

THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE IN THE ABORTION DEBATE

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Some years ago I overheard an argument between two women, one "pro-life" and the other "pro-choice," about what the Bible has to say on the subject of abortion. The pro-life woman appealed to Deuteronomy 30:19 in support of her contention that the Bible opposes abortion: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose *life*...." The pro-choice woman responded quickly, appealing to the same verse in support of her belief that the Bible promotes freedom of choice: "That's right," she said. "'Choose life.' There has to be choice."

In his keynote address at the University Faculty for Life conference held at Georgetown University in 1992, then-president of Catholic University William J. Byron, S.J., called for pro-life academics to begin to use Biblical language to express and undergird the pro-life position, not only in the church but also in the public arena. In 1982 I myself made a similar plea in print and have written a number of essays in response to my own appeal.ⁱ But very few other people, to my knowledge, have responded to these calls. One reason may be the difficulty of doing so responsibly, since the Bible does not address induced abortion directly and can be used to support very different, even contradictory, perspectives. The conversation narrated above is a vivid microcosm of the situation confronting those who might want to appeal to the Bible in the abortion debate.

This problem is not, of course, limited to the abortion debate. It was this way with slavery, and is still this way today with such issues as homosexuality. The use of

the Bible in the abortion debate is, indeed, just one example of the greater problem of the use of the Bible in ethics, a topic currently receiving very lively attention in theological circles. But the role of the Bible in the abortion debate should not be of interest only to theologians. This is the case for at least two reasons.

First, biblical themes and language — such as compassion, covenant, and hospitality — have permeated many of the ethical debates in this country and in other Western countries, as the work of Robert Bellah and others has recently stressed.ⁱⁱ Even in this post-Christian age, certain biblical symbols and images are still alive (or are perhaps able to be resurrected) and may have significant rhetorical and substantive power in the discussion of difficult moral issues such as abortion.

Second, the abortion debate in this country is still greatly influenced, if not governed, by religious forces that look to the Bible for moral guidance generally and moral guidance about abortion particularly. Some of the strongest pro-choice groups are religious, including many of the mainline denominations and sub-units within those denominations. Even many secular and political "pro-choice" advocates, including President Clinton, ground or justify their views by appealing to the Bible — either to its silence or to its supposed implicit or explicit pro-choice position. I am convinced that only if these groups and individuals are persuaded that a proper reading of the Bible refutes their position will they alter their stance on abortion. Fr. Byron was therefore right to signal the importance of using Biblical language in the public square.

This paper embodies some of my own reflections on the Bible in the abortion debate. The first part of the paper is an analysis and critique of selected writings of individuals and religious bodies who use the Bible in

support of their position on abortion. Included in this analysis are representative statements from pro-life groups and denominations, official position papers of "mainline" pro-choice denominations, essays by pro-choice feminist theologians, and literature from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (formerly Religious Coalition for Abortions Rights). The second part of the paper proposes a process for using the Bible as a way of understanding, or reading, abortion and for evaluating other, competing readings of abortion. This process is an eclectic one, primarily utilizing commonly acknowledged biblical images and themes rather than traditional abortion proof texts. Some of these images and themes useful for the responsible development of a pro-life perspective are briefly discussed.

PROOF TEXTING: READING INTO THE BIBLE

Some readers of the Bible, perhaps even some who are aware that the Bible has nothing explicit to say on abortion, attempt, by appealing to proof texts, to find the Bible's hidden or *implicit* position on abortion. "Proof texts" are biblical texts that are lifted out of context or otherwise improperly explained in order to prove a point. Some scholars suggest that any appeal to the Bible alone on the abortion issue says nothing about the inherent meaning of the biblical text but merely supports "the ideological commitments of the text's readers."ⁱⁱⁱ

Proof texting can be done with lesser or greater sophistication. There are, for instance, innumerable printed lists of Scriptural quotations, usually from conservative Christian sources, that are supposed to answer all the important ethical questions ("Is murder wrong?"; "Is the fetus human?"; "Do women have the right to control their own bodies?"; and so on). There is

also a significant body of articles devoted to detailed scholarly explanation of such texts as Exodus 21:22-25 ("When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage...."). Critics of the religious pro-life movement have often accused that movement of proof texting, but, as we will see, the religious segment of the pro-choice movement uses proof texts, too.

Lurking behind most proof texting in the abortion debate is the soundness, or truthfulness, of the following syllogism (or some variant thereof):

Major premise: The Bible prohibits the taking of innocent human life.

Minor premise: The Bible says that the embryo/fetus is innocent human life.

Conclusion: The Bible prohibits the taking of innocent embryonic/fetal life — abortion.

Because the major premise is relatively self-evident for most people, the minor premise is the key to this syllogism. Its truthfulness is the focus of intense debate. Sometimes this debate is quite simplistic, while at other times it is quite sophisticated, with arguments imported from philosophy about the distinction between "biological life" and "personhood."

PRO-LIFE PROOF TEXTING

The most well-known biblical texts cited in the abortion debate are quoted by pro-life people to buttress their belief that the Bible teaches that the embryo or fetus is a "life" or a "person" and that abortion, therefore, is wrong — even murder. This point of view can supposedly be found in a variety of texts, the most well-known of which are probably Exodus 21:22-25, Psalm 139, Isaiah 44:2, Jeremiah 1:5, and Luke 1 (especially

vv. 31, 36, 41, 44).

In 1986, for example, the Assemblies of God approved a paper called "A Biblical Perspective on Abortion" that begins with a section on "What the Bible Says About the Unborn Child."^{iv} Discussing the aforementioned texts and a half-dozen others, the document concludes that the Bible views (1) the embryo/fetus as a child whose body is being formed and whose life has been planned by God; (2) pregnancy as the work of God; and (3) the child's "quality of life" (handicapping condition, etc.) as an act of divine sovereignty. A similar treatment of the texts — with even less theological sophistication — may be found in Tj. Bosgra's book *Abortion, the Bible, and the Church*.^v

Apart from a summary of one denominational professor's exegesis of Exodus 21:22-24,^{vi} the Assemblies of God document — which is representative of much conservative Christian use of the Bible in the abortion debate — shows no concern for the literary or historical contexts of its proof texts. This is the most common and grievous error of those who appeal to the Bible to demonstrate the humanity or personhood of the embryo/fetus. A serious consideration of these issues is necessary for a legitimate reading of the biblical texts, none of which is as straightforward as the Assemblies of God document or Bosgra's book suggests. The questions and difficulties raised by some of these commonly used texts can be explored in some detail at this point.^{vii}

Exodus 21:22-25 is a legal text prescribing the penalty for causing unintentional injury or miscarriage to a pregnant woman. This text supposedly demonstrates that unborn life is fully human, equal legally and morally to that of an adult, because the penalty for the miscarriage is "life for life," understood by some interpreters to mean "life of the perpetrator for life of the

fetus." Although the text is notoriously difficult, it is quite possible that the penalty of "life for life" applies only to the death of the woman and that the unborn child, legally, is more like a limb than a person. If so, then its accidental death is not a capital offense.

