

Feature Article: DA360

**DEAD SILENCE:
MUST THE BIBLE SAY ABORTION IS WRONG BEFORE WE CAN
KNOW IT'S WRONG?**

by Scott Klusendorf

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 1 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

Abortion advocates contend that the Bible is silent on abortion and that none of the biblical passages cited by pro-life advocates actually say the unborn are human. Are we to conclude from this alleged silence that elective abortion is morally permitted? There are good reasons to say *no*. First, the Bible's lack of explicit prohibitions against abortion does not mean that it condones the practice; instead, Scripture writers did not believe prohibitions against abortion were necessary because neither the Hebrews of the Old Testament nor the Christians of the New Testament were likely to kill their unborn children. Second, the Bible need not explicitly say elective abortion is wrong before we can know that it's wrong. The Bible affirms that all humans are valuable because they bear God's image. Science clearly demonstrates that the unborn are unquestionably human from the earliest stages of development. Biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life, therefore, apply to the unborn as they do other human beings. Third, abortion advocates cannot account for basic human equality. If humans are valuable only because of some acquired property such as self-awareness, then it follows that since this acquired property comes in varying degrees, basic human rights also come in varying degrees. It's far more reasonable theologically to argue that although humans differ immensely in their respective degrees of development, they are nonetheless equally valuable because they have in common a nature made in the image of God.

Abortion advocates from both the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and Planned Parenthood Federation of America contend that the Bible is silent on abortion. None of the Scriptures traditionally cited by pro-life advocates establish the humanity of the unborn, they proclaim. "One thing the Bible does not say is 'Thou shalt not abort,'" writes Roy Bowen Ward, professor emeritus of comparative religion at Miami University of Ohio.¹ Reverend Mark Bigelow, a member of Planned Parenthood's Clergy Advisory Board, writes, "Even as a minister I am careful what I presume Jesus would do if he were alive today, but one thing I know from the Bible is that Jesus was not against women having a choice in continuing a pregnancy. He never said a word about abortion (nor did anyone else in the Bible) even though abortion was available and in use in his time."² Paul D. Simmons, former professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, finds the Bible's silence on abortion "profound" and remarks that not once does the subject appear in any of the apostle Paul's lists of prohibited actions.³ Suppose we grant that Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons are correct in that the Bible *is* silent on abortion. Let's further suppose that none of the specified passages cited by pro-life advocates (Ps. 51:5; 139:13-15; and Luke 1:41-44 to name a few) explicitly say the unborn are human. Does it follow, therefore, that Scripture teaches that women have a God-given right to abort their unborn offspring? The purpose of this article is to show that the case for elective abortion based on the alleged silence of Scripture is flawed both theologically and philosophically.

DOES SILENCE EQUAL PERMISSION?

Abortion advocates are correct that the Bible does not specifically mention abortion, but what's the best explanation for its silence? The hidden (and undefended) premise in the argument advanced by Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons is that whatever the Bible doesn't condemn it condones. It's easy to see that this premise is flawed, since it leads to some absurd conclusions. The Bible does not expressly condemn many things, including racial discrimination against blacks, killing abortion doctors as a means of fighting abortion, and lynching homosexuals, and yet few people would argue that these acts are morally justified. We know, in fact, that they are wrong by inference. Scripture, for example, tells us it's wrong to treat human beings unjustly. Lynching homosexuals treats human beings unjustly. Scripture, therefore, condemns this activity even if the topic of lynching is never explicitly addressed.

A century ago, racists argued from the alleged silence of Scripture that blacks were not human. Some went so far as to deny that blacks had souls.⁴ This argument was hardly persuasive. Scripture does not mention every specific race and nationality, but it does teach that all humans are made in God's image and were created to have fellowship with Him (Gen. 1:26; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10–11). The inference is clear: if blacks are human beings, they, too, are made in God's image. No further proof from Scripture is necessary.

As we shall see, the same is true with the unborn. If embryos and fetuses are human beings, then biblical commands that forbid the unjust taking of human life apply to them as they do to other humans. Appealing to the Bible's alleged silence on abortion misses the point entirely. That is why when abortion advocates argue their case from the silence of Scripture, I ask, "Are you saying that whenever the Bible does not specifically condemn something, it condones it?" When they say *no* (and they must), I reply, "Then what is your point?"

