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Pro-life Tactics: An Ethical Reinterpretation of New Testament Teaching

“I can’t vote for Hillary because she kills babies.”

This was the response I received from a highly intelligent, compassionate Christian when asked about their voting intentions for the 2016 United States presidential election. The statement, of course, is not factually true. However, as a self-identified “pro-life”ⁱ voter, it was their powerfully-held conviction. It was their truth, motivated and informed by their faith. This person believed vis-à-vis the bible, that abortion is murder and, as a Christian, murder cannot be condoned under any circumstances. They were informed by an eisegesisⁱⁱ of scripture that has been carefully crafted over time, acquiring a convincing verisimilitude, especially compelling to many compassionate people of strong Christian faith.

Therefore, any exegesis of New Testament texts that prove contradictory to their position, especially if presented by a pro-choice advocate like me, would not be effective to support a counterargument. The likelihood is that such an argument simply wouldn’t be accepted.

What I seek to accomplish in this paper is not an interpretation or ideological analysis of text that disproves the convictions of pro-life supporters either that the fetus is human life or abortion is murder.ⁱⁱⁱ I propose an ethical reinterpretation, an alternate reading which neither contradicts nor disparages the pro-life perspective, but rather broadens it to include a theological response, not to the act of abortion itself, but to the real and lasting consequences of current methods being used by pro-life advocates to prevent abortion. I hope to prompt an investigation of the question, “Given the documented results, is the current pro-life activism ethically justifiable according to the teachings of Jesus?”

I will begin with a brief summary of the historical Christian attitude toward abortion and its evolution into the current era. This will be followed by an isolation and analysis of specific New Testament texts used to justify the pro-life response to the prospect of abortion. Finally, I will describe the current tactics used by the pro-life movement and the documented results worldwide in order to prompt consideration of the morality thereof.

It is generally agreed by historians and other scholars that abortion was practiced by Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the first few centuries after the common era. However, the various groups had divergent legal reactions and ethical stances.

Prior to and into the common era, Ancient Greeks and Romans respectively put the needs of the state and the *paterfamilias*^{iv} above all else. When abortion was alternately promoted or restricted, it was either for the direct benefit of the state or for the benefit of the mother only with regard to her position within the Roman family unit as the property of the male head of household.

Abortion and exposure^v were common in what we now refer to as the Pagan world. Both acts were undesirable, even if sometimes considered necessary. Various reasons for abortion and exposure included the concealment of illicit sexual activity and family limitation. The offense, however, for Greco-Roman Pagans was never against the fetus, which was part of the mother and not considered fully human. The concurrent and lasting Jewish perspective on abortion was informed by the Jewish ideals of love for all life as God's creation, and abhorrence to bloodshed developed in the early legal codes of the Torah and evolved over centuries into what is written in the *Talmud*.^{vi} Whereas the Jews came to recognize the fetus as human life and therefore precious, its religious and legal status was derived from a consideration that it was part of the mother whose life took precedence. Therefore, although it was immoral to deliberately kill the unborn;

therapeutic, accidental, or necessary feticide were considerations for Jews. Despite no express Jewish prohibition or condemnation, the Jewish ethic combined with the very explicit commandment to propagate Jews and Judaism, meant abortion was not widely practiced within Jewish communities and actively discouraged. Christian positions from the first century CE until today were influenced significantly by Jewish thought.

No direct reference to abortion can be found in the canon of the New Testament. “Likewise, throughout the history of the early church into the middle-ages, there is little to no mention of abortion as a topic of great alarm. Hence, there is no case to be made for a definitive Christian stance throughout history – from the days of the Old Testament until modern history – on the spiritual or moral aspects of abortion.”^{vii} However, the noncanonical writings of Christian theologians in the first three centuries CE formed the basis for all subsequent Christian writing on the issue. As the Christian orientation evolved into modern times, it diverged significantly from that of the Pagans and the Jews in one main regard, the status of the fetus.

Christianity assigned the fetus an independence as separate human life and consequently, classified all abortion as murder. Complexities encircling issues such as time of ensoulment and fetal development remained with regard to when life actually begins. Still, for Christian the vast majority of modern Christians, abortion is unquestionably murder.

Specific scriptural condemnation of abortion by Christian thinkers began as an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. However, in their capacity as defenders of the Christian faith, apologists in the second century CE made the first direct connection from Christian scripture to abortion in order to show that life begins before birth. The following two verses from the first chapter of The Gospel of Luke are primary texts used as proof that God created the human soul, and therefore a fully human life, even within the womb. “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child

leaped from the womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the holy spirit.”^{viii} “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”^{ix} There is uncontested reference in both of these texts to enwombed life, specifically of John and Jesus. However, the question of when exactly life begins remains a contentious one, even within various Christian doctrines. From conception to birth, stages of fetal development vie for primacy as the defining stage of the beginning of human life. Regardless of the stage in which life may begin, this contention does not at all dissuade pro-life Christians from believing, based on scripture, that human life begins before birth. As mentioned previously, in an attempt to reframe the debate, it would be futile to begin by discounting this idea, since it is foundational to the pro-life orientation.