Such a view of the *legal* status of the fetus as a non-person became, in fact, the prevalent view later in Judaism. The fetus could not inherit property, for instance, until its head emerged from the birth canal. Legally, it was a part, an appendage, of the pregnant woman. If this view is already implicit here, how would that affect the interpretation of this text with respect to the personhood of the fetus and the penalty for abortion?

Furthermore, one has to consider the possibility that the penalty imposed in this case was motivated by a patriarchal view of women and children as possessions of their husbands and fathers. The penalty imposed would then be compensation to the husband or father. Should such a view of women and children (born or not) be normative today?

Psalm 139 is a well-known psalm that is often invoked as proof of God's creation of the unborn child and, hence, of the immorality of abortion. To be sure, this psalm does beautifully describe fetal development as the act of a loving creator. Many pro-choice readers of the Bible fail, or perhaps refuse, to deal adequately, if at all, with this psalm. On the other hand, however, many pro-life people appeal too quickly to this psalm without reading it carefully. What is the intent of the psalmist?

It has been suggested by scholars that the psalm is primarily a plea of innocence (see vv. 23-24, the last two verses), in which the words in praise of creation function as a proof of God's knowledge of the psalmist — knowledge that should confirm his innocence. To be sure, the *larger purpose* of these verses does not

necessarily detract from their significance as an affirmation of God's creation of the unborn, but this is an aspect of the text that must be considered.

Furthermore, even an affirmation of divine creation of the unborn may not be sufficient, in the minds of some readers, to prohibit abortion. After all, according to the Bible, God is also the maker of plants, animals, adult humans, and every other living thing, yet all of these members of creation, according to most people, can sometimes have their life justifiably ended. Moreover, God's creation of living things other than humans is also celebrated in poetry throughout the Bible (Job, other psalms, the Sermon on the Mount), yet few people believe that it is always immoral to kill, say, a deer or a sparrow. So the argument from creation alone, even this creation text, does not completely answer the question of abortion.

Luke 1:41, 44 and related texts in the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew are sometimes said to be proof that the fetus is a "life," i.e. a person with the right to life. It is argued that the pre-natal activity of John the Baptist and Jesus demonstrate this biblical assumption.

Further, in a more sophisticated vein, it is also maintained that because the Greek word *brephos*, "infant," is used to refer to the unborn Baptist, the Bible makes no distinction between a fetus and an infant. The moral conclusion drawn from this linguistic argument is that the Bible views the unborn as persons equal in status to the already-born and that abortion, therefore, is as clearly murder as is infanticide.

The logic of these particular arguments might be compelling, if they did not rest on erroneous assumptions about language. The normal use of a common word like "baby" or "infant" does not necessarily reveal anything about one's philosophical or moral convictions. Neither does attributing activity to a

fetus. For instance, it is just as possible for a pro-choice woman as for a pro-life woman, seven months into a pregnancy, to say, "I just felt the baby kicking." Such a statement does not reveal either woman's view of the true "status" of the fetus, nor does it reveal either woman's position on abortion. The "pro-life" interpretation of these texts places more weight on a few words than they can bear.

Jeremiah 1:5, which says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," and similar texts referring to the servant of Isaiah 40-55 (Isaiah 49:1, 5) and Paul (Galatians 1:15), are often cited as proof of fetal "life" or personhood and, hence, of abortion's status as murder.

It is obvious, this position argues, that God cannot call or otherwise communicate with non-persons.

At least three serious questions about this argument can be raised, however. First, since these texts about pre-natal calling are associated only with prophets and other special servants, does this limitation mean that only prophets or other certain, specially chosen people experience a pre-natal calling and thus possess personhood before birth? Second, is the real point of these texts about the pre-natal prophetic call to affirm the prophet's personhood before birth or the divine authority of his ministry and message in his contemporary situation? Almost certainly, it is the latter.

And third, taking the Jeremiah text literally as a message about personhood before birth, isn't one forced to say that personhood begins before conception, "before I formed you in the womb"?

Although one may generalize in response to the first question ("All people are similarly called"), equivocate on the second ("Divine authority is the point, but this could not be had without the pre-natal relationship with God"), and similarly hedge on the third ("Yes, but that's

not the main point"), these answers are theological, not exegetical, ones. That is, they are interpretations, revisions even, of the original meanings of the texts, and they are interpretations that have little basis in the Bible. Honest readers of the Bible must at least acknowledge this, even if they feel justified in appealing to these texts as "pro-life" support.

Many other biblical passages can be, and have been, used as proof texts for a pro-life perspective. Prohibitions of murder, injunctions to choose life or to protect the oppressed, and other kinds of texts have all been used. What *all* of them, have in common, however, is that they do not refer explicitly to abortion, and they do not for the most part address the general question of the status of the fetus. Furthermore, many people appeal to these texts without seriously considering either their original significance or the consequences of reading them as commentaries on abortion and/or fetal personhood.

It does not take a professional biblical scholar — only a careful reader — to discern the error in this kind of proof texting. As the abortion debate continues, more and more people are becoming aware of the dubious proof texting methods of the pro-life movement. Indeed, former university professor and journalist-author Garry Wills makes criticisms very much like the ones I have made in his book *Under God: Religion and Politics in America*.^{viii} Wills has read the religious pro-life literature, noticed the same standard anti-abortion proof texts, and — with the help of a commentary or two — re-examined the biblical texts only to find *serious* problems with the pro-life interpretation. If these problems are so obvious and are clearly spelled out in a book written for the general public, what happens to the point of view that finds its authority in these misinterpreted texts? It is clearly going to be

discredited, and its proponents will be edged further toward the periphery of society, out of the main arena of serious public discourse about abortion, both in religious circles and in society at large. Thus the 1974 statement of the Reformed Church in America must be taken seriously:

Scriptural passages often cited as determining the status of a human fetus as fully human, upon careful exegetical examination prove to be indecisive and not clearly supportive of an absolutist position, either affirmative or negative..., and since the above passages are receiving differing interpretations from equally faithful interpreters within the Reformed community, we believe it is not advisable to make the passages bear the weight of an absolute "yes" or "no" position.^{ix}

All of this is not to say, however, that these quoted but often misinterpreted texts are insignificant, or that they have no relevance to the abortion debate. Quite the contrary: the proof texts cited to defend the position that the unborn are persons and abortion is murder may be very important to the abortion debate. Furthermore, the so-called "pro-life" position may, in fact, be implied by certain biblical texts, especially if they are seen in a larger biblical context. For example, Pope John Paul II's appeal to the traditional proof texts in *The Gospel of Life* is much more convincing than most because it appears in the context of a riveting analysis, in Scriptural language, of our contemporary "culture of death."^x In a balanced and cautious chapter of his book *The Bible and the Moral Life*, Baptist theologian Freeman Sleeper suggests that the traditional proof texts do contribute to an ethos of the sanctity of life that means a presumption for life and, without compelling reasons, against abortion.^{xi} However, as one maxim has it, "A text without a context is a pretext." Simply to quote texts or to read unintended meanings into biblical texts

is neither honest biblical exegesis nor serious grappling with the moral issue.