Contrary to Ward and Bigelow, there are good reasons to suppose the alleged silence of Scripture does not mean the biblical writers condoned abortion, but that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary. We should remember that the Bible as a whole is not a comprehensive code of ethics; rather, the Bible is the story of God's redemption of His people. In other words, the biblical writers, under guidance from the Holy Spirit, selectively discussed topics relevant to their intended audiences while leaving many other topics unstated. If neither the Hebrews of the Old Testament nor the Christians of the New Testament were inclined to abort their unborn offspring, there was little reason for the biblical writers to address the matter.

The Old Testament Context

Biblical and cultural evidence suggests that the original audiences of the Bible were not inclined to consider abortion even though it was practiced in surrounding cultures.⁵ Turning first to the Hebrew worldview found in the Old Testament, we find that:

- Humans have intrinsic value because they are made in the image of God. The shedding of innocent blood is hence strictly forbidden (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; Exod. 23:7; Prov. 6:16–17).
- Children are seldom seen as unwanted or as a nuisance (unless they turn wicked), but they are considered gifts from God — the greatest possible blessings (Ps. 127:3–5; 113:9; cf. Gen. 17:6; 33:5).
- Immortality is expressed through one's descendants. God promised Abraham to make of him a great nation and that promise was passed on to Isaac, Jacob, and so on. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him," wrote the psalmist (Ps. 127:3; cf. Gen. 48:16).
- Sterility and barrenness are a curse, a source of great shame and sorrow. Peninnah therefore harshly ridiculed Hannah, the prophet Samuel's mother, because of the latter's initial barrenness (1 Sam. 1:6; cf. Gen. 20:17–18; 30:1, 22–23).

As theologian Germain Grisez points out, among a people who saw children as a gift and barrenness as a curse, it was unthinkable that an Israelite woman should desire an abortion. In such a context, the Old Testament's silence on abortion suggests that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary and not that the practice was tacitly approved.⁶

Ward disputes this conclusion, noting it was common for authors of both Testaments to condemn the practices of neighboring nations, “such as idol worship, sacred prostitution, and the like, yet they did not choose to condemn abortion” — a practice common in those surrounding cultures.⁷

Ward’s rejoinder, however, is not persuasive. Unlike abortion, idolatrous practices were not restricted to neighboring cultures, but at times were pervasive among God’s *own* people; indeed, Ward overlooks the fact that Israel and Judah were taken captive on numerous occasions precisely because of their idolatry (Ps. 106:35–43; Jer. 1:16; 2:23; Ezek. 6:1–10). It is no surprise, therefore, that the biblical writers mentioned this practice but not abortion; although Israel’s neighboring cultures practiced abortion, it does not mean the Hebrews practiced abortion as well. In short, Ward fails to interpret the Old Testament within its own intellectual and historical-cultural framework.

Ward’s argument from silence, moreover, implies too much. The Bible does not mention one of the most heinous practices of the surrounding ancient world, female infanticide, but it does not follow from this that the act is therefore morally justified. The view that the absence of a direct prohibition meant that women had a God-given right to kill their offspring would have been utterly foreign to the Hebrew culture of the time.

The New Testament Context

Abortion was a foreign thought in the New Testament as well. Professor Michael J. Gorman writes that the first Christians were largely Jewish, with an essentially Jewish morality.⁸ If a Jewish consensus against abortion existed at the time, the early Christians most certainly would have shared that consensus.

As Gorman points out, first-century Judaism was, in fact, quite firmly opposed to abortion. Jewish documents from the period condemn the practice unequivocally, demonstrating a clear antiabortion consensus among Jews:

- The *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* (written between 50 bc and ad 50) says, “A woman should not destroy the unborn babe in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before the dogs and vultures.”
- The *Sibylline Oracles* includes among the wicked those who “produce abortions and unlawfully cast their offspring away.” Also condemned are sorcerers who dispense abortifacients (an abortion-inducing substance or device).
- First Enoch (a first or second century bc document) says an evil angel taught humans how to “smash the embryo in the womb.”