Equally important to pro-life apologists, however, are both Jesus’ redefinition of “neighbor,” which was *sui generis* within historical context, as well as the unrelenting prescription for nonviolence found within the teachings of Jesus. The most important protestations of each occur in The Gospel of Matthew.

With regards to Jesus’ definition of neighbor, the following verse is most often referenced.

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do that same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?^x

The Beatitudes extol the virtues of nonviolence, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”^{xi}

The way of love inclusive of these two ideas was of primary importance to Christians in the first and second centuries. Consequential noncanonical Christian texts like the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas^{xii} as well as influential Christian writers of this time including Tertullian^{xiii}, Clement of Alexandria^{xiv}, and Origen^{xv} expressly forbade killing in any instance. When it came to who is to receive this love found in the teachings of Jesus, all distinction was removed between friend and foe, the guilty and the innocent, and, most relevant to this paper, the born and the unborn. The status of the fetus in Christian theology was enshrined as that of “neighbor,” as defined by Jesus, with all the merits and blessings that title conferred.^{xvi}

In my own theological interpretation, I will focus on these two important verses from Matthew and the concepts encapsulated within, nonviolence and love of “neighbor.” To support my interpretation, it is necessary to examine the documented results of the main goal of many pro-life activists, which is the complete prohibition of abortion.

In an effort to increase the population of Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu outlawed abortion and contraception in the mid-1960s. Although there was an initial spike in births, this was quickly reversed as women found alternate access to abortive procedures. In the succeeding 20 years, documented deaths of women resulting from unsafe abortions increased to 10 times that of the rest of Europe, approximately 10,000 women. There were also countless undocumented deaths. The official number was six times the rate of the U.S., which had the worst mortality rate of the industrialized world. In addition, the ban disproportionately hurt low-income women who had to hide their actions even from their immediate family for fear of serious repercussions.^{xvii}

The ban also orphaned hundreds of thousands of children. This further burdened an already deficient apparatus tasked with caring for them, leading to deplorable living conditions and severe developmental impairment and other physical and mental health issues in these children.^{xviii}

In Honduras, there is currently a total ban on abortion and emergency contraception. According to Margaret Wurth, senior right's researcher at Human Rights Watch, "Banning abortion does not stop it, but it forces women and girls to put their health and lives at risk to end pregnancies behind closed doors, in fear and desperation and without medical care." More than 8,600 women were hospitalized for complications from abortion or miscarriage in 2017 according to data from the Honduran health secretary. Many related deaths go either unreported or are falsely attributed to other causes. Despite the ban, there are estimates of 50,000 to 80,000 abortions yearly in Honduras.^{xix}

Even here in the U.S., according to Time, "making abortion illegal never meant abortion didn't happen. Before Roe, hospitals had entire wards for patients experiencing sepsis after undergoing shoddy self-induced abortions.^{xx} The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists opposed efforts to limit abortion access.^{xxi} A Guttmacher Institute study concluded that

...abortion rates are similar in countries where abortion is highly restricted and where it is broadly legal: The abortion rate is 37 per 1,000 women in countries where abortion is prohibited or permitted only to save the life of the pregnant women, and 34 per 1,000 women in counties where abortion is not restricted as to reason.^{xxii}

In the United States, The Turnaway Study by Dianna Greene Foster of UC San Francisco concluded that mental health concerns for women seeking and getting abortions – an idea pushed

by pro-life proponents – was completely groundless. What’s more, the study found that women who were denied the procedure were more likely to be poor six months after the clinic visit and still poor four years later. Women in this group who had children after being turned away were shown to have worse maternal bonding than women who received an abortion and then had more children. Children already born to these women scored lower on standard measure of development and were more likely to live below the federal poverty line in the years that followed.^{xxiii} Besides these consequences, banning abortion interferes with healthcare providers ability to practice evidence-based medicine and provide other forms of necessary care.

The on-the-ground tactics are also incredibly ineffective. Pro-life activists will picket outside women’s health clinics offering any necessary help to mothers who are willing to forgo abortion.^{xxiv} However well-meaning, there is no way the institutions which support these protestors could conceivably provide the long-term assistance many of these families would need were they to see pregnancies to term. Pro-life activists threaten abortion providers with physical violence. They set-up institutions, “crisis pregnancy centers,” most often religiously affiliated, that are disguised as legitimate women’s health providers. These places provide medically inaccurate information, use misleading language, game search results, intimidate, harass, delay, and proselytize, all in an effort to trick or coerce women into not getting an abortion. One deleterious result of this is delaying and often denying women necessary medical care from legitimate clinics.