PRO-CHOICE PROOF TEXTING

While the "pro-life" position is most frequently defended with biblical proof texts, the "pro-choice" perspective can also be reinforced with proof texts.

One of the most frequent issues that stimulates pro-choice proof texting is the issue of fetal personhood. Just as pro-life people appeal to the Bible to defend the full humanity or personhood of the fetus, pro-choice people can appeal to the Scriptures to deny it. One of the most thorough attempts at this is an article by Paul D. Simmons, "A Theological Response to Fundamentalism on the Abortion Issue."^{xii} Simmons first deals with Exodus 21:22-25, concluding, with the majority of scholars, that "the woman has been granted full standing as a person under the covenant, while the fetus has only relative standing, certainly inferior to that of the woman."^{xiii} He admits, however, that this text has limited meaning for the abortion debate since the fetal death is accidental.

Simmons goes on, however, to discuss four texts that supposedly reveal the biblical understanding of "personhood": Genesis 2:7 ("dust of the ground... breath of life... living soul"), which demonstrates that a human being is a complex organism of animated flesh; Genesis 1:26-28 ("in the image of God"), which defines a human being as one with God-like powers and abilities; Genesis 3:22 ("has become like one of us, to know good and evil"), which shows that a person is a moral decision-maker; and 1 Peter 2:9 (the "priesthood" of all believers), which shows that a "full person is one with direct access to God and the ability and responsibility to know God's will."^{xiv} The conclusion Simmons draws

about the abortion issue, obviously, is that only the woman involved, not the fetus, is a person (the fetus being a potential person).

What Simmons does not say, but should admit, is that such a definition of personhood excludes not only the fetus, but also infants until at least the age of six months, maybe even two years; the severely mentally handicapped; many elderly people with Alzheimer's disease; and probably other members of the human species. It is not at all clear, biblically or otherwise, that these members of the human family should be considered non-persons. But if the criteria Simmons proposes are valid, they must be applied indiscriminately. This situation demonstrates the problems inherent in constructing a full-blown anthropology from a small selection of Scriptural texts.

A similar proof-texting approach to anthropology is found in another pamphlet from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, "Is the Fetus a Person — According to the Bible?" by Roy Bowen Ward.^{xv} Appealing primarily to Genesis 2:7 and a handful of obscure texts, Ward contends that the biblical notion of a "person" (Hebrew *nephesh*, often translated "soul" or "life" or "being") is of a *breathing* being and thus excludes the fetus. There are numerous flaws in Ward's argument, but here it is important only to re-emphasize the problem of trying to develop a full anthropology from a few texts of Scripture. It is especially odd that Ward (and others who appeal to Genesis 2:7 to disprove fetal personhood) fails to realize that a creation story in which human beings appear instantaneously as adults is hardly sufficient to rule out the personhood of non-adults such as adolescents, children, infants, and fetuses.^{xvi}

Other pro-choice advocates have also developed arguments about the biblical definition of personhood,

or being in the image of God, that exclude the fetus. Many such arguments take their clue from contemporary theological and philosophical definitions of personhood that emphasize the centrality of *relationships* to human personhood. The basic contention is that the embryo or fetus, being incapable of forming and maintaining human relationships, does not possess personhood. Once again, the principle of logical consistency requires that such a criterion be applied indiscriminately, and once again significant numbers of members of the human family must be labelled non-persons. Is this what readers of the Bible want to be forced to do?

Another issue for which proof texting emerges from the pro-choice side is the importance of "choice" to human and Christian freedom. Some years ago I was invited to present the pro-life perspective at a large denominational conference bringing together pro-choice and pro-life groups for dialogue.^{xvii} The supposedly neutral keynoter, a denominational theologian and seminary president, chose Acts 15 as the text for his remarks. That chapter of Acts relates the controversy in the early church between those who wished Gentile converts to be circumcised and those who did not. The chief lesson to be learned from the passage, according to the speaker, was the principle enunciated by Saint Paul, who opposed requiring circumcision: that there is "no act obligatory for salvation; obligation contradicts freedom in Christ."

Although the keynoter's remarks were intended to initiate dialogue and reconciliation, and they did not *explicitly* support either the pro-choice or pro-life side, in a subtle but powerful way they reinforced the pro-choice perspective and effectively prejudiced conference participants toward the pro-choice point of view as the *biblical* point of view. By appealing to a biblical text that

condemned a particular religious/moral obligation and thus, supposedly, promoted an almost absolute moral freedom, the speaker implied that requiring *any* religious or moral obligation from Christians was and is contrary to the gospel. This implication is suspect, first of all, as a legitimate interpretation of the notion of freedom that Paul embraced and preached. It is further suspect as a faithful reading of Acts, because the early church did in fact, according to Acts, place certain requirements on all Christians, Gentiles as well as Jews (see Acts 15:20,29 on abstention from idols, unchastity, etc.). Thus it did not promote an absolute freedom without obligation.

The implicit comparison of abortion to circumcision is also questionable. According to the narrative in Acts, circumcision, unlike unchastity or idolatry, is neither inherently good or evil, so it cannot be absolutized in any way.^{xviii} It is not at all clear, however, that abortion is more like circumcision than it is like idolatry. In fact, early Jewish and Christian opinion was just as united in opposition to abortion as to idolatry.^{xix} All in all, the association of the circumcision controversy with the abortion controversy neglects the fuller context of the story in Acts and does not deal adequately with the moral difference between circumcision and abortion. In short, this theologian's remarks represented a subtle, elaborate, but nonetheless inappropriate proof texting.^{xx}

Other biblical texts that refer, either explicitly or implicitly, to "choice," "freedom," and similar ideas, have also been quoted as proof texts for the pro-choice position. For instance, the "Choose life" text from Deuteronomy 30:19 was quoted by the woman in the episode narrated at the beginning of this chapter. The 1988 resolution of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.^{xxi} says that while many of its members derive their perspective on abortion from the traditional anti-

abortion proof texts, many others appeal to the "biblical principles of compassion and justice... and freedom of will."^{xxii} The document includes relevant supporting texts for these themes, including John 16:13 (which promises the Spirit's guidance into all truth) and Romans 14:4-5, 10-13 (against judgmentalism) to justify freedom of choice.^{xxiii} The document fails, however, to mention the issue addressed in Romans — differences about dietary and calendar observance — and thus fails to distinguish between that kind of issue and the much more morally serious issue of abortion.

