

Image of God and Abortion

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This essay will discuss the topic of abortion as it relates to what the image of God is, what it means, and in turn why an unborn human being's life matter with Scripture—particularly Genesis 1—as its basis. Abortion as used in the essay is the purposeful termination of a human life, as marked by one who has already been conceived in utero.

According to Genesis 1:26-28 by way of historical context and surrounding narrative context, Conservative and Reformed Evangelical Christians in membership in their churches have an obligation to recognize that unborn children are made in the image of God and therefore are worthy of life and undeserving of abortion from the moment of conception all the way to birth because of three affirmations. These affirmations are as following: human life begins at conception, the inherent image of God is in every human being from conception, and a right understanding of dominion given to man over creation yields proper stewardship contrary to the allowance of termination of an image-bearer.

Does human life begin at conception?

This is important because if the aforementioned question is not answered, there is not a viable reason to concern oneself with the topic of abortion; if the unborn entity is not in fact a life, then the entire discussion is moot. To consistently address the topic of abortion and its unethical standing in society, one must have a firm standard by which they can judge what is ethical and unethical.

One way that one can go about this is exploring the field of bioethics and general sciences. Mark Cherry, professor of Applied Ethics and Philosophy at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas writes in his article "Sex, Abortion, and Infanticide, The Gulf between the Secular and the Divine" that

*Bioethics inevitably begins epistemic and moral analysis from the perspective of methodological atheism; that is, with the implicit foundational assumption that there is no God. In its rejection of traditional Christianity, contemporary biomedical ethics places persons, rather than God, in authority to define the right, the good, and the virtuous.*¹

In other words, the sciences (in particular bioethics) begin at a place that takes God out of supreme authority and places man in that place. He goes on in his article and calls the reader to consider the fact that those in the sciences are no longer questioning the ethics of abortion, but assuming it.² Rather, the safety of the medical procedure itself for the mother of the aborted fetus is discussed, and a "safe" abortion is considered the highest victory of ethical achievement.³

Examples of the former-days when abortions were performed in low-tech rooms with a high mortality rate are used in defending the right to safe abortion by advocates, but Cherry continues in his article to bring the reader back to the Christian ethical standard for abortion as the only basis for any ethics whatsoever. To truly recognize that unborn persons have a right to life from conception, the Christian must first set his or her basis of ethics on Scripture.

Those without the *imago dei* as their foundation

Proponents of abortion, however, do not believe the Christian bioethical foundation of life in the *imago dei* (image of God) and thus do not see an unborn fetus as having life at conception. Such beliefs and foundations are evident in the opening statement of an article entitled "Early Abortion Options" on pro-abortion website *Our Bodies Ourselves*: "Abortion is a safe and legal way to end a pregnancy."⁴

Though the aforementioned article intends to focus on the differentiation between medical and aspirational abortion,

¹ Mark Cherry, "Sex, Abortion, and Infanticide: The Gulf Between the Secular and the Divine," *Christian Bioethics: Non-Ecumenical Studies In Medical Morality* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2011), 26-27.

² Mark Cherry, "Sex, Abortion, and Infanticide" *Christian Bioethics* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2011), 33.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Early Abortion Options," *Our Bodies Ourselves*, April 02, 2014.

the opening statement of the article tells the reader all they need to know about how this website and overall pro-abortion movement believes that the truest and highest ethical standard involving this procedure is making it legal and safe.⁵

On the same side of the issue, Karen Weingarten in her book *Abortion in the American Imagination* documents the history of the abortion discussion in the early 20th century via all types of media, from plays to texts, and summarily concludes that abortion was never an ethical dilemma to begin with.⁶ She argues, rather, that it was an undiscussed topic of “that which had to be done” and didn’t become much of a topic of debate or a thought of morality in the public square until the decades leading up to the *Roe v. Wade* decision to legalize abortion in all states.⁷

This thinking, however, shows again an evident presupposition of starting bioethics without the foundation of Christianity and its consequent Scripture and instead replacing it with the foundation of self and high moral value of “safety.”⁸