Josephus (a first-century Jewish historian) stated, “The law orders all the offspring be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus.” A woman who did so was considered to have committed infanticide because she destroyed a “soul” and hence diminished the race.⁹

These texts, writes Gorman, “bear witness to the general Jewish and Jewish-Christian attitude of the first and second centuries, thus confirming that the earliest Christians shared the anti-abortion position of their Jewish forebears.”¹⁰

Finally, we should remember that the theology of the New Testament epistles is primarily “task” theology written to address specific issues in specific churches. Paul, for example, is largely silent on the historical career of Christ (he mentions it only in passing while underscoring the importance of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15), but this does not mean that he questioned the facts of Jesus’ earthly ministry. A discussion of those facts simply never became necessary. New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd stated, “We may say that we owe whatever understanding we have of Paul’s thought to the ‘accidents of history’ which required him to deal with various problems, doctrinal and practical, in the life of the churches.”¹¹

The best explanation, then, for the New Testament’s silence on abortion is not that its authors condoned the practice, but that a discussion of the issue was unnecessary. As Gorman points out, there was no deviation from the norm inherited from Judaism. Unlike the surrounding pagan cultures, the early Christians to whom the New Testament was written were simply not inclined to kill their children before or after birth.

WHAT IS THE UNBORN AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

The morality of abortion comes down to just one question: Is the unborn a member of the human family? If so, elective abortion is a serious moral wrong that violates biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life (Exod. 23:7; Ps. 106:37–38; Prov. 6:16–17; Matt. 5:21). It treats the unborn human being, made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; James 3:9), as nothing more than disposable tissue. Conversely, if the unborn are not human, elective abortion requires no more justification than having a tooth pulled.

Scripture (we will grant) is silent on the humanity of the unborn (as it is on the humanity of whites, blacks, Asians, etc.); however, it is clear that we are not to take human life without justification. It follows that if a positive case can be made for the humanity of the unborn apart from Scripture (as, e.g., we know the French are humans apart from Scripture), we can logically conclude that biblical commands against the unjust taking of human life apply to the unborn as they do other human beings. At this point, science assists theology; that is to say, science gives us the facts we need to arrive at a theologically sound conclusion.

What the facts of science make clear is that from the earliest stages of development, the unborn are distinct, living, and whole human beings. True, they have yet to grow and mature, but they are whole human beings nonetheless. Leading embryology textbooks affirm this conclusion.¹²

An Embryo Is More than Human Cells

Abortion advocate Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, whose work is prominently featured in the literature of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, insists, however, that we gain no theological knowledge from these facts. “The fetus is biologically human only in the sense that any part of a human body is human: every cell carries the full genetic code. A severed hand is genetically human as well but we don’t call it a person.”¹³ In other words, Mollenkott would have us believe there is no difference in kind between a human embryo and each of our cells.

This is bad biology. Mollenkott is making the rather elementary mistake of confusing parts with wholes. The difference in kind between each of our cells and a human embryo is clear: an individual cell’s functions are subordinated to the survival of the larger organism of which it is merely a part. The human embryo, however, is already a whole human entity. Robert George and Patrick Lee argue that it makes no sense to say you were once a sperm or somatic cell when science clearly states that you were once a human embryo: “Somatic cells are not, and embryonic human beings are, distinct, self-integrating organisms capable of directing their own maturation as members of the human species.”¹⁴

Maureen Condic, assistant professor of neurobiology and anatomy at the University of Utah, points out that embryos are living human beings “precisely because they possess the single defining feature of human life that is lost in the moment of death — the ability to function as a coordinated organism rather than merely as a group of living human cells.” Condic explains the important distinction between individual body parts and whole human embryos overlooked by Mollenkott: “The critical difference between a collection of cells and a living organism is the ability of an organism to act in a coordinated manner for the continued health and maintenance of the body as a whole. It is precisely this ability that breaks down at the moment of death, however death might occur. Dead bodies may have plenty of live cells, but their cells no longer function together in a coordinated manner.”¹⁵

From conception forward, human embryos clearly function as organisms. “Embryos are not merely collections of human cells, but living creatures with all the properties that define any organism as distinct from a group of cells; embryos are capable of growing, maturing, maintaining a physiologic balance between various organ systems, adapting to changing circumstances, and repairing injury. Mere groups of human cells [e.g., a severed hand] do nothing like this under any circumstances.”¹⁶

WHAT MAKES HUMANS VALUABLE?

Do humans come to be at one point, but come to be valuable only later by virtue of some acquired property (i.e., characteristic)? In his article, “Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate,” Paul D.