According to feminist lay theologian Virginia Ramey Molenkott, writing in an essay for the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights [now Reproductive Choice], a New Testament text that supports freedom of procreative choice, and thus the right to abortion, is the well-known Christ-hymn in Philippians 2. Molenkott's contention throughout the essay is that coercion, especially to the Christ-like self-sacrificial life of motherhood, is always wrong, and that humans should follow the Creator's example in giving free choice to women, even if they think or know that the women will choose wrongly.^{xxiv} Writes Molenkott:

It is self-serving and exploitative for people of power to teach powerless people — those trapped in poverty or marginalization — that they ought to lay down any little power they have achieved in imitation of Christ's self-emptying power. According to Philippians 2, Jesus the Christ chose servanthood from a position of tremendous power, laying aside the very form of God in order to die the death of a slave. The lesson for Christians is that Christlike servanthood can only be *chosen* by people who have the power to choose. To deny procreative choice to women is to deny them the opportunity to choose Christlike servanthood — or, conversely, to recognize if and when for various reasons they cannot make the necessary covenant of caring.^{xxv}

While Molenkott's criticism of urging powerless people to be self-sacrificial has some force — both church and

society should be servants for, not oppressors of, such people — her use of Philippians 2 is unjustified. While the hymn certainly emphasizes the free choice Christ made to humble himself in the interest of others, the accent falls not on his power to choose but on his self-humbling. Indeed, power is redefined in this text as an act of serving. Moreover, Paul uses this hymn to exhort his readers not to remember the importance of the *option* to serve — or not to serve, if unable — but to practice mutual service within the fellowship in Christ, where each looks out for the needs of the other and the "powerless" are thereby empowered, both by serving and by being served. Citing a text like this in support of procreative choice is misreading the text entirely, as well as avoiding the crucial moral issue — not merely choice, but *what is chosen* (the act itself).^{xxvi}

Indeed, the notion of "freedom" advocated by pro-choice people appealing to the texts cited above seems quite distant from other Scriptural texts — to which they do not, conveniently, appeal. There is, for example, Paul's injunction "not to let freedom become an excuse for the flesh" (Galatians), as well as other texts that connect human freedom to obeying God and serving other people. Scripture, above all, offers no justification for a belief in absolute liberty, in which freedom is defined as unrestrained choice and worshipped as the ultimate goal. With that view, whether consciously or unconsciously, people avoid the real issues in an ethical question, since anything can be defended in the name of unrestricted choice and individual conscience — slavery, domestic violence, rape, apartheid. Those who wish to claim biblical texts of "freedom" to support their pro-choice convictions must examine those texts much more carefully.

Other proof texts have also been adduced by pro-choice people. For example, one biblical scholar

circulated a paper within his denomination that appealed to Jesus' words in John 10:10, "I have come to bring you life, life in all its fullness," as proof that the "quality" of life is what matters, and if abortion improves that quality, it serves the purposes of God for human life.

THE FAILURE OF PROOF TEXTING

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that "proof texting" can be done by people on both sides of the abortion debate, though it has traditionally been a weapon of the pro-life movement. This, it must be admitted, is due at least in part to the fact that there are more biblical texts that, at least superficially, support the pro-life perspective. There are texts about pre-natal creation and pre-natal calls, prohibitions of murder, calls to help the oppressed, and so on. Pro-choice people are confined largely to scattered, supposedly anthropological texts, the theme of freedom or choice, and perhaps also texts about the "quality of life."

For both sides, however, the pursuit of proof texts no doubt arises from the Bible's silence on abortion and the need — or at least the desire — to hear what the Bible says about what it doesn't speak about and thus to give divine sanction to a particular perspective. In so doing, both sides have been guilty of irresponsible handling of the biblical texts and, to varying degrees, of failure to deal adequately with the act of abortion. Readers of the Bible who wish to use the Bible to help address the abortion question must do so by reading the Bible carefully, not sloppily or ideologically, combined with a serious commitment to grappling with the complex moral issues that our contemporary situation presents. As Freeman Sleeper notes in his book *The Bible and the Moral Life*, "the abortion issue

demonstrates clearly the failure of a proof texting approach to Scripture" (emphasis his).^{xxvii}

GIVING UP ON THE BIBLE

Perhaps in part as a reaction to those who have been guilty of reading into the Bible, some people have given up any hope of finding guidance on abortion from the Bible. Some have (mistakenly) assumed that abortion was unknown in biblical times. Believing that the Bible cannot be forced to address issues that did not exist (so they think) at the time of its writing, they look elsewhere.

Others have assumed that the Bible's silence on abortion leaves Christians free to develop their own perspective, independent of biblical guidance, much like they form opinions about other matters on which the Bible is silent, both weighty and trivial, in daily life. Both groups turn, when they feel the need for guidance or assistance, to other religious sources — tradition, experience, reason, clergy, the community — and, perhaps just as frequently, to secular authorities such as philosophers, legal experts, newspaper and magazine essayists, and public opinion.

Still others who have heard the proof texting arguments of the pro-choice or pro-life sides have gone back to the Bible to examine the texts for themselves. An admirably thorough job of this was done a decade ago by Mark Olson, in *The Other Side*.^{xxviii} Looking especially at the issue of fetal personhood, Olson concluded that the biblical evidence was inconclusive. Preferring, however, to err on the side of caution, he decided that since the Bible spoke no definitive word that the fetus is *not* a person, it was preferable to think it might be and that abortion should not be championed by Christians.

Olson's cautious approach is commendable. Those who finally give up on the Bible, however, fail to recognize the way the Bible *has* functioned and *should* function in communities of faith. Regarding the past, these people forget that faithful readers of the Scriptures — indeed, even those who actually *wrote* the Scriptures — have always re-appropriated old texts and stories, old themes and truths, for new situations. As for the present, those who think the Bible has nothing to say on abortion view the Bible primarily as a collection of rules or principles with a limited scope of applications, rather than as a determinative revelation or narrative that shapes one's total identity. That is, they neglect the perspective-shaping and character-forming roles of the Bible, both for individuals and communities, that function even when the Bible does not speak directly about the topic at hand.

CRITICIZING AND THUS AVOIDING THE BIBLE

Another approach to the abortion issue criticizes the use of the Bible and avoids it. This approach is reactionary and deliberate, born not out of frustration about the Bible's silence but out of opposition to biblical "tyranny," or "biblicism." Those who choose this approach include self-proclaimed practicing Christians and theologians, but they believe that too many people read the Bible uncritically, without engaging in serious moral reflection, as the final authority on matters of ethics. These people are not simply critical of proof texting — though that, of course, infuriates them — but of giving the Bible an authority greater than one's own ethical thinking and greater than alternative ethical perspectives.