Scripture as our foundation

The foundation for the Christian to base his or her ethical standards on is Scripture, but specifically Genesis 1:26-28. The author of Genesis, Moses, begins with “God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . so God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”” (ESV) While what it precisely means to be created in the *imago dei*, the image of God, is contested amongst Christian scholars, there is a general consensus that it proves and provides the basis for the dignity and intrinsic worth of mankind.⁹ There are three categories by which scholars interpret the *imago dei* and its implications: that of functional, substantive, and relational status.¹⁰

Functional View

The first of these categories, functional, is simultaneously the oldest and newest view of the *imago dei*. As evidenced in the ancient near-eastern text surrounding the writing of the Torah by Moses, the idea of representing a king by being made in his image is something that even the pagan religions surrounding Israel believed.¹¹ While it is an ancient belief, it has come up in the studies of many 20th century and 21st century scholars such as Kenneth A. Matthews in the Genesis 1-11:26 portion of his contribution to *The New American Commentary*. He says that “royal figures were considered “sons” adopted by the gods to function as vice-regents and intermediaries between deity and society.”¹²

If this parallel between Genesis 1:26-28 and the image of the rulers in ancient near-Eastern societies is a valid one, this means that Moses in Genesis 1 is calling all of mankind, or at least Adam and Eve, the intermediaries between God and creation.¹³ This would fit within the exegetical narrative of the passage, considering that verse 28 goes as following: “and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”” (ESV)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Karen Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940* (Rutgers University Press, 2014), 13.

⁷ Ibid., 144-145.

⁸ Mark Cherry, “Sex, Abortion, and Infanticide” *Christian Bioethics* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2011), 26.

⁹ Gunnlaugur A Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988), 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement*, 3rd ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, University Microfilms International, 1969), 417.

¹² Kenneth A. Matthews “Excursus: Interpreting the ‘Image of God’.” *The New American Commentary: Genesis 1- 11:26*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 169.

¹³ Ibid.

Summarily, man in this view of the *imago dei* is valuable and dignified by the fact that he represents His Creator that defines and embodies value and dignity. This would in turn mean that from the moment of creation, each person at the point of conception is valued and dignified because of the inherent ruler-representative image of God in them; in effect, making the ethical case and standard for abortion being immoral. This view will be especially important in the discussion over the limits of dominion.

Substantive View

The overwhelmingly dominant view of what it means to be created in the image of God in church history is the substantive view.¹⁴ That is, the view that the *imago dei* is of spiritual substance and each person is made in the image of God by their possession of a soul and consequently being an ethics-bearer.¹⁵ When God said “let us make man in our image and our likeness,” this would be the interpretation of the text by those holding this view: each person is made in God’s image by having a spiritual aspect to him or herself, considering God is spirit.

While this is a necessary and theologically accurate aspect of the *imago dei*, it falls short of placing it within historical and narrative context by failing to recognize the dominion aspect of the narrative. This view, however, is much more developed and more accurate in comparison to Richard Briggs’ argument, which is that throughout the ages the only answer that theologians have given is that which is “reflecti[ve] of their own image.”¹⁶

It is, however, correct in providing the ethical basis against abortion, as it shows that the soul of a person is created at conception in the “likeness of God” and therefore terminating that soul is a spiritual as well as physical violation of God’s command to not shed the blood of man in Genesis 9. This soul possession is something that man possesses and animal does not according Christian theology, and therefore “as God’s image-bearers, human beings are imbued with a dignity and worth beyond that of animals” as Justin Holcomb says.¹⁷

Relational View

The last view, as perhaps the least popular and most obscure, is the relational view of the *imago dei*. Essentially in neo-orthodox thought via men like Karl Barth see the image of God as only applies to those in relationship with Him.¹⁸ This type of thought breaks down very easily when one considers that in Christian Scripture, each person is in a relationship with God according to Romans 1, either in a wrathful or in a graceful way. While this neo-orthodox understanding is coherent within itself, it does not find itself in harmony with other parts of the Christian Scripture. Perhaps the biggest difference holding to this view of the *imago dei* makes is when comes to the topic of abortion.

In holding to the belief that the *imago dei* applies to those in relationship with God, a certain level of intellectual assent, age, logical coherence within the individual, etc. is require before someone is in the image of God. Considering man’s central identity is rooted in this passage in Genesis about being in God’s likeness, this would in turn mean one is not truly human until they have an active faith relationship with God.

