

The Bible, Abortion, and the Sanctity of Life

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Slightly shorter version published at dailypress.com, 3/17/18

<http://www.dailypress.com/features/dpfea-religion-column-warren-0311-story.html>

Summary: Christian opposition to abortion has no biblical basis. It's rooted in confusion. Neuroscience can help clear up this confusion.

Exodus 21:22-25 prescribes the punishment for causing a woman to miscarry. If there's no harm done besides the miscarriage, then the person is fined. If the woman is hurt or killed, then it's "life for life, eye for eye," etc. There's only a life for a life if the woman is killed. If a fetus was considered a person, then it would be a life for a life in either case.

Leviticus 27:2-7 provides offering values "equivalent for a human being." A male from one month to five years is worth five shekels. A female is three shekels. There's no value for an infant less than a month old. In Numbers 3:15 God calls for a census to be taken. Only males a month and older are to be counted.

Numbers 5:11-31 gives the legal procedure for when a man suspects his wife of adultery. A priest will take dust off the floor and mix it with holy water. The woman drinks this and if she's not guilty, nothing will happen. If she's guilty, and pregnant, then "the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop." God induces an abortion.

Nowhere in the Bible is there a prohibition on abortion. Fetuses were not considered persons. Abortions were even mandated in cases of adultery.

With no basis in the Bible, where does Christian opposition to abortion come from? It comes from confusion.

It's often stated that life begins at conception. There are a few problems with this. First, it's not true. Sperm and eggs are alive before they combine to form zygotes.

Next, even if it was true, it wouldn't matter. Life itself is not morally significant. Plants are alive, but there's nothing wrong with killing vegetables. Animals are alive. We kill them too. Most of us anyway. So the issue's not life, but human life.

This raises another question. What makes human life special? Why is it ok to kill plants and animals, but not humans? What makes human life sacred? What's the basis for human rights?

Self-consciousness--or the mind, the soul, the spirit--is what distinguishes us from other animals. It's what gives us the right to determine our own lives, to not have our lives controlled by others, much less to have our lives taken by others.

[Many animals](#) are [apparently](#) sentient and consequently deserve consideration. Any creature with the capacity for suffering, the ability to feel pain, [shouldn't be mistreated](#). We should do all we can not to cause any unnecessary pain to any such being. But it's [only humans](#), as far as we can tell, that are not just conscious, but self-conscious. It's only humans that have a sense of who they are, a sense of self, and consequently an experience of time. Only humans have hopes, dreams and expectations for the future. This is the basis for the right of self-determination.

Consciousness is the basis for moral concern. Self-consciousness is the basis for human rights.

In a human fetus, at around [24 weeks gestation](#) (22 weeks post-fertilization), the cerebral cortex develops and starts connecting to the rest of the nervous system. This connection is necessary for consciousness. Prior to this, a fetus cannot possibly be conscious in any way, much less self-conscious, and it's therefore in no need of any kind of protection. However precious the fetus may look, prior to consciousness there simply is no moral issue.

Claims of fetal pain prior to 24 weeks are based on [reflexive behavior](#) that has nothing to do with consciousness.

Furthermore, for consciousness, the cerebral connection is necessary, but insufficient. After connections begin at 24 weeks, neuronal integration, as seen by synchrony of the EEG rhythm of the cortical hemispheres, isn't detected until [around 34 weeks](#).

Finally, independent of brain development, low oxygen and a range of substances, including adenosine, allopregnanolone, pregnanolone and prostaglandin D2, ensure that the [fetus is completely sedated](#) for the full duration of the pregnancy.

A child's conscious experiences begin, at the earliest, at birth. Self-consciousness [develops after birth](#). [Genesis 1:27](#) says that we're created in God's image. This sacred status, the status of a person, doesn't predate our birth.

Traditional Christian beliefs in fetal personhood were based on various theories of [ensoulment](#). The earliest theorists claimed ensoulment occurred at conception. In the 4th century, some theorists started to claim a later point for ensoulment, often 40 days after conception. We now know that they were all wrong. They did the best they could, but without the insights of modern science, they were just making things up.

The soul is born no earlier than the child is born.

For the full history of Christian beliefs concerning abortion, see "[The Soul of the Embryo](#)," by David Albert Jones. For the Jewish history, see "[Marital Relations, Birth Control, and Abortion in Jewish Law](#)," by David M. Feldman.

[Virginia law](#) prohibits abortion in the [third trimester](#), except to prevent death or serious harm to the mother. There is no good reason for any laws that ban or restrict access to abortion in the first two trimesters, or that interfere with a woman's decision making. Any such laws, however well

intended, are extremely cruel. It's cruel to force or coerce a woman to have a child that she's not prepared to have. It's the woman that needs our protection and love, not the insentient fetus.