Thus, for example, feminist ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison, in her widely read book *Our Right to Choose*,

is critical not only of how pro-life people interpret the metaphorical theology of Psalm 139 and quote it to prove fetal personhood, but — more importantly — of how they "manipulate"

its [Psalm 139's] status as scripture to obviate any contemporary moral reconsiderations of the nature of fetal life...[,] substitute religious authority for moral reasoning.... [and] falsely portray the past as inherently morally superior to the present by evading the moral inadequacies reflected in scripture."^{xxix}

Harrison continues:

Biblicists refuse to face the fact that the ancient moral ethos reflected in scripture is not always noble by our moral standards and has been superseded by a more adequate morality at some stages in later human history.... [With respect to abortion,] [a]s in many other matters, scripture at best addresses analogous, but never identical, issues. While we are always well advised to probe these analogies for genuine correspondence, we must remember that we are never justified in simply deducing standards of moral conduct from scripture. On the contrary, we are responsible for bringing biblical norms into dialogue with new circumstances and weighing the relevance of other moral orientations to the development of our value systems."^{xxx}

Harrison's contention, fundamentally, is that although "scripture" contains "positive elements of moral wisdom" and "positive theological values and moral principles... that may have continuing claims to make on us," there are also "distortions" and "moral inadequacies," specifically those that are oppressive to women and represent them as the property of males.^{xxxi} She therefore outlines a plan of interpretation for moral issues that includes finding "analogous issues" addressed in the Bible, probing them for genuine correspondence, identifying the values and principles enunciated in the Bible, and evaluating them in light of contemporary value systems. On the abortion issue,

this approach means that the biblical theme of God's love for human beings before birth and even conception, which Harrison acknowledges,^{xxxii} cannot automatically determine one's view of fetal life or of abortion, since the theme may actually represent an oppressive view of women. Furthermore, even if this theme did not reflect such a view of women but did imply the full personhood of the fetus, and thus the immorality of abortion, Harrison's approach permits a contemporary value such as "women's rights to reproductive freedom" to overrule the biblical theme and its implicit norm.

This position must not be dismissed out of hand. Harrison, as well as others who share a similar point of view, often correctly perceive the poor handling of the Bible by many of its most loyal readers — of all theological persuasions — and recognize the superficial moral thinking that often accompanies it. But Harrison commits two closely related, grave errors: she forbids the biblical message to challenge the contemporary values that she brings to the text, and she fails in actual practice to follow through on her own proposal to search and use the Bible critically to address the abortion issue.

In rejecting biblical authority, Harrison replaces it with a new authority, the principle of procreative choice, to which all points of view, biblical or otherwise, must now submit. This principle grows out of a more basic view of freedom, power, co-creativity with God, and self-determination as the essential elements of a feminist spirituality and ethic.^{xxxiii} While there are some elements of profound insight in Harrison's work, one cannot help but suspect that its independent spirit is prompted not only by anger at male abuse of the Bible but also by fear that the Bible, given a dynamic and fresh hearing, liberated from the chains of both

chauvinist and feminist ideology, might actually challenge some of the very presuppositions on which her own ideology is constructed. More importantly, it might threaten the moral perspectives and practices to which these presuppositions lead. Harrison's work exemplifies a new "ism" that can be just as rigid, authoritarian, and close-minded as the "biblicism" it rejects.

The second error Harrison commits is her failure to search the Scripture for issues analogous to the issues involved in the abortion debate. After summarily dismissing Exodus 21:22-24 and Psalm 139 as irrelevant to the debate,^{xxxiv} she proceeds to consider no other biblical text or theme that might correspond to the problem of abortion. The few references to the Bible in her book are passing remarks about such things as the call of the prophets and Jesus to "serious immersion in real, concrete suffering."^{xxxv} Her resources and authorities for discussing the issues of women's rights, fetal personhood, and abortion are other feminist theologians, secular philosophers, and legal experts who support *Roe v Wade* — but not the Bible.

Neither deliberately avoiding the Bible in reaction to proof texting (or in fear of hearing it afresh), nor giving up on it because of its lack of explicit statements on abortion, is the most appropriate course of action for those who look to the Bible for moral guidance. Another approach, which will allow the Bible to speak to an issue about which it is silent, must be sought.

THE THEMATIC APPROACH

Unable to accept the proof texting methodology employed by others, yet unwilling to forsake (or reject) the Bible completely as a source of guidance on the abortion question, many readers of the Bible have

chosen another way, a *via media*. They seek to look to the Bible in the abortion debate by applying more general ethical texts or biblical themes to the issue. Both pro-choice and pro-life people have taken this route.

Pro-choice people have primarily focused on the biblical theme of liberation or freedom, as do their counterparts who are prone to citing and explaining texts more specifically. For example, the 1976 study document of the United Presbyterian church (now part of the PCUSA — Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.) found the Scriptural basis for its pro-choice stance in the teaching of Jesus and Paul on human freedom:

In several instances [in the gospels] Jesus specifically recognized women as responsible persons, capable of ethical decisions in the light of the truth of the good news.... The Sermon on the Mount indicates that Jesus did not consider any of the commandments absolute in themselves. Instead he urged persons to review their attitudes and that attitudes were of sometimes greater significance than the actual conformity to the law.... [I]n the New Testament, particularly Paul, the covenant is reinterpreted as participation in Christ — as members of Christ's body — as over against being under the law (the Old Testament view of covenant). Christ serves as the model: his ministry, behavior, and teachings are ways in which Christians should model themselves in their decision-making.... Both of these views [Old and New Testament] of the image of God in human beings call men and women to exercise their full capacity for ethical decisions even while subject to the limitations of human error and limitation.... Because the Bible has no direct reference to elective abortion, Christians cannot turn to Scripture for immediate counsel in decision-making regarding problem pregnancies. However, the Bible — particularly the ministry of Jesus — can undergird our freedom, and responsibility as human beings, as well as the ministry of the church and the understanding of God for the human situation. This reinforces the possibility that responsible decisions can be made by women facing problem pregnancies.^{xxxvi}

The progression of thought is clear: Jesus taught and

lived the truth that women are responsible decision-makers; no law is absolute; and freedom to choose is the meaning of being in the image of God. The implicit conclusion, of course, is that freedom to choose abortion is the will of God and Jesus.