Simmons concedes that zygotes (early embryos) are biologically human, but he denies they are “complex” or “developed enough” to qualify as “persons” in a biblical sense. “No one can deny the continuum from fertilization to maturity and adulthood,” writes Simmons. “That does not mean, however, that every step on the continuum has the same value or constitutes the same entity.”¹⁷

Simmons’s larger purpose is to defend abortion rights by telling us who does and does not bear God’s image. He argues that humans bear that image (and hence, have value as “persons”) not by virtue of the kind of thing they are (members of a natural kind or species), but only because of an acquired property, in this case, the immediate capacity for self-awareness. A “person,” he contends, “has capacities of reflective choice, relational responses, social experience, moral perception, and self-awareness.”¹⁸ Zygotes, as mere clusters of human cells, do not have this capacity and therefore do not bear God’s image.

Three counterexamples underscore the arbitrary nature of Simmons’s claim. First, newborns cannot make conscious, reflective choices until several months after birth.¹⁹ What principled reason, therefore, can Simmons give for saying infanticide is wrong? Peter Singer points out in *Practical Ethics* that if self-awareness makes one valuable as a person, and newborns like fetuses lack that property, it follows that both fetus and newborn are disqualified. One cannot arbitrarily draw a line at birth to spare the newborn.²⁰

Abraham Lincoln raised a similar point with slavery, noting that any argument used to disqualify blacks as valuable human beings works equally well to disqualify whites:

You say “A” is white and “B” is black. It is color, then: the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are a slave to the first man you meet with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean color exactly — You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again: By this rule you are to be a slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.

But you say it is a question of interest, and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.²¹

In short, Simmons cannot account for basic human equality. As George and Lee point out, if humans are valuable only because of some acquired property such as skin color or self-awareness and not in virtue of the kind of thing they are, then it follows that since these acquired properties come in varying degrees, basic human rights also come in varying degrees. Do we really want to say that those with more self-awareness are more human (and more valuable) than those with less? This relegates the proposition “all men and women are created equal” to the ash heap of history.²² Theologically, it’s far more reasonable to argue that although humans differ immensely with respect to talents, accomplishments, and degrees of development (acquired properties), they are nonetheless equally valuable because they have in common a nature made in God’s image. Humans are equally valuable by virtue of being equally human.

Second, if the immediate capacity for consciousness makes one valuable, many nonhuman animals qualify as persons. This is Peter Singer’s point. Singer contends that a variety of nonhuman animals are rational, self-conscious beings that qualify as persons in the relevant sense of the term; consequently, dogs, cats, and pigs are valuable persons, while fetuses, newborns, and victims of Alzheimer’s disease are not. Singer concludes that to favor the preconscious infant over a self-conscious dog simply because the infant is biologically human makes one guilty of “speciesism,” a crime akin to racism.²³ It’s hard to see how Simmons can escape this same conclusion given his belief that God’s image in humans is grounded in the property of self-awareness per se rather than in human nature, which allows for self-consciousness among other capacities, given the right conditions.

Third, human embryos have a basic (root) capacity for self-consciousness, lacking only the immediate, or current, capacity for it. As George points out, human embryos possess this basic capacity by virtue of the kind of thing they are — members of a natural kind, a biological species — whose members (if not prevented by some extrinsic cause) in due course develop the immediate capacity for such mental acts.²⁴ We can, therefore, distinguish between two types of capacities for mental functions: (1) basic, or natural, and (2) immediate, or current. On what basis can Simmons require for the recognition of full moral

respect the second sort of capacity, which is an accidental (i.e., nonessential) attribute, and not the first, which is grounded in the kind of thing one is?²⁵ I cannot think of any basis that is not arbitrary. One grows in the ability to perform mental acts only because one *already is* the kind of thing that grows into the ability to perform mental acts, that is, a human being. *My* thoughts and *my* feelings, indeed all of my functional mental abilities, cannot exist unless *I* first exist. I can exist without them, as, for example, when I am sleeping, but they cannot exist without me.²⁶

In the end, Simmons's case for human value is ad hoc and arbitrary. It cannot answer why self-awareness is the biblically relevant factor rather than another, nor why a certain level of development is necessary.

FLAWED THEOLOGY

Exodus 21:22–25 is a favorite of abortion advocates, though it does little to bolster their case. The passage reads in the nasb as follows: “And if men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage [“gives birth prematurely” in nasb 1995 update], yet there is no further injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him; and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” Abortion advocates argue that this Scripture proves the unborn are not fully human because the penalty for accidentally killing a fetus is less than the penalty for killing its mother.