In turn, this view would be consistent with viewing the abortion of an unborn fetus as ethical or at the very least indifferent, as there would be no ethical ground by which one could defend or support the life (or lack thereof) in utero.

Calvin on the *Imago Dei*

¹⁴ Mathews, Kenneth A. “Interpreting the ‘Image of God’,” 169.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Company, 1959), 190.

¹⁶ “Humans in the Image of God and Other Things Genesis Does Not Make Clear.,” *Journal Of Theological Interpretation* 4, no. 1 (2010), 113.

¹⁷ Justin Holcomb, “The Ethics of Personhood,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, April 1, 2013.

¹⁸ Gunnlaugur A Jónsson, *The Image of God*, 18

Theologian and Protestant Reformation era author John Calvin in his work *Institutes of the Christian Religion* says about the image of God in man:

*For though God's glory shines forth in the outer man, yet there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul. I do not deny, indeed, that our outward form, in so far as it distinguishes us from brute animals, at the same times more closely joins us to God.*¹⁹

What Calvin means here that though it is clear in Genesis 1:26-28 that there is a physical aspect of being made in the *imago dei*, the main focus of the text is to point the reader to see something that substantively separates man from animal—that is, the soul.

Correct observation and interpretation of the text of Scripture is essential in understanding what the *imago dei* is, what it entails, and what the views are because it affects how one views human life from conception to natural death. Though the implications are wide for each and every view—not to be viewed as mutually exclusive, however—each viable interpretation carries with it the burden of not terminating human life because of its value, something that should be important to each Christian should they take theological implications seriously.

Using Dominion as An Excuse

An argument used since the 20th century by some theologically liberal groups for the justification of abortion (while still maintaining an orthodox view of the *imago dei*) is that of the dominion mandate. An example of this is the UPC's two-part document that states that sometimes "justification for . . . choosing abortion [is] necessary for responsible stewardship over creation."²⁰ According to William S. Kurz of Marquette University, however, this is an abuse of the dominion mandate.²¹ In this, he provides a short defense for a sort of functional view, as he states that those have dominion are often associated with "royal rule."²²

This application of the ancient king-representative view of subjects in the image of the king is made clearer here in that one sees the practical outworking of this view—stewardship.²³ Stewardship would simply be ruling under the authority and name of someone else, giving a glimpse, picture or representation of the highest ruler when the lesser rulers subdue what is under their domain.²⁴ There must be limits to this dominion, however, as if there were not, the lesser ruler (man) would have ultimate authority and therefore be the greater ruler.²⁵

Genesis 9 gives the reader general context as to what dominion-limits are in the punishment of innocent murder, but there is also an immediate context of the *imago dei* doctrine that makes the substantive difference between man and animal.²⁶ The general limit of man in the dominion mandate in verse 28 of Genesis 1 is the restriction of power to that which is substantively lower than him—namely animals and inanimate life.²⁷

Since each person is in the image of God, the value and dignity of life is inherent in the unborn person. Therefore, because man has dominion over that which is substantively lower than him but not that which is substantively equal to him (and unborn persons are substantively equal according to orthodox view of the image of God), man does not have

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 186.

²⁰ William S. Kurz, "Genesis and Abortion: An Exegetical Test of a Biblical Warrant in Ethics," *Theological Studies* 47, no. 4 (December 1, 1986), 668.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 670.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 669.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 670.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 671.

²⁶ William S. Kurz, "Genesis and Abortion," 674.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 675.

the right nor reason to exercise false dominion via abortion of an unborn person.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated via a right understanding of the Genesis 1:28 dominion mandate, orthodox interpretations of the image of God in each person, and the beginning of personhood and life from the moment of conception via bioethical foundations, human beings that unborn are worthy of life and undeserving of abortion. As proven in the section on foundations of ethics, the basis for a right understanding of unborn personhood and life comes from Scripture—namely Genesis 1:26-28—and is also the foundation for who should care and why. Those that have the basis for solid ethical grounds against abortion are Conservative and Reformed Evangelical Christians, whose foundation also becomes their reason for caring about unborn persons and rejecting abortion as an option: the image of God in every person. Therefore, it is necessary for such Christians to make active efforts to provide for and save unborn children as well as the mothers.

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