The document spells this out further in stating its position vis-à-vis "anti-choice groups" who maintain the "traditional absolutist position"^{xxxvii} that affirms fetal personhood and right to life as an inalienable right granted by the Creator. Rather, says the paper, a "divine [meaning, one must suppose, attested in Scripture] self-revelation discloses that that the primary aim of Divine Intention is to maximize human choices — so as to endure risk and surmount tragedy. Whenever and wherever human freedom to choose between alternatives is prohibited — where responsibility for such choices is abdicated through cowardice or usurped by external authority-figures — there the Divine Intention is frustrated and violated."^{xxxviii}

The problem with this line of interpretation of the supposedly biblical theme of freedom is that it sounds much more like certain kinds of modern, secular political or ethical theory than biblical teaching. There is no hint of the self-giving nature of freedom emphasized by both Jesus and Paul, in which one becomes free by "enslaving" oneself in service to God and others. Furthermore, as noted above in the discussion of freedom proof texts, this interpretation of freedom as absolute makes it logically impossible to pronounce any choice or any act — except perhaps the restriction of another's freedom — contrary to the will of God. It is highly unlikely that anyone actually believes in, or wishes to live with, that kind of total moral and social anarchy.

Another biblical theme popular among pro-choice people is "dominion," or "stewardship of the creation."

In 1983 the PCUSA issued a document containing two lengthy papers on medical ethics, the latter paper entitled "Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion."^{xxxix} This paper began by citing and commenting on Psalm 8, which includes the following lines about humanity's "dominion" over the earth: "Thou hast made him [man] little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands." Referring also to Genesis 1:28 to explain dominion as responsibility, the paper asserts that there is a difference between domination and dominion, "power for its own sake" versus "care for that which God has made."^{xi} Claiming "profound respect for human life,"^{xii} the paper treats contraception and abortion as an "aspect of our care for creation,"^{xiii} "a question of [the] stewardship of life,"^{xiii} such that abortion can be an act of faithful dominion and stewardship. The paper claims that the decision "to terminate a pregnancy is a question of one's covenant responsibility to accept the limits of human resources." Furthermore, because limiting population growth is "generally understood as caring for the next generation," when a pregnant woman

judges that it would be irresponsible to bring a child into the world given the limitations of her situation, this paper [affirms] that it can be an act of faithfulness before God to take responsibility for intervening in the natural process of pregnancy by terminating it.^{xliv}

According to the paper, the difference between abortion, which is frequently a responsible act of stewardship, and murder, which is a violation of the sixth commandment, corresponds to the difference between dominion and domination noted above; abortion can be a responsible choice because a woman "takes seriously the needs of a human child" and,

exercising dominion rather than domination, acts responsibly not only for herself but "for the whole of nature insofar as [she is] empowered to direct its design."^{xlv}

This emphasis on the biblical theme of dominion, or responsibility, is connected to the theme of freedom:

Affirming human responsibility for procreative processes is an affirmation of human freedom. The freedom to do what one judges most appropriate in an abortion decision is qualified by the fact that the purpose of such decisions is the responsible exercise of stewardship. Even when we misuse our freedom, God's forgiving grace is offered.^{xlvi}

Thus, according to the paper, the Presbyterian position on abortion brings together the Old Testament theme of responsibility and the New Testament theme of freedom, keeping in line with the best of the Calvinist tradition.^{xlvii}

The problems inherent in using the biblical theme of "stewardship" or "dominion" as justification for abortion are very serious ones. In the first place, it is striking how the one thing over which humanity is *not* given dominion in the Bible is human life. The animal kingdom, the earth and its resources, yes. Human life, no. Moreover, doing what the Bible did *not* do — placing human life under the dominion of humans — inevitably leads to domination: oppression, murder, genocide. History is nothing if not a testament to this obvious truth. Furthermore, carried to its logical conclusion, the notion of the "stewardship of [human] life" as a function of the "stewardship of resources" could lead to all sorts of future immoralities: refusing to feed a certain segment of the population of a poor country, or even deliberately killing off a percentage of the population, all justified by appealing to the "biblical doctrine" of the stewardship of human life.

What is also lacking in all of the typical pro-choice thematic approaches to the Bible is serious consideration of the biblical texts and themes that might lead to a different conclusion. Themes like God's creation of people in the womb, the gift of children, and other "traditional" challenges to a pro-choice perspective are simply dismissed as antiquarian theological nonsense that is unacceptable to Christians in the modern scientific age who live in a world of diminishing resources.^{xlviii}

Among those who have come to oppose abortion but do not find specific abortion-related texts in the Bible, several biblical themes have been suggested as support for their case. Recently, for instance, the United Methodist Taskforce on Abortion and Sexuality, an unofficial band of lay people, pastors, and theologians, issued the *Durham Declaration*.^{xlix} This document, addressed to all United Methodists, focuses on two biblical (especially New Testament) themes — "Our bodies are not our own" and "Welcome the children" — as ethical and pastoral responses to abortion. The choice of these two themes suggests an attempt to address what is perceived to be the fundamental cultural belief behind abortion itself — the right to do as one pleases with one's body — and the responsibility of the Christian church to welcome unwanted children.¹

The advantages of this approach, and this particular choice of themes, are several: the document refrains from proof texting, moves beyond condemnation to analysis and prescription, calls the church to action, and soft-pedals the issue of fetal personhood. But critics will charge that these strengths are weaknesses: some will say that, Paul's dictum notwithstanding, the right to use one's body as one wishes is fundamental to Christian and democratic freedom, while others will

insist that until the issue of fetal personhood is addressed and resolved systematically, the call to welcome unwanted children carries little weight.^{li}

Despite the very different themes chosen by pro-choice and pro-life advocates, it should be clear that appealing to broader biblical themes has more promise, more integrity, than simply calling up proof texts. There are many examples today of people addressing other contemporary problems — for instance, suicide — from this kind of thematic approach. They share the conviction that the Bible is capable of speaking *to* issues even when it does not speak *about* them. This method is less likely to read into the text something not there because it is seeking to *re-appropriate* themes for a new day, a new set of problems.

But the problem, of course, especially in the abortion debate, is how to decide which themes and which other kinds of texts — narratives, laws, etc. — to choose. Is there anything that makes "pro-choice" themes any more or less appropriate than "pro-life" themes? In the end, it may well be that our reading of abortion in light of the Bible depends on how we read the Bible more generally. Does it contain a message best characterized as the "gospel of life," the "gospel of choice," or some combination of these?

TOWARD A NEW APPROACH

We have examined several examples of misuse of the Bible in the abortion debate, all of which can be labelled eisegesis, proof texting, or ideologically governed reading. I would like to suggest that most, if not all, of these examples have a common deficiency. They attempt to read the Bible through the lens of abortion. Abortion, in theory or experience, is the starting point. From that starting point, one begins a search through

the Bible for a perspective on abortion. Abortion — however that is understood or "named" — becomes the hermeneutical key to the interpretation of certain biblical themes and texts. This not only leads to distortion of the text to make it support one's previously held conviction, but also — and perhaps more importantly — to confirmation of one's understanding of abortion without any kind of re-examination.