This argument, however, is flawed on several counts. First, assuming for the sake of argument that the pro-abortion interpretation of this passage is correct (i.e., that the unborn's death is treated differently from the mother's), it still does not follow that the unborn are not fully human. The preceding verses (21:20–21) present a situation where a master unintentionally kills his slave and escapes with no penalty at all (the lack of intent being proven by the interval between the blow and the death), and yet it hardly follows that Scripture considers the slave less than human.

Second, this passage does not even remotely suggest that a woman can *willfully* kill her unborn child through elective abortion. Nothing in the context supports this claim. At best, the text assigns a lesser penalty for *accidentally* killing a fetus than for accidentally killing its mother. It simply does not follow from this that a woman may *deliberately* kill her child through abortion.

Third, the pro-abortion interpretation of this passage (that a lesser penalty applies for accidental fetal death) is highly questionable. When read in the original Hebrew, the passage seems to convey that both the mother and the child are covered by the *lex talionis* — the law of retribution. According to Hebrew scholar Gleason Archer, “There is no second class status attached to the fetus under this [lex talionis] rule. The fetus is just as valuable as the mother.”²⁷

Taken together, the cultural, exegetical, philosophical, and scientific considerations we've examined prove that the Bible need not explicitly say elective abortion is wrong before we can know it is wrong. Although the Bible does not say “Thou shalt not abort,” it does prohibit the unjust taking of human life, which applies to the unborn as it does to other humans.

NOTES

1. Roy Bowen Ward, “Is the Fetus a Person? The Bible's View,” *Mission Journal* (January 1986) <http://www.rcrc.org/pdf/is_fetus_a_person.pdf>.
2. Mark Bigelow, letter to Bill O'Reilly of *Fox News*, November 22, 2002. Letter available at <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about/pr/021126_gloria_letter.html>.
3. Paul D. Simmons, “Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate,” Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice <http://www.rcrc.org/pdf/personhood_and_bible.pdf>.
4. Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery: Origin, Fortunes and History of the Negro Race*, 5th ed. (Glasgow, KY: W. S. Brown, 1852), 33, cited in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 560.
5. I'm indebted here to the research of Germain G. Grisez and Michael Gorman, whose works I cite below.
6. Germain G. Grisez, *Abortion: The Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments* (New York: Corpus Books, 1970), 123–27.
7. Ward.
8. Michael J. Gorman, “Why Is the New Testament Silent about Abortion?” *Christianity Today*, January 11, 1993.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 377–78.
12. See T. W. Sadler, *Langman's Medical Embryology*, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1993), 3; Keith L. Moore, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*, 4th ed. (Toronto: B. C. Decker, 1988), 2; Ronan R. O'Rahilly and Fabiola Müller, *Human Embryology and Teratology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Liss, 1996), 8, 29.
13. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Respecting the Moral Agency of Women," Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice <http://www.rcrc.org/pdf/moral_agency_women.pdf>.
14. Robert George and Patrick Lee, "Reason, Science, and Stem Cells," *National Review Online*, July 20, 2001 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-george072001.shtml>>.
15. Maureen L. Condit, "Life: Defining the Beginning by the End," *First Things* 133 (May 2003): 50–54.
16. Ibid.
17. Simmons.
18. Ibid.
19. Conor Liston and Jerome Kagan, "Brain Development: Memory Enhancement in Early Childhood," *Nature* 419, 896 (2002). See also O'Rahilly and Müller, 8.
20. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169–71.
21. Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Ray P. Basler, vol. 2 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 222.
22. Robert P. George, "Cloning Addendum," *National Review Online*, July 15, 2002 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/document/document071602.asp>>; Patrick Lee, "The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity" (paper presented at the Tollefsen Lecture Series, St. Anselm's College, November 14, 2002).
23. Helga Khuse and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 123. See also Singer, 117–19.
24. George, "Cloning Addendum."
25. Patrick Lee asks this question (though not addressing Simmons) in "The Pro-Life Argument from Substantial Identity."
26. Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 27.
27. Cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *When Does Life Begin?* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1990), 195–96. See also Meredith Kline, "Lex Talionis and the Human Fetus," *Simon Greenleaf Law Review* 5 (1985-1986): 73-89.