

ABORTION AND THE EARLY CHURCH

A List of Teachings by the Early Church Fathers on the Immorality of Abortion

§1

The Epistle of Barnabas

Circa A.D. 70 to 79 according to Lightfoot,¹ section 19, from *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1898, trans. J. B. Lightfoot), p. 286 (my italics).

“Thou shalt not entertain a wicked design against thy neighbour; thou shalt not admit boldness into thy soul. Thou shalt not commit fornication, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not corrupt boys. The word of God shall not come forth from thee where any are unclean. Thou shalt not make a difference in a person to reprove him for a transgression. Thou shalt be meek, thou shalt be quiet, thou shalt be fearing the words which thou hast heard. Thou shalt not bear a grudge against thy brother. Thou shalt not doubt whether a thing shall be or not be. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain. Thou shalt love thy neighbour more than thine own soul. *Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion, nor again shalt thou kill it when it is born.*”

§2

The Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles

Circa A.D. 60 to 160,² section 2, from *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1898, trans. J. B. Lightfoot), p. 229f. (my italics).

“And this is the second commandment of the teaching. Thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, though shalt not corrupt boys, thou shalt not commit fornication, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not deal in magic, thou shalt do no sorcery, *thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born . . .*”

§3

Athenagoras

circa A.D. 133 to circa 190

A Plea for the Christians (circa. A.D. 177), chapter 35, from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. II, p. 147b (my italics). This statement occurs in an argument refuting false accusations of immorality among Christians.

1. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1898, trans. J. B. Lightfoot), p. 241.

2. J. A. Robinson, *Barnabas, Hermas, and the Didache* (London: SPCK/New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), p. 60.

“How, then, when we do not even look on, lest we should contract guilt and pollution, can we put people to death? And when *we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder?*”

§4

Clement of Alexandria

A.D. 150 to circa 215

Attributed to *Paedagogus* or *The Instructor*, Book II.10, (circa A.D. 190 to 200), from “Early Christians on Abortion” (earlychristiansonabortion.blogspot.co.uk, Friday 24 October 2008—my italics). The following quotation from Clement of Alexander is quoted on many internet websites, and the source is usually given as *Paedagogus* II.10. I have, however, been unable to find this quotation in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. II. Much of this chapter of the *Paedagogus* in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* is in Latin without translation.

“Our whole life can go on in observation of the laws of nature, if we gain dominion over our desires from the beginning and if we do not kill, by various means of a perverse art, the human offspring, born according to the designs of divine providence; *for these 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 . . . Abortion is the killing of human life that is under God’s care, design and providence.*”

§5

Tertullian

circa A.D. 155–222

Apology (circa A.D. 198 to 204), chapter IX, from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. III, p. 25af (my italics). The following argument is in the context of a defence of Christians against the false accusation that they committed acts of cannibalism and drank the blood of children.

“In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, *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 merely speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to birth.*”

§6
Minucius Felix
d. A.D. 250

The Octavius, (A.D. 198), chapter xxx, from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. IV, p. 192a (my italics). This statement again is made in the context of defending Christians against the false accusations of immorality, cannibalism and drinking the blood of infants while at the same time criticising the pagans for abortion and exposing their infants.

“And I see that you at one time expose your begotten children to wild beasts and to birds; at another, that you crush them when strangled with a miserable kind of death. *There are some women who, while drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels, and thus commit a parricide before they bring forth.* And these things assuredly come down from the teaching of your gods. For Saturn did not expose his children, but devoured them.”

§7
Hippolytus
circa A.D. 170–235

The Refutation of All Heresies (circa A.D. 223 to 235), Book ix, chapter vii, from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. V, p. 131af. (my italics). This argument occurs in the context of a critique of Callistus, Bishop of Rome, circa 218 to 222 A.D., who was a heretic and a libertine and who condoned all manner of immorality among his flock.

“And the hearers of Callistus being delighted with his tenets, continue with him, thus mocking both themselves as well as many others, and crowds of these dupes stream together into his school. Wherefore also his pupils are multiplied, and they plume themselves upon the crowds (attending the school) for the sake of pleasures which Christ did not permit. But in contempt of Him, they place restraint on the commission of no sin, alleging that they pardon those who acquiesce (in Callistus’ opinions). For even also he permitted females, if they were unwedded, and burned with passion at an age at all events unbecoming, or if they were not disposed to overturn their own dignity through a legal marriage, that they might have whomsoever they would choose as a bedfellow, whether a slave or free, and that a woman, though not legally married, might consider such a companion as a husband. *Whence women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility, and to gird themselves round, so as to expel what was being conceived on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth.* Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by inculcating adultery and murder at the same time!”

§8
The Apostolic Constitutions

A collection of Christian teachings from the sub-apostolic age, Book vii, section iii, from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. VII, p. 466a (my italics).

“Thou shalt not use magic. Thou shalt not use witchcraft; for He says ‘Ye shall not suffer a witch to live.’ *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.’ ”

§9
The Council of Ancyra (A.D. 314),

Canon XXI, from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. XIV, p. 73 (my italics).

“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.”

§10
The Quinisext Council,
or Council of Trullo (A.D. 692),

Canon XCI, from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. XIV, p. 404.

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

§11
Basil, Archbishop of Cæsarea
A.D. 329–379

The First Canonical Epistle of Basil, Archbishop of Cæsarea in Cappadocia to Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium (circa A.D. 374), Canon II, from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. XIV, p. 604.

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

§12

Basil, Archbishop of Cæsarea
A.D. 329–379

Letter CLXXXIII, to Amphilochius, (circa A.D. 374), from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. VIII, p. 225 and 227 [this appears to be the letter from which the Canon of Basil quoted above (no. 11) has been extracted, but the letter itself has more detail].

(Section II) “The woman who purposely destroys her unborn child is guilty of murder. With us there is no nice enquiry as to its being formed or unformed. In this case it is not only the being about to be born who is vindicated, but the woman in her attack upon herself; because in most cases women who make such attempts die. The destruction of the embryo is an additional crime, a second murder, at all events if we regard it as done with intent. The punishment, however, of these women should not be for life, but for the term of ten years. And let their treatment depend not on mere lapse of time, but on the character of their repentance.”

(Section VIII) “Women also who administer drugs to cause abortion, as well as those who take poisons to destroy unborn children, are murderesses.”

§13

Aurelius Ambrose, Bishop of Milan
circa A.D. 340–397

Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel, Book Five, The Fifth Day (The Seventh Homily), Chapter 18 (§58), from *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961, trans. John J. Savage), Vol. 42, p. 207 (my italics).

“Those who are very poor expose their infants and refuse to lay claim to them when they are discovered. Even the wealthy, in order that their inheritance may not be divided among several, *deny in the very womb their own progeny. By the use of parricidal mixtures they snuff out the fruit of their wombs in the genital organs themselves. In this way life is taken away before it is given.*”

§14

Jerome
circa A.D. 340–420

Letter XXII (section 13) to Eustochium (A.D. 384), from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. VI, p. 27a.

“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.”

§15

John Chrysostom
circa A.D. 347–407

Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, Homily XXIV, from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), Vol. XI, p. 520b.

“Why sow where the ground makes its care to destroy the fruit? where there are many efforts at abortion? where there is murder before birth? for even the harlot thou dost not let continue a mere harlot, but makest her a murderess also. You see how drunkenness leads to whoredom, whoredom to adultery, adultery to murder; or rather something even worse than murder. For I have no name to give it, since it does not take off the thing born, but prevent it being born. Why then dost thou abuse the gift of God, and fight with His laws, and follow after what is a curse as if a blessing, and make the chamber of procreation a chamber of murder, and arm the woman that was given for childbearing unto slaughter? For with a view to drawing more money by being agreeable and an object of longing to her lovers, even this she is not backward to do, so heaping upon thy head a great pile of fire. For even if the daring deed be hers, yet the causing of it is thine. Hence too come idolatries, since many, with a view to become acceptable, devise incantations, and libations, and love potions, and countless other plans. Yet still after such great unseemliness, after slaughters, after idolatries, the thing seems to many to belong to things indifferent, aye, and to many that have wives too.”

§16

Augustine of Hippo
A.D. 353–430

Patrologiæ Cursus Completus . . . Patrologiæ Latine, Tomus XXXVIII (1863), *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi, Opera Omnia . . . Tomus Quintus*, Column 698. The following quotation can be found in many places on the internet always with the reference given as Sermon 126.12 or Sermon 126 line 12. This reference is incorrect. The correct reference is Sermon CXXXVI, Caput I.2 (i.e. chapter I, paragraph 2. Paragraph 2 is at the beginning of the sermon while paragraph 12 is near the end). The text is available at: archive.org/stream/patrologiaecurs09goog#page/n364/mode/2up.

“Therefore brothers, you see how perverse they are and hastening wickedness, who are immature, they seek abortion of the conception before birth; they are those who tell us, ‘I do not see that which you say must be believed.’”

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§17
Caesarius of Arles
circa A.D. 470–542

The Following quotation can be found in many places on the internet and the reference given is “Excerpt from a sermon of St. Caesarius.”

“No woman should take drugs for purposes of abortion, not should she kill her children that have been conceived or are already born. If anyone does this, she should know that before Christ’s tribunal she will have to plead her case in the presence of those she has killed.”

I have been unable to find a source for the above quotation verbatim, but it is very similar in wording to sermon 19.5 in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Caesarius of Arles, Sermons* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1956, trans. Sister Mary Maddaleine Mueller), Vol. I, p. 102, which says the following:

“I give this advice to all your daughters, in accord with my fatherly solicitude: that no woman take medicine for purposes of abortion, or kill her children after they are conceived or born. However many children she conceives, let her nurse them herself or give them to others for support. As many as she kills, of so many she will be the guilty murderess on the day of judgement.”

§18
Theodorus Priscianus
fourth century A.D.

Euporiston, Book III “Gynaecia,” VI, “De aborsu,” 23 (translation from: www.priestforlife.org/magisterium/earlychurchfathers/priscianus.html).

“It is never licit to give something that will cause an abortion. As Hippocrates points out, it is not fitting that the innocent office of a doctor be stained by complicity in such a serious offense. But if they attempt to avoid the birth on account of either a defect in their womb or the difficulties associated with their age, they greatly risk their lives to earn their health just as one risks killing the tree by applying something to the branches or boats which are tossed about by a storm must throw away their cargo.”

§19
Justinian
A.D. 527–565

Digest, 48.19.38.5 (translation from: www.priestforlife.org/magisterium/earlychurchfathers/justinian.html).

“Because the thing is a bad example, lower-class people who give a drink to cause an abortion or to excite a passion (although they do not do it deceitfully), are to

be condemned to the mines, and more distinguished persons to be relegated to an island and deprived of a part of their wealth. If by this drink a woman or a man has died, they are condemned to capital punishment.”

Compiled by STEPHEN C. PERKS