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THE 2012 ELECTIONS: Five Questions for Pro-Life Advocates

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In 2008, a handful of notable pro-life evangelicals and Catholics threw their support behind a presidential candidate sworn to uphold elective abortion as a fundamental right. They argued that doing so constituted an enlightened pro-life vote that was morally superior to the narrow party politics of religious conservatives. Instead of passing laws against abortion, so the argument went, the candidate and his party would “reduce” it by addressing its underlying causes.¹ True, he was mistaken on abortion, but he was right on other, important “whole-of-life” issues such as opposition to war, concern for the poor, and care for the environment. The candidate’s political strategy was simple: shrink the significance of abortion so it was more or less equal with other issues.²

It worked. Twice as many white evangelicals age eighteen through forty-four voted for Barack Obama in 2008 than voted for John Kerry in 2004. Catholics, meanwhile, supported Obama at fifty-four percent, up seven points from what they gave Kerry four years earlier. The candidate got just enough pro-life votes from these groups to tip the election his way.³

I submit that each of these alleged pro-life votes represents a profound misunderstanding of the pro-life position. The fundamental issue before us is not merely how to reduce abortion, but who counts as one of us. How we answer will determine whether embryos and fetuses enjoy the protection of law or remain candidates for the dumpster. As Francis Beckwith points out, a society that has fewer abortions but protects the legal killing of unborn humans is still deeply immoral.⁴ Given what’s at stake, it’s vital that pro-life Christians persuasively answer five key questions before the 2012 election:

1. Are pro-life advocates focused too narrowly on abortion? After all, informed voters consider many issues, not just one.

Of course abortion isn’t the only issue—any more than the treatment of slaves wasn’t the only issue in the 1860s or the treatment of Jews the only issue in the 1940s. But both were the *dominant* issues of their day. Thoughtful Christians attribute different importance to different issues, and give greater weight to fundamental moral questions. For example, if a man running for president told us that men had a right to beat their wives, most people would see that as reason enough to reject him, despite his expertise on foreign policy or economic reforms. The foundational principle of our republic is that all humans are equal in their fundamental dignity. What issue could be more important than that? You might as well blame politicians like Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt for focusing too narrowly on defeating the Nazis, to the neglect of other issues. Given a choice, I’d rather pro-lifers focus on at least one great moral issue than waste their precious resources trying to fix all of them.⁵

2. Why don’t pro-life advocates care about social justice both here and in developing countries?

They do, which is why pro-life crisis pregnancy centers vastly outnumber abortion clinics in the U.S. and why committed evangelicals, most of whom are pro-life, give more than their secular counterparts.⁶

Nevertheless, pro-life Christians should reject the premise that because they oppose the intentional and unjustified killing of innocent human beings, they must therefore take responsibility for all of the world's ills. Is the American Cancer Society wrong to focus on one deadly disease to the exclusion of others? It's highly unfair to demand that local pro-life groups take their already scarce resources and spread them even thinner fighting every social injustice imaginable. This would be suicide for those opposed to abortion. As Frederick the Great once said, "He who attacks everywhere attacks nowhere."

True, as defenders of human dignity, we should care about the poor, clean water, and the rights of others everywhere. The U.S. government, however, is not going to solve those problems in developing countries the way it can solve abortion here. For example, our government can't ban poverty or stop the sex trade of young girls in Thailand. That is the job of *that* nation's citizens and government! However, the U.S. government can and should ban the killing of unborn humans within its own borders. That is why prudent pro-lifers have always sought both moral and political solutions to that problem. While poverty and the sex trade are evil, no one in America proposes legalizing them.

Abortion is different. Far from reducing the practice, our government currently advocates it both here and abroad. For example, during his first week in office, President Obama restored funding to organizations that promote and perform abortion overseas. A year later, he signed a healthcare bill that subsidized insurance plans that fund it here in the U.S. At the same time, he rescinded federal regulations that protect doctors from forced participation in elective abortion and threatened to cut off Medicaid funding to any state that denied tax funding to healthcare entities that provide abortions.⁷ Finally, he nominated to the federal courts justices sympathetic to the abortion license whose rulings could set the pro-life cause back for decades to come.

Because ours is a government of the people, Christians have a fundamental duty to work within the political system to limit evil and promote good. Shouldn't social justice start in the womb?

3. Why don't pro-lifers oppose war like they do abortion?

War can be a moral evil, but it isn't always so. Careful thinkers make distinctions between *intrinsic* (absolute) moral evils and *contingent* ones. For example, the decision to wage war may or may not be wrong, depending on the circumstances. However, the decision to kill intentionally an unborn human being for socioeconomic reasons is an intrinsic evil and laws permitting it are scandalous. True, a general in a just war may foresee that innocent humans will die securing a lasting peace, but he does not intend their deaths. With elective abortion, the death of an innocent human fetus is not merely foreseen; it is intended. The problem is that many Catholics and left-leaning evangelicals are perfectly willing to support a political party that supports an intrinsic evil simply because its members promise to help us avoid contingent ones. This is bad moral thinking.