A majority of women seeking abortions are marginalized. They are victimized by society, entrapping them in cycles of poverty. Pro-life candidates, for the most part, are conservatives who support a political platform that works against the interests of marginalized communities.

They regularly vote down policy and solutions that would end these cycles. In this way as well, the results of pro-life advocacy are extremely harmful directly and indirectly.

All of this is to say that pursuing the absolute prohibition of abortion, which is the goal pro-lifers, is leading to actions without considerations of real consequences. These are actions that are proven ineffectual and, in the short and long term hurt and even kill countless people.

On the other hand, evidence shows that legalizing abortion and providing safe and easy access, reverses the harm. The new government that came into power in 1989 in Romania issued an emergency reverse of the ban, which led to the maternal mortality rate falling 50 percent a single year.^{xxv} Nepal legalized abortion in 2002 and over the next 10 years the maternal mortality rate dropped from 360 to 170 per 100,000 births. When abortion is legalized the result is not only safer abortions, but there are fewer low-weight births and pre-term births.^{xxvi}

Given all of this, are the results of the current pro-life response ethically justifiable according to the teachings of Jesus?" If abortion is considered murder; if two deaths, that of the mother and child, are better than one murder, what about thousands of deaths? Can the definition of murder be expanded to include actions that sentence thousands of people to death, even indirectly? Can we truly save one "neighbor" at the expense of thousands of others? Are we truly saving a fetal "neighbor" if our other actions are condemning them and their family to remain marginalized and discriminated? Are we saving this "neighbor" if we are not working to change conditions that necessitated the choice of abortion in the first place? If the goal of the pro-life movement is to end abortion, yet their actions are shown to have the exact opposite result, how can they continue to be justified?

Is there a way to accomplish mutual, realistic objectives, including the reduction of abortion that are concomitant with access to proper health care and freedom of choice? Can the current

bilateral debate between life and freedom, overlap? It may not be convivial, but can it at least be respectful and even deferential.

Despite the fact there are no passages directly addressing abortion in The Christian New Testament, there are over 3000 unambiguous verses in the bible that are concerned with social justice^{xxvii} – exercising kindness and compassion and taking care of those in need. Can the focus shift from prohibition and punishment to support and prevention in order to live the values that Jesus so clearly elucidates?

Since the current clash between pro-life and pro-choice camps is often contentious and subjective, and has little hope of bearing fruit, I ask all of these questions rhetorically in an effort to possibly catalyze a civil conversation between pro-life and pro-choice camps.

Following is my theological reinterpretation of the two specific texts from The Gospel of Matthew. “You shall love your enemies” seems a clear appeal for pro-life and pro-choice advocates to work to validate each other’s spirituality, and reposition themselves empathetically in order to work toward mutually beneficial solutions. After all, “if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” Jesus clearly summons Christians to greet, and not fight, those who they don’t consider their “family,” to extend love to all. This passage is used to extend the definition of neighbor to fetus. Does it not therefore, also extend the definition to include all those who are being marginalized and discriminated against? How can we justify protecting one while harming and killing the other? If we look to the very next verse in the beatitudes, we see Jesus also says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”^{xxviii} Pro-life activists and candidates are persecuting marginalized populations and all women by denying them healthcare and sentencing them to

death with abortion prohibitions, for supposedly righteous ends. Shifting to the context of the current era, is this not what Jesus would be directly prohibiting?

As far as the intentions expressed by the verse “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God;” they are unmistakable as much as they are axiomatic. A peaceful world should not be a world where murder is acceptable, but peace certainly cannot include putting women in positions where they are forced to make a decision about abortion, then prosecuting them for doing so. It absolutely cannot include prohibitions that sentence thousands of people to sickness and death. This is not an easily resolved dilemma, but one with which both sides of the debate, whether one considers abortion murder or not, must wrestle.

People with entrenched views supported by conviction of unflinching faith are very hard to reach. But, alt-right and neo-conservative movements have had success. They have coopted the abortion issue to retain and strengthen political dominion over evangelical and other fundamentalist Christians.^{xxix} The placement of the pro-life position has been carefully crafted. Stories have been spun and emotional responses have been activated in insidious ways.^{xxx} As political forces collude to frame the issue, it is imperative, especially for the church^{xxxi} to reconsider its ethical stance on what Jesus truly meant by “neighbor” and “peace” and expurgate any political, corrupting influence, beginning with an ethical reinterpretation of Matthew such as I have suggested.

