

What does the Bible teach about the Sanctity of Life?

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From the opening pages of the Bible we read that God is the giver and sustainer of life. He is our creator and we owe our existence to Him. We also see in the scriptures that God alone has the right to *end* life. In Genesis 9:6 we see the first stern warning against murder:

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

The scriptures make it very clear that God is stirred to wrath over the shedding of *innocent blood*.¹ God calls righteous people to protect the defenseless and helpless members of society. The widow and the orphan.²

Abortion

How does this truth apply to the sanctity of pre-born life? Does pre-born life have the same kind of sacred status in God's eyes? What does the Bible and Church History say? Job--likely the oldest book in the Bible--says God's hands shaped Job and made him.³ God "knit [Job] together."⁴

Isaiah--a preeminent Old Testament Prophet--wrote:

"This is what the LORD says--he who made you, who *formed you in the womb*. . . ." [44:2a]

God forms a personal relationship with us even as He knits us together inside the womb. This is described quite dramatically in Psalm 139:

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." [13-16]

In the New Testament we see that babies can be "filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth"⁵ and while in the womb they can even "leap for joy!"⁶ Clearly, the Bible recognizes pre-born children as God's handiwork, and this has been clearly understood throughout Church History. Many ancient Church documents and catechisms speak specifically against the practice of abortion.

¹ See Deuteronomy 19:10; Proverbs 6:16-17.

² James 1:27.

³ Job 10:8.

⁴ Job 10:11.

⁵ Luke 1:15.

⁶ Luke 1:41.

Their words are clear: *do not murder a child by abortion!*⁷ The scriptures make it very clear: *Life is a gift of God and it is never appropriate for individuals to end life.* By so doing, an individual is “playing God.” This kind of authority—or in some cases, vigilante justice—is not supported anywhere in the scriptures.

The Death Penalty

But some have inferred that it is also not appropriate for the *state* to end a life. What does the Bible say about this? The clearest New Testament reference to the role of government comes from Romans 13:

"For [the governing authority] is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." [v.4]

The words and actions of Paul and Jesus support this perspective. When Paul's own life was on the line he affirmed that if “I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die.”⁸

In a similar context, Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate as a wrongly condemned man. He was amazed that Jesus remained silent. Finally Pilate said, “Don't you realize that I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” This would have been the perfect opportunity for Jesus to say, ‘No! You have no such power or right.’ But instead Jesus responded, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”⁹ Jesus affirms Pilate's power to punish citizens of Rome, even unto death.

John the Baptist's encounter with soldiers who have been converted to Christ is also very instructive. They asked him very directly “what should we do?”¹⁰ This would have been the perfect opportunity for John to teach them that their occupation was immoral. He could have instructed these professional killers that being a soldier is inconsistent with being a Christian. But instead he responded this way, “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”¹¹ The silence is staggering. John seems to affirm that soldiers who “bear the sword” of the state, do so rightfully.

Why is this? While it is wrong for *individuals* to “play God” it is entirely appropriate for *governing authorities* to portray God through the judging of wrongdoers. It is for this purpose the state “bears the sword.” When evil-doers are judged by human authorities it is to be a reminder to us that there is a Divine Authority who one day will judge all evil. When the state does not do its job in

⁷ See the *Didache*, 2.2; *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 19.5; and many others.

⁸ Acts 25:11.

⁹ John 19:10-11.

¹⁰ Luke 3:14a.

¹¹ Luke 3:14b.

portraying God accurately, the people receive a distorted view of God. They tend to believe that He is so forgiving that He will never judge. They lead lives of license and liberty, never realizing that *their sins must be completely paid for* in order to be a partaker in the kingdom of God.

Since the state is to mirror God's justice it is critical that they employ the standards of true justice presented in the scriptures. What are those standards?

1. High standards of evidence.

In the Old Testament a person could not be convicted for a capital crime without the testimony of two or three witnesses.¹² This standard receives continued support in the New Testament from Jesus¹³ and the Apostle Paul.¹⁴ The Christian should be an advocate of especially high standards of evidence in capital cases. Truthful testimony and accurate punishments were so important in the Old Testament that the punishment for false testimony was *the death penalty!*¹⁵ In a modern society there are many kinds of evidence that might serve as an equivalent to eyewitness testimony (Cameras, DNA, fibers, etc.). Biblically, a combination of at least two strong witnesses should be required to convict someone of a capital crime and sentence them to death.

2. 'Blind' justice.

The Bible commands courts and judges to practice fairness regardless of race, cultural standing, or financial strength. Moses summarizes these principles of fairness in the book of Exodus:

"Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. "Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous. "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt. (23:6-9)

These words are echoed throughout the prophets.¹⁶ The Christian should be very interested in 'blind' justice. If it can be demonstrated that there is systemic injustice on the basis of race, cultural standing, or finances there ought to be reform. However, the reform ought to *strengthen proper punishment*, not *weaken punishment for those who are correctly convicted*. With high standards of evidence and 'blind' justice we could begin seeing some of the benefits of a consistent and fair application of the death penalty.

¹² Deuteronomy 17:6.

¹³ Matthew 18:16.

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 5:19.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 19:16-19.

¹⁶ Isaiah 5:20-23, Malachi 2:9.

Conclusion

God is the giver of life and He alone has the authority to take life and to authorize others to execute justice. Since life is so precious, there is no other penalty that is appropriate when it is taken away through murder.

Some continue to wonder how Christians could be pro-life and also pro-death penalty. However, this view is rooted in the Biblical teaching on the sanctity of life. Life is sacred. It is always to be protected. And when we deal casually with life, God is offended. He has ordained governing authorities to protect life. He has also authorized governing authorities to punish those who take life casually.