

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP404

## IS A PRO-LIFE HERMENEUTIC POSSIBLE?

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The entire Christian tradition has rejected the practice of abortion from the beginning.<sup>1</sup> Let that sink in for a moment. This, at times, has been politicized for better or worse. Nevertheless, as one considers all of the division that exists within Christianity concerning various doctrines, to find anything that has been uniformly believed is quite astounding. And it makes sense. Christians have long understood that it is wrong to kill an innocent human being intentionally, and that's what abortion is. Even though the Bible never specifically mentions abortion, for centuries no one thought its silence equaled permission, neither did they see anything else in Scripture that would affirm the right to kill the unborn. This has changed.

Claiming to see what no one has before, some today are embracing a pro-choice hermeneutic that sees abortion as a moral decision. Consider, for example, The Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing's position: "Scripture neither condemns nor prohibits abortion. It does, however, call us to act compassionately and justly when facing difficult moral decisions."<sup>2</sup>

A difficult moral decision it is, but how does one take the Bible's supposed silence on the issue to mean the Bible has a pro-choice moral framework? They and others are able to do this because of one huge assumption — the moral status of the unborn — and the subsequent misapplication of the biblical principle of moral agency. But first, is the Bible silent?

**Is the Bible Silent on Abortion?** Writing for the Freedom from Religion Foundation, Dr. Steven Morris says, "It would surprise many in the antiabortion flock to learn that abortion is nowhere mentioned in the Bible."<sup>3</sup> His subsequent advice: don't tyrannize others based on theological guesswork. It is true: the Bible nowhere mentions abortion. So what follows? Certainly not the assumption that silence equals permission. Adopting this thinking would put us in some morally awkward positions, as the Bible is silent on a number of things we know are morally reprehensible and certainly forbidden.

As Scott Klusendorf points out, "The Bible does not expressly condemn many things including racial discrimination against blacks, killing abortion doctors for fun,

and lynching homosexuals, yet few people proclaim these acts morally justified.”<sup>4</sup> Klusendorf is right. The Bible does not need to state explicitly these things are wrong because it clearly teaches that we are to love our neighbors, even our enemies. Not by guesswork but by inference we know how we are to treat different groups of people. But therein is the problem. Pro-choice hermeneutics assume the unborn aren’t people.

**What Is the Moral Status of the Unborn?** Pro-choice advocates can no longer claim that the fetus isn’t human. The science of embryology has clearly settled that, from the earliest stages of development, an embryo is a distinct, living, and whole human being.<sup>5</sup> What they do claim is that, though human, the unborn do not possess full moral worth because they are not persons. In a *New York Times* interview, abortion doctor and professing Christian Willie Parker said, “If I thought I was killing a person, I wouldn’t do abortions. A fetus is not a person; it’s a human entity.”<sup>6</sup> So what’s the difference?

Pro-choice advocates claim that human beings become persons when they possess certain characteristics, such as rationality, self-awareness, and desires. Since the fetus doesn’t possess these characteristics, it is therefore not a person, and we can kill it.<sup>7</sup> But why do these characteristics constitute value or personhood? More than *why*, consider the implications of this functional view of human worth.

Rationality, self-awareness, and desire are characteristics that come in degrees. In other words, we don’t all share these characteristics equally, as none are equally rational, self-aware, and desiring of life. But if what makes us valuable comes in degrees, it stands to reason that our value comes in degrees, and equality becomes a myth. Those more rational, for example, would be more valuable than those with cognitive disabilities. Once you establish that degreed functional characteristics determine our worth, you have laid the foundation for inequality.<sup>8</sup>

The Bible does not support this functional view of human value, as it draws no distinction between a human being and a human person. There simply is nothing in Scripture that would allow us to assign more value to human beings because they possess certain arbitrary characteristics. Naturalism or materialism would allow us to do so, but not Scripture. In contrast, Christians have long understood Scripture to teach that all humans are valuable by virtue of their nature — creatures made in the image of their God.<sup>9</sup> And as we all share this nature equally, we are all equally valuable, deserving of rights and protection. Historically, this understanding caused Christians to push social boundaries, seeking to bring in those deemed “less than.”