Emilie Townes, in her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* entreats to deconstruct and eradicate systems of evil by engaging in exposing the truth of the multiplicities that form us – nationally and globally – with as much precision as we can. Townes is addressing the issues surrounding identity and colonialism, of women of color vs. the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” but her prescription to utilize counter-memory to disrupt empire as well as religious

values in public policy making, is germane to this discussion as well. The use of counter-memory provides an alternative, space to understand who we are in our diversity. It offers the possibility [to] enhance our lives – all of us. Townes explains that collective memory is socially constructed. We create and recreate narratives in response to ever-changing political and social circumstance.^{xxxii}

Our stories and memories are easily manipulated, controlled and managed by hegemonic forces that use associations like the church to coerce. If we understand that, can we work to unlatch that control with counter-hegemony and counter-memory? We can take agency, empowering ourselves to shift viewpoints, to “begin to see, hear, and appreciate the diversities in our midst as flesh and blood...” to “disrupt ignorance and invisibility.”^{xxxiii}

In simpler terms, the pro-choice movement must re-write the story that includes Truth. But, instead of telling the story in a way that immediately alienates religious people, we can retell the story of Jesus and expand his ideas of nonviolence and neighbor love to facilitate activism that helps rather than hurts. I realize the rose-colored tint of this suggestion but, what choice do we have when intelligent, compassionate people are being misled to not “...vote for Hillary because she kills babies?”

Notes

- ⁱ The term “pro-life,” in the author’s determination, is a misnomer. However, since it is currently the most widely used and easily understood in reference to those who oppose abortion, it will be used throughout this paper.
- ⁱⁱ The process of interpreting text in such a way as to introduce one’s own presuppositions, agendas or biases.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The author does not believe that abortion is murder and is a strong pro-choice advocate.
- ^{iv} Latin for “father of the family,” the *paterfamilias* was the eldest male head of the Roman household. The “family” included immediate and extended relatives as well as slaves, all of whom were considered his property.
- ^v The act of abandoning an unwanted infant.
- ^{vi} The texts that comprise the *Talmud* are the *Torah* or *Pentateuch* which is first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, the *Mishnah* which is the written text of the Jewish oral tradition and laws, and the *Gemara* which is the Rabbinical interpretation of the *Mishnah*.
- ^{vii} (Forrester 2017)
- ^{viii} Lk. 1:41 NRSV
- ^{ix} Lk. 2:21 NRSV
- ^x Mt. 5:43-48 NRSV
- ^{xi} Mt. 5:9 NRSV
- ^{xii} The Didache and The Epistle of Barnabas are influential Christian texts written in Greek, dating from the first two centuries of the common era.
- ^{xiii} North African Berber Christian author and apologist (c. 155 – c. 240 AD)
- ^{xiv} Greek philosopher, theologian, teacher, and Pagan convert to Christianity. (c. 150 – c. 215)
- ^{xv} Christian scholar, theologian, and ascetic widely regarded as one of the most important Christian theologians. (c. 184 – c. 253)
- ^{xvi} When Christianity was first adopted by the state under Constantine in Rome, political necessity demanded a reconsideration of the absolute prohibition against killing and the idea of “just war” was invented and bolstered by a reworking of scriptural analyses and interpretation. Eventually capital punishment too was supported and justified through scripture. However, these instances of “justifiable killing” were considered responses to, and corrective of sin. They were also deemed reasonable defenses of God’s kingdom on earth. In contrast, since the fetus was innocent human life, abortion remained and still remains a completely separate issue.
- ^{xvii} (Mackinon 2019)
- ^{xviii} (Nelson et al. 2011)
- ^{xix} (“Honduras: Abortion Ban’s Dire Consequences” 2019)
- ^{xx} (Reagan 2019)
- ^{xxi} (“ACOG Opposes U.S. Senate Effort to Limit Abortion Access” 2018)
- ^{xxii} (“New Report Highlights Worldwide Variations in Abortion Incidence and Safety” 2018)
- ^{xxiii} (Greene Foster, Phd, n.d.)
- ^{xxiv} The author is a volunteer escort at reproductive health clinics in Michigan. This information is from first-hand experience.
- ^{xxv} (Mackinon 2019)
- ^{xxvi} (Rogers 2019)
- ^{xxvii} (Forrester 2017)
- ^{xxviii} Mt. 5:10 NRSV
- ^{xxix} The machinations of how this came about is not within the scope of this paper.
- ^{xxx} Recently abortion has even been called genocide, invoking the Holocaust.
- ^{xxxi} The Catholic Church has a position also based on the idea of “original sin,” an analysis of which cannot be attempted within the scope of this paper.
- ^{xxxii} (Townes 2006)
- ^{xxxiii} (Townes 2006)

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