I would like to suggest that the process be reversed, that our starting point become Scripture, that Scripture become the lens through which we view and read abortion. In a recent article entitled "Jesus and Ethics," New Testament scholar PHEME PERKINS claims that in doing Christian ethics by using biblical materials, we ought to "seek to inculturate the inherited [biblical] images [of God and human life] by *reading our own times in their light*" (emphasis mine).^{lii} Applied to abortion, this means that we must seek to "inculturate," or re-appropriate, the image-rich words of Jesus and the biblical writers by reading, or interpreting, abortion in light of those image-rich words. We are to read Scripture, through its narratives, themes, and images, as a means of reading abortion. Ethicists such as Stanley Hauerwas have already been advocating and doing precisely this when considering abortion.^{liii}

I recognize, of course, that a hermeneutical circle exists between the text and the contemporary issues and situation we wish to address. Nevertheless, if we must choose a starting point, a place that will be more definitive than any other, it must be Scripture rather than the contemporary situation.

Several implications follow from the fundamental method I have suggested.

First, this approach will take the historical-critical method seriously but will see the method as its servant, not its master. The appeal to Scripture for moral

wisdom assumes that it has "an ability to transcend the particularities of time and culture."^{iv} Careful exegesis protects us from misusing Scripture, but it must also free us to use it creatively. As Richard Hays says, "[t]he task of hermeneutical appropriation requires an *integrative act of the imagination*."^{iv} *Second*, this approach will be textually and thematically broad. Many different themes and images from Scripture must be employed to "read" abortion, not just the traditional pro-life or pro-choice proof texts. It will be particularly important to appeal to commonly acknowledged themes, images, and narratives. In reading the various ethics within the Bible, and in doing ethics with the Bible, we need to discern and then utilize a "cluster of master images to govern our construal of New Testament [or, I would add, biblical] ethics."^{vi} *Third*, the resulting reading of abortion will be holistic. Because abortion will not be interpreted by one, narrow set of texts, it will be read and addressed within a more comprehensive Christian ethic rooted in a wide variety of biblical images and themes.

Fourth, this approach actively engages any and all understandings, or readings, of abortion in order to re-read these readings in the light of Scripture. These contemporary readings of abortion include abortion as murder, the shedding of innocent blood, termination of pregnancy, an exercise of freedom, a rite of passage, a tragic necessity, an act of desperation, a result of poverty. As a matter of procedural principle, no reading of abortion is excluded from consideration, and any reading may prove partially appropriate and partially inappropriate in the light of Scripture. *Fifth*, this approach will be prophetic, or critical, vis-à-vis status-quo readings of abortion. Because this approach takes Scripture, not abortion, as its normative starting point, all readings of abortion — those that are labelled pro-

life, pro-choice, and anything else — are subject to intense scrutiny. Abortion must be, so to speak, *deconstructed and then reconstructed*.

Finally, this approach assumes a community of moral learners who take Scripture seriously as their hermeneutical key to reading abortion and to ordering their lives in accord with that reading.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The approach to reading Scripture as a reading of abortion, and as a reading of competing readings of abortion, that I have outlined will not provide easy answers to the complex moral and social problem that is abortion. Nevertheless, there are several commonly acknowledged themes, narratives, and images in Scripture that have significant potential for becoming a "cluster of master images" (Hays) to undergird and express a responsible pro-life perspective. I have chosen the biblical number of seven, appropriately, to discuss briefly.

1. *Shalom*. One of the most promising biblical themes or images is captured in the Hebrew word *shalom*. This image figures significantly in contemporary theological ethics on a host of topics. The word *shalom* connotes wholeness and the restoration of broken relationships; it is often described as eschatological peace and justice for all creation and is symbolized in the image of the lion and lamb lying down together. Since the time of the New Testament, Christians have believed that the Hebrew vision of *shalom* is inaugurated by Jesus and continued in the ministry of the church in the world.

In a 1986 essay, "*Shalom* and the Unborn," I outline various dimensions of the biblical vision and their relevance to the abortion issue.^{lvii} *Shalom* means

peace, justice for the defenseless, security for all, and violence toward none. It is thus a comprehensive image and central to a consistent ethic of life. *Shalom* means that we protect and provide for *all* human life, both born and unborn. *Shalom* creates a secure place for women and children in need.

2. *Covenant*. Another promising theme is that of covenant. Covenant means a binding relationship of love and faithfulness, expressed in the Hebrew word *hesed*. Relationships of *hesed* are the norm in Scripture and underlie many texts even when the word "covenant" (*berit*) is absent. The notion of covenant figures not only in the Judeo-Christian tradition but also in the tradition of American social and legal thought. It has the potential to describe the many personal and societal relationships that are jeopardized by abortion and how covenant faithfulness can be actualized or restored through acts of mercy, justice, and sacrifice.

3. *The feminine metaphors and similes for God*. In my 1994 University Faculty for Life conference paper, "Abortion and the Biblical Metaphor of God as Mother,"^{lviii} I suggest that feminine images of God, found largely in the Hebrew Bible, constitute a hermeneutical circle of theological affirmations about God and corresponding moral demands on people. If God, as feminist theologians have especially reminded us, is like a birthing and nursing mother, full of life-giving power and eternally compassionate, then abortion, no less than infanticide, betrays the character of God. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the faith community to act on God's behalf to provide the care and compassion needed by child and mother.

4. *Freedom/liberation*. According to the Hebrew Bible,

the people of Israel were liberated from slavery into a relationship of covenant love and faithfulness with their liberating God. In the New Testament, Christians are described as liberated from the power of sin to worship God by living for Christ and others in the power of the Spirit.

The scriptural vision of freedom, as Pope John Paul II has frequently pointed out,^{lix} is a prophetic critique of our culture's captivity to hedonistic autonomy, whether of the right or of the left. The scriptural vision of freedom is one of personal and communal responsibility for others as the "horizontal" expression of one's "vertical" love of God. Freedom is thus freedom *for*, not merely freedom *from*. "Freedom to choose," in the scriptural vision, is, paradoxically, an interdependent freedom, a freedom to choose love that is dependent on the love of God channelled through the loving actions of other human beings. "Freedom to choose abortion" is thus a contradiction in terms; freedom to "choose life," on the other hand, can be exercised only with community support. A Christian vision of freedom does not compel a woman to face an unplanned pregnancy alone; rather, it allows for the kind of love in community that liberates, that allows a crisis to be survived and new life to be birthed and nurtured.

5. *Hospitality, including welcoming children.* The mandate of hospitality to the stranger, widow, and orphan permeates the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Hospitality was not only an essential mark of ancient middle Eastern culture; it was perceived as a divine command. Hospitality to those afflicted by the temptations, and possible effects, of abortion is no less an implicit mandate of the biblical texts.

The well-known gospel text, "Let the little children come to me and forbid them not, for of such is the

kingdom of heaven," is an extension of the hospitality mandate to those who were, and are, often marginalized. This text challenges us in many ways. What are the attitudes and structures we have created — not just individually but corporately — that compel people to turn away from the gift of children? What personal and corporate revisioning and restructuring are necessary to discourage abortion and other impediments to the life and welfare of children?

