of human life makes us morally obligated to protect the unborn ("pro-life").

FRC's publication "Biblical Principles for Pro-Life Engagement" helps Christians think about human life and abortion from a biblical perspective. What follows is a summary of this resource.

### **WHAT IS ABORTION?**

When people use the word "abortion," they usually mean an induced abortion (the termination of a pregnancy through external intervention), as opposed to spontaneous abortion (natural miscarriage). Ninety-two percent of induced

abortions are elective, meaning the motivation for getting the abortion is unrelated to the life of the mother or the health of the baby. In other words, the most common type of abortion is where healthy women terminate pregnancies that would have otherwise led to the birth of healthy children.

## WHAT IS PERSONHOOD?

Science increasingly acknowledges the biological humanity of the unborn. In 2018, a comprehensive study of 5,502 biologists found that 95 percent affirm that human life begins at fertilization. The conversation surrounding the morality of abortion boils down to this: does a developing baby qualify as a person, and therefore warrant legal protection?



The pro-life community would say yes, arguing there is no better criteria for personhood than biological humanity. In fact, biology and genetics is the only objective basis for determining personhood. The pro-choice position would deny that being biologically human is the same as having personhood. However, they have not yet reached a consensus on what criteria should determine personhood.

## THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF PERSONHOOD

Christians have additional resources that inform our understanding of personhood. Specifically, we have the Bible, God’s authoritative Word. The question is, does the Bible prove the personhood of the unborn?

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT LIFE IN THE WOMB

In Psalm 139:13-16, King David describes God’s dealings with him when he was still in his mother’s womb using fully personal language. He describes himself as a person possessing value, whom God was forming and knitting together, and emphasizes his personal identity by the repeated use of “I” and “my.” This language assumes personal identity in the womb and affirms continuity from the earliest stages of development through adulthood. Essentially, David viewed himself as the person “David” from his unborn state to his current state as an adult.

In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel tells the virgin Mary she will bear a son through the power of the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing this news, Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, who was herself six months pregnant. Three details of their meeting in verses 39-45 underscore the profoundly pro-life perspective of this passage.

First, John the Baptist “leaped” upon hearing Mary’s voice, evidencing personal human activity in utero. This action was consistent with John’s mission in life—

to be the forerunner and proclaimer of the Christ (see Luke 1:17; John 1:6-8, 19-23, 3:28). Although John was still in the womb, his ministry of heralding the arrival of the Messiah had already begun!

Second, Elizabeth refers to Mary as a mother at a time when most women do not even know they are pregnant. Scholars estimate that Mary had been pregnant for less than a month when she visited Elizabeth. Elizabeth's statement implies that prenatal Jesus is not an impersonal, non-moral entity; rather, He is honored as both a person and the Lord by Elizabeth and her unborn baby.

Third, Elizabeth's choice of words about her unborn child is significant (v. 44). Here, the Greek word used for baby (βρέφος) is the same word used for children after they are born (e.g., Luke 2:16). This indicates that babies, whether born or unborn, share the same status as humans after birth.

Lastly, both Elizabeth (v. 41) and the unborn John (v. 15) are filled with the Holy Spirit. By bringing attention to this detail, Luke wants his readers to understand that Elizabeth and John's reactions to the unborn Jesus are appropriate. If, as this passage suggests, Jesus was rightly regarded by them as "Lord" when he was still in the womb, then his incarnate personhood was secured at conception rather than at birth!

Other passages of Scripture affirming the personhood of the unborn are discussed in the full-length publication "Biblical Principles for Pro-Life Engagement."

## THE CHURCH: PRO-LIFE FROM THE BEGINNING

For 2,000 years, Christians have interpreted the Bible consistently on the value of unborn human life. Nearly every prominent leader and authority in the history of Christianity—whether theologians, pastors, or church councils—have publicly opposed abortion.

### *Early Church*

Abortion was a widely accepted practice in Roman society during the first three centuries. The average Roman had such a low view of fetal and infant life that infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion remained common in the Roman Empire until these practices were outlawed, at the urging of Christians, in 374.

Despite the morally dark backdrop of the first three centuries, Christians consistently opposed abortion and valued unborn life, rooted in Jesus' teachings on the priority of love (Mark 12:31) and His high view of



children (Matt. 19:14). First century Christian texts such as the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* explicitly condemned killing children by abortion. Second and third century Church Fathers such as Clement, Athenagoras, and Tertullian explicitly condemned abortion and infanticide as well.

### ***Post-Reformation***

After the Reformation, both Protestants and Roman Catholics remained pro-life, and their leaders continued to champion the rights of the unborn. For example, John Calvin explained, “The unborn child... though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being... and should not be robbed of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy.”

### ***The Modern Church***

Christians remained opposed to abortion well into the twentieth century. In 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “To kill the fruit in the mother’s womb is to injure the right to life that God has bestowed on the developing life.” This remained the view of every Christian denomination until the 1960s. Only then, at the height of the sexual revolution, did some denominations, which had embraced theological liberalism, change their long-standing views.

## **GOSPEL HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Christians must speak with courage and conviction, willing to counter anyone who suggests another way of interpreting the Bible on the issue of abortion. At the same time, we must present our position with kindness and love, recognizing that abortion is a personal, rather than theoretical, discussion for many. The gospel is good news for all people, including those who have had or performed abortions. While abortion is a serious sin, God is fully forgiving and promises redemption to those who repent of their sin, including the sin of abortion (Isaiah 44:22, 2 Peter 3:9, Romans 10:13).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Bible unequivocally affirms the personhood of the unborn. All people—born and unborn—are made in the image of God and possess inherent dignity and value. Christians must oppose abortion while simultaneously extending love and support to those who have been personally affected by it.



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