4. Instead of passing laws against abortion, shouldn't pro-life Christians focus on reducing its underlying causes?

First and foremost, the abortion debate turns on the question of human equality. That is, in a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, do the unborn count as members of the human family? With that fundamental question in mind, it's unreasonable for liberals to insist that pro-lifers surrender the legal fight to focus on underlying causes. As my colleague Steve Weimar points out, this is like saying the "underlying cause" of spousal abuse is psychological, so instead of making it illegal for husbands to beat their wives, the solution is to provide counseling for men. There are "underlying causes" for rape, murder, theft, and so on, but that in no way makes it misguided to have laws banning such actions.⁸

Moreover, why are liberals even concerned about reducing the number of abortions in the first place? If destroying a human fetus is morally no different than cutting one's fingernails, then who cares

how many abortions there are? The reason to reduce elective abortion is that human life is unjustly taken—but if that’s the case, then restricting the practice makes perfect sense. Imagine a nineteenth-century lawmaker who said that slavery was a bad idea and we ought to reduce it, but owning slaves should remain legal. If those in power adopted his thinking, would this be a good society? True, politics isn’t a sufficient answer to injustice, but it’s certainly a necessary one. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, “The law can’t make the white man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me.”⁹ Frankly, if Christians don’t think the government-sanctioned killing of unborn children merits a political response, then they not only misunderstand the moral gravity of the situation, but also their mandate to love their neighbor as themselves.

5. Should pastors challenge church members who support a political party sworn to protect elective abortion?

Yes and no. They should challenge believers and nonbelievers alike with the truth that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being—and that truth should impact which party we support. They shouldn’t claim that supporting a particular party or candidate saves us from God’s righteous wrath against sin (only the gospel does that!) or that members of the opposite party are not Christians.

Nevertheless, in a nation where the people *are* the government, Christians have a duty to apply their biblical worldview in a way that limits evil and promotes the good insofar as possible given current political realities. At the legislative level in particular (House and Senate races), that usually means voting for the party that, though imperfect, will best protect unborn humans against one that sanctions killing them. The reason is simple: at the legislative level, political parties more than individuals determine which laws see the light of day.

Consider the House of Representatives. If a party committed to elective abortion controls the chamber, it will squash pro-life bills and promote pro-abortion ones. Even if that pro-abortion party has a few pro-life members, those members will likely never get to vote on a pro-life bill unless their party is not in power!

But it gets worse. These same pro-life members of that pro-abortion party almost always put party politics above moral principle when it comes to the most important vote they will cast—selection of the Speaker. Remember, the Speaker of the House ultimately determines the legislative agenda and if the party committed to elective abortion controls the chamber, its candidate for speaker will inevitably be pro-abortion. Nevertheless, these pro-life members vote for their party’s candidate for speaker, which all but guarantees that pro-life bills never see the light of day. In most cases, then, they aren’t reforming their party’s pro-abortion stance; they’re enabling it!¹⁰

If parties drive legislation, how should a pastor educate his flock on the relationship between politics and Christian morality? First, he should teach a biblical worldview affirming that all humans have value because they bear the image of their maker. Second, he should challenge church members to live out that biblical view in every area of their lives, including their political affiliations. Third, he should stress that while no political party is perfect, on the question of fundamental human value, some parties are more in line with biblical truth than others.

Suppose, for example, that it’s 1860 and fifty percent of professing Christians in your church are members of a political party dedicated to the proposition that an entire class of human beings can be enslaved or killed to meet the needs of the white race. If you’re a pastor committed to applying a biblical worldview in all areas of life, is this OK? You might be sympathetic to new converts coming to grips with Christian teaching, but mature church members? Pastors can’t use church resources to endorse political candidates or parties, but they can (and must) teach that a biblical worldview informs our political behavior—including which parties we choose to empower with our vote. Saying so is not wrong—it’s leadership.

—Scott Klusendorf

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NOTES

- 1 For an evangelical example, see the interview with Donald Miller on August 25, 2008: <http://burnsidewriterscollective.blogspot.com/2008/09/interview-with-donald-miller.html>. For a Catholic example, see Michael New, "Professors Robert George and Douglas Kmiec Debate Abortion, a Pro-Life Recap," *Life News*, June 1, 2009.
- 2 Alex Spillius, "Barack Obama Doubles Support from Evangelical Christians," *The Telegraph*, November 7, 2008.
- 3 "How the Faithful Voted," Pew Research Forum, November 10, 2008.
- 4 Francis J. Beckwith, "Why Reducing the Number of Abortions Is Not Necessarily Pro-Life," *Moral Accountability*, February 12, 2009. <http://www.moralaccountability.com/2009/02/12/why-reducing-the-number-of-abortions-notnecessarily-prolife/>
- 5 See Randy Alcorn (EMP Blog, November 16, 2008) and Steve Hays (Triablogue, January 30, 2006) for more.
- 6 Helen Alvare et al., "The Lazy Slander of the Pro-Life Cause," *Public Discourse*, January 17, 2011; Arthur C. Brooks, "A Nation of Givers," *The American* (March/April 2008).
- 7 O. Carter Snead, "Protect the Weak and Vulnerable: The Primacy of the Life Issue," *Public Discourse*, August 22, 2011.
- 8 Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 169.
- 9 Speech at Western Michigan University, December 18, 1963.
- 10 Though rare, there are exceptions to this general rule. A state representative recently explained that although he is pro-life, the political realities in his district are such that his constituents simply will not elect a member of the party that is more or less pro-life. To win, he must run as a member of the pro-abortion party, even though he always votes with the pro-life party on life issues. Given the pro-life party enjoys a commanding majority in the State House, his membership in the pro-abortion party does not put at risk the advancement of pro-life legislation.