**What Does Moral Agency Have to Do with Abortion?** Advocates of a pro-choice hermeneutic rightly insist that women, like men, have the duty to make moral choices because we are moral agents. For example, the “Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Abortion as a Moral Decision,” written by diverse theologians, affirms “women as moral agents who have the capacity, right and responsibility to make the decision as to whether or not abortion is justified in their specific circumstances.”<sup>10</sup>

It is true: we have the capacity, right, and responsibility to make decisions. This principle is biblical. The problem is the way it is applied. Consider how Dr. Parker

applies moral agency: “The part of you that’s like God is the part that makes a choice. That says, *I choose to*. Or, *I choose not to*. That’s what’s sacred.” Therefore, “The procedure room in an abortion clinic is as sacred as any other space to me, because that’s where I am privileged to honor your choice” (emphasis in original).<sup>11</sup> In other words, choice is sacred and is what makes us special; therefore, it is immoral to deny one’s right to choose.

Like all false teaching, there is some truth there. Freedom is a gift, and we should protect it; but the application of moral agency here is only relevant if the unborn aren’t valuable in same way as are you and I. Do you suppose Dr. Parker views the gas chambers at Auschwitz as a sacred place where choice was honored? Of course he doesn’t. He can only afford this position because of his arbitrary and unbiblical assessment of the value of the unborn.

Nowhere in Scripture does moral agency equal unfettered autonomous freedom. Neither does it give us the responsibility to “determine what is best for the unborn” and then kill those who might be born into a life of difficulty.<sup>12</sup> Rather, we are to use our freedom sacrificially to love each other, even to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16). We are to bear each other’s burdens and work to end social ills, not “terminate” those pregnancies that would bring a child into poverty, disability, or abuse. Scripture does not teach that a painless existence is what makes for a meaningful existence. Hardship certainly does not justify homicide.

**A Call to Clarify.** Pro-choice hermeneutics are gaining momentum, but they are not, as of yet, gaining momentum in academia. There is little written at a scholarly level that advocates for a pro-choice hermeneutic. The reason is quite simple. No proper exegetical work on any passage in Scripture will lead one to conclude that arbitrary characteristics constitute human value. And for a pro-choice hermeneutic to stick, that is what must be shown.

Why, then, is a belief that the Bible supports abortion growing? It is partly, perhaps mainly, because many share the wrongful pro-choice assumption that our value comes from our function, not our being. This must be challenged by sound teaching based in the precious truth that all possess inestimable value because all are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. In so doing, many will be able to see the issue of abortion clearly and biblically, and gain a newfound confidence in their own value. —*Michael C. Sherrard*

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## NOTES

- 1 For a brief summary see, Michael Gorman, “Ahead to Our Past: Abortion and Christian Texts,” in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives on Medical Ethics*, ed. M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 917–24.

- 2 Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Abortion as a Moral Decision,"  
[http://religiousinstitute.org/sites/default/files/open\\_letters/abortionopenletter.pdf](http://religiousinstitute.org/sites/default/files/open_letters/abortionopenletter.pdf).
- 3 Steven Morris, "Abortion: Why the Religious Right Is Wrong," <https://ffrf.org/about/getting-acquainted/item/16916-abortion-why-the-religious-right-is-wrong>.
- 4 Scott Klusendorf, "Does the Bible's Silence Justify Abortion?"  
<http://prolifetraining.com/resources/five-minute-4/>.
- 5 Leading embryology textbooks affirm this. See, e.g., Keith Moore and T. V. N. Persaud, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology* (Philadelphia: Saunders/Elsevier, 2008), 15.
- 6 Ana Marie Cox. "Willie J. Parker Changed His Mind about Abortion,"  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/magazine/willie-j-parker-changed-his-mind-about-abortion.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/magazine/willie-j-parker-changed-his-mind-about-abortion.html?_r=1).
- 7 In fact, because newborns don't possess these qualities either, Peter Singer thinks we can kill them, too. See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 122–23.
- 8 See Richard Weikart, *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Faith, 2016), 2–21.
- 9 For an in-depth treatment of this, see John F. Kilner's paramount work *Design and Dignity: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 3–51.
- 10 Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, "An Open Letter."
- 11 Willie Parker, *Life's Work: From the Trenches, a Moral Argument for Choice* (New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017), 212.
- 12 See, e.g., "The Biblical Basis for Being Pro-Choice," Belief.net,  
<http://www.beliefnet.com/news/2003/01/the-biblical-basis-forbeing-pro-choice.aspx?p=2>.