6. *The Good Samaritan*. This well-known parable begins with the ordinary human question "Who is my neighbor?" and ends with the prophetic question "Who was a neighbor to the person in need?" This transformation suggests that the old question of "personhood" (or "neighbor-hood"), construed as the establishment of criteria for membership in the human community, is the wrong question. The text of the parable suggests that even those who might not be considered fully alive or human according to human perception or status-quo biological and social criteria, are in fact worthy of our compassion.

The right question, then, is how I can *become* a neighbor, on the assumption that membership in the human community is inclusive rather than exclusive and therefore that the other — specifically anyone in danger or need — is *already* a neighbor. Thus the issue of "personhood" is transformed from a philosophical or social construct into a moral imperative. It is not the personhood of the fetus that is ultimately at issue or at stake, but rather the personhood of the person or persons who refuse to acknowledge and appropriately respond to this member of the human community.

7. *"Choose life."* It may be appropriate to conclude this essay by returning to the text from Deuteronomy 30:19

with which the paper opened: "Choose life." Ultimately, our reading of Scripture as a reading of abortion and of competing readings of abortion may hang on the issue raised by this text. Does Scripture offer a message that is best characterized as the "gospel of life" or the "gospel of choice"?

As a Protestant theologian, I would agree wholeheartedly with Pope John Paul II, that the fundamental posture of Scripture is toward life rather than choice. Referring to Moses's invitation in Deut. 30:19, the pope says that in the present "enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the `culture of death' and the `culture of life,' we have the inescapable responsibility of *choosing to be unconditionally pro-life*" [emphasis his].^{lx} This is not to deny human freedom but rather to suggest that human freedom is ultimately slavery unless directed toward the way of blessing, of life, of God.

The Jewish tradition of the "two ways," one of death and curse, the other of life and blessing, which was born in this text from Deuteronomy, was taken over by the first Christians. When it was so, they specifically included abortion and infanticide as part of the way of death that Christians had abandoned and must continue to abandon. This, it seems to me, captures the heart of the moral vision of Scripture when it comes to the issue of abortion. This, in other words, is how Scripture "reads" abortion. But the expression of that vision, the embodiment of that reading, must be done creatively and consistently by those who appeal to Scripture.^{lxi}

NOTES

1. *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish, and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove, IL and

Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1982) 91-101; "Shalom and the Unborn" in *Transformation* 3/1 (1986) 26-33; "Ahead to Our Past: Abortion and Christian Texts" in Paul Stallsworth, ed., *The Church and Abortion: In Search of New Ground for Response* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 25-43; "Abortion and the Biblical Metaphor of God as Mother" in Joseph W. Koterski, ed. *Life and Learning IV: Proceedings of the Fourth University Faculty for Life Conference, June 1994* (Washington, DC: University Faculty for Life, 1995) 253-270.

2. See Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

3. Kathy Rudy, "Abortion, Grace, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral" in *Quarterly Review: A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry* 15/1 (1995) 75.

4. In J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak On: Abortion* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989) 29-33.

5. Toronto: Life Cycle Books (1987) 4-17.

6. See Melton 31-32.

7. In the interest of space, I have chosen in the following paragraphs not to document every question and difficulty mentioned. It will be readily apparent to careful readers of the biblical text that these are legitimate interpretive problems.

8. New York: Simon & Schuster (1990).

9. Melton 151.

10. Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* (Papal Encyclical): *Evangelium Vitae* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995).

11. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox (1992) 151.

12. Paul D. Simmons, *A Theological Response to Fundamentalism on the Abortion Issue* (Washington, DC: Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice [formerly Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights], 1987, rev. 1990).

13. Ibid. 10.

14. Ibid. 10-12.

15. Washington, D.C.: Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (formerly Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights), n.d.

16. For a fuller critique of Simmons and Ward, see my "The Sounds of Silence: Abortion and the New Testament Canon" in *Proceedings of the Second University Faculty for Life Conference* (Washington, DC: University Faculty for Life, 1993).

17. Because the proceedings of this conference were not, as far as I know, made available to the public, I have decided not to name the specific individuals or denomination involved.

18. The more Jewish Christians thought circumcision necessary, the more Gentile Christians thought it superfluous or contradictory, and the two groups seem to have compromised by finally classifying it with the "indifferent matters" (what the Stoics called *adiaphora*).

19. See my *Abortion and the Early Church*.

20. For a similar use of Acts 15 and related texts to justify, by analogy, "the acceptance of 'nonabstaining' homosexual Christians," see Jeffrey S. Siker, "Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion: Confessions of a Repenting Heterosexualist" in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 178-194. Curiously, editor Siker concludes the book on "both sides of the debate" in a way not unlike the keynote began the conference on both sides of the abortion debate (though Siker is more explicit). Interestingly, the conference ended with an odd worship service in which the main point of the sermon, based on a biblical story about Hebrew women, was that the only bad choice for women is a coerced "choice."

21. In Melton 25-28.

22. Melton 26.

23. Exodus 21:22-25, John 8:1-11 (the woman caught in adultery), Matthew 7:1-5 ("judge not..."), and James 2:2-13 are used to illustrate compassion and justice.

24. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Respecting the Moral Agency of Women" (Washington, DC: Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, 1989).

25. Ibid. 4.

26. The similar theological criticisms of modern understandings of moral freedom made in the 1993 papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* are relevant at this point.

27. Sleeper 149.

28. *The Other Side* (June 1980).

29. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 70. Because Harrison does not capitalize "scripture," I have not capitalized it in quoting her or in restating her position.

30. Ibid. 71.

31. Ibid. 70-71.

32. Ibid. 69.

33. See *ibid.*, chapter 2, "The Morality of Procreative Choice," pp. 32-56, and chapter 4, "Toward a Liberating Theological Perspective on Procreative Choice and Abortion," pp. 91-118.

34. Ibid. 68-70.

35. Ibid. 92.

36. *Problem Pregnancies: Toward a Responsible Decision* (New York: Office of the General Assembly, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1976) 23-24.

37. Ibid. 27.

38. Ibid. 28.

39. *The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community and Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion* (New York and Atlanta: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1983). For a critique, especially of the document's use of Scripture, see William S. Kurz, "Genesis and Abortion: An Exegetical Test of a Biblical Warrant in Ethics" in *Theological Studies* 47 (1986) 668-680.

40. Ibid. 31-32.

41. Ibid. 32.

42. Ibid. 32.

43. Ibid. 36.

44. In J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak On: Abortion* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989) 29-33.

45. Ibid. 47.

46. Ibid. 33.

47. Ibid. A similar appeal to "the biblical doctrine of stewardship," in which "[c]hoice, not chance, becomes the divine mandