



# THE BEREHA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Abortion in the Early Church

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By at least the early second century AD, a Christian document had appeared entitled, *The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles*, commonly known by its shorter title, *The Didache* (Greek for “Teaching”). This document was quoted in the early centuries of the Christian era by writers including Eusebius and Clement of Alexandria. Its three sections present teaching about the “two ways, one of life and one of death” (*Didache* 1.1); instructions concerning church practice and order; and a brief apocalyptic section. The document offers a window into what Christians only a generation or two after the apostles believed and how they were expected to live.<sup>1</sup>

The first section, “The Two Ways,” presents teaching related to the greatest commandments—love for God and love for neighbor (see Mark 12.28-34). One passage specifies expectations for complying with the second command:

<sup>1</sup> The second commandment of the teaching is: <sup>2</sup> You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not corrupt children; you shall not be sexually immoral; you shall not steal; you shall not practice magic; *you shall not engage in sorcery; you shall not abort a child or commit infanticide.* You shall not covet your neighbor’s possessions; <sup>3</sup> you shall not commit perjury; you shall not give false testimony; you shall not speak evil; you shall not hold a

grudge. <sup>4</sup> You shall not be double-minded or double-tongued, for the double tongue is a deadly snare. <sup>5</sup> Your word must not be false or meaningless, but confirmed by action. <sup>6</sup> You shall not be greedy or avaricious, or a hypocrite or malicious or arrogant. You shall not hatch evil plots against your neighbor. <sup>7</sup> You shall not hate any one; instead you shall reprove some, and pray for some, and some you shall love more than your own life (*Didache* 2.1-7; my emphasis).<sup>2</sup>

It is of interest that neither *abortion* nor *infanticide* are explicitly mentioned in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of these terms in *Didache* is noteworthy, for when the Christians opposed those practices, they were at odds with their culture. In *Abortion and the Early Church*, his introduction to the attitudes toward abortion in Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian settings, Michael Gorman notes that both the Greeks and Romans knew and spoke extensively about abortion. In other words, the practice of abortion was well-known in the world the first Christians inhabited.

The Greek philosopher Plato, for example, viewed the fetus as a living being, but believed the ideals of the state took precedence over the rights of the unborn. In his ideal state, he commanded abortion for women over the age of 40. Aristotle advocated abortion in cases

involving a deformed child or where families had grown too large.

In Roman law, during the Republic Period, the fetus was not viewed as human, but was instead thought to be part of the mother. However, abortion was considered an offense against the father and husband who possessed absolute power over the household. During the Imperial Period, the state was pro-family and thus generally opposed abortion as a practical matter. But since the right of fathers over their homes was dominant, abortion, or exposure of unwanted infants, especially girls, was common. Gorman summarizes the governing principle: "That the fetus is not a person is fundamental to Roman law."<sup>4</sup>

The Jews refused to go along with these cultural practices. According to Gorman, schools of thought representing the Alexandrian and Palestinian regions discussed abortion, both considering the fetus from a legal, not ethical, standpoint. The groups differed in their interpretations of what was permitted—and the Palestinians were divided among themselves—but the discussions in both schools were "confined [to] accidental or therapeutic abortions. Neither considered the possibility of induced abortion for less than life-threatening reasons." Regarding deliberate abortion, the majority and minority viewpoints of the regions were united: both "condemned deliberate abortion as disrespect for life and as bloodshed."<sup>5</sup>

Christians followed suit. As seen in *The Didache*, they argued that abortion was precluded by the command to love one's neighbor. Consequently, throughout the first five centuries of church history, Christians emphasized three beliefs about abortion:

- The fetus is God's creation.
- Abortion is murder.
- God's judgment will fall on those who are guilty of abortion.

From this survey we learn at least three things. First, resisting the beliefs and practices of

a culture that overwhelmingly supports abortion is something the church has done before. Second, the reasons given to justify abortion now are essentially the same as they were then: personal family concerns and the sanction and encouragement of the practice by the state were considered more important than whether the fetus was to be valued as human life created in God's image. Third, Christians living in a sensual culture where the state was supreme over all other authorities contended that abortion was a violation of the command to love one's neighbor and that those who practiced it were guilty of murder.

The point to be seen from this is twofold. First, western civilization has traveled this road before. We benefit from studying what our forebears believed and how they responded. Second, we too can do what is right regardless of cultural attitudes or pressure. Throughout 2,000 years of church history, thousands have refused to bow to Caesar's lordship. Secular voices may be in the majority, have the power of the government behind them, and control the voice of the most popular opinion-makers. That does not mean they are right, can completely eradicate what is right, or will always be in control. It certainly does not mean their word on the subject will be the last word.

Luke recorded the principle by which we must live: "But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men'" (Acts 5.29 ESV).

### Appendix: A Note on *Pharmakeia*

For reasons I will summarize momentarily, Michael Gorman suggests the possibility that, although abortion is not explicitly condemned in the New Testament, there may be an implicit reference to it in texts such as Galatians 5.20 and Revelation 9.21, 18.23, 21.8 and 22.15, all of which use *pharmakeia* (φάρμακεία) or one of its cognates, translated in the ESV as "sorcery" or "sorcerers."

Lexicographers and commentators generally note that *pharmakeia* was a neutral term that

meant to dispense drugs for medicinal purposes, but which also had acquired a negative connotation due to the use of drugs as poisons and in the practice of sorcery or witchcraft. For instance, after reciting the different meanings in his discussion of Galatians 5.20, Richard Longenecker cites examples of the negative meanings of *pharmakeia* and its cognates in the LXX (Exod 7.11, 22; Isa 47.9), intertestamental literature (*Wisdom* 12.4), and Josephus (*Wars* 1.195, 227, 452, 638; *Antiquities* 15.47; 17.63; *Life* 145-50).<sup>6</sup>

Gorman affirms that “the association of the use of drugs (*pharmakeia*) with abortion in pagan and later Christian writings” may suggest “an implicit reference to abortion” in the texts in Galatians and Revelation. He grants that the word was used in antiquity in the neutral, generic sense, but contends it more often had the negative connotation associated with the use of drugs and potions by sorcerers or magicians. He adds that “it is also used to refer to poisons and mind-disturbing drugs,” calling attention in particular to Soranos’s *Gynecology*, where “it refers specifically to the use of one type of evil drug, the abortifacient.” He concludes, “the word *pharmakeia* itself, then, can mean the use of drugs, evil or magical drugs themselves, or a specific evil drug such as a poison or an abortifacient.”<sup>7</sup>

As Gorman goes on to point out, it is apparent that *pharmakeia* was used in a negative sense in the vice lists and apocalyptic texts in

which it appears in the New Testament (cf. Gal 5.20; Rev 18.23). What are we to make of the fact that the author of *Didache*, writing before 125 AD, added explicit references to abortion and infanticide—condemned along with sins such as fornication and murder—to a vice list that mimicked New Testament texts that had become “standard literary settings in the early church for the denunciation of moral evils”?<sup>8</sup> Does this knowledge help as we seek to understand what the writers of the New Testament had in mind when they used *pharmakeia*? Historically speaking, what is sufficient to explain what we read in *Didache* (and *Barnabas*)? What led those Christians, living just a generation or two after the New Testament era, to add the sins of abortion and infanticide to the vice lists that were standard in the New Testament writings? Were they making explicit what they knew the New Testament writers were implying when they used *pharmakeia*?<sup>9</sup>

In view of these observations, I submit that Gorman’s reserved conclusion and its potential implications are worthy of additional consideration:

Thus, while a conclusive affirmation of explicit New Testament condemnation of abortion is impossible, the word *pharmakeia* and the contexts in which it is found suggest that Galatians and Revelation implicitly reject at least one major means of abortion in their rejection of magic, drugs and poisons.<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to *The Didache* in Michael W. Holmes, ed. & trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 334-343. The citations herein are from Holmes. The emphasis on the “two ways” and the condemnation of abortion and infanticide are also found in *Barnabas* 18.1; 19.5.

<sup>2</sup> *The Apostolic Fathers* and other ancient church writings are available online. For a searchable library, see <https://ccel.org/>. For John Lightfoot’s translation, see <https://ccel.org/ccel/lightfoot/fathers/fathers.ii.xii.html>. For a pdf of Lightfoot’s translation, see <https://www.ccel.org/1/lightfoot/fathers/cache/fathers.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> But see the appended note on *pharmakeia*.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982) 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 255.

<sup>7</sup> Gorman, 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>9</sup> The interpretative issue here is *historical foreground*, an important, but often overlooked, part of the work of biblical interpretation. See Everett Ferguson "Using Historical Foreground in New Testament Interpretation," in F. Furman Kearley, Edward P. Myers, and Timothy D. Hadley, eds., *Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Practice. Studies in Honor of Jack Pearl Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 254-263. He introduces and defines the importance of foreground study as follows:

"If the relevant Roman, Greek, and Jewish literature, history, and customs may be labeled the 'background' to the New Testament, then early Christian literature, history, and practices may appropriately be termed the 'foreground' of the New Testament. The use of historical background materials in the interpretation of the Bible is generally accepted and is at the foundation of the historical-grammatical approach to the Bible. Not so generally recognized is the value of early church history as an aid to the interpretation of the New Testament. What Christianity became in early history was largely shaped by the New Testament documents, although not by these exclusively, of course. This development also deserves to be considered in attaining a proper historical perspective on the meaning of the text itself.

"Two aspects of the Christian material are to be considered: (1) the actual interpretation of New Testament passages, sometimes expressed consciously and explicitly but at other times expressed only allusively or implicitly (especially in the earliest writings outside the text); (2) the faith and practice of early Christianity, *which reflects the understanding of the apostolic message and often preserve early customs, presuppositions and structures of thought*" (p. 254; my emphasis).

<sup>10</sup> Gorman, 48.

*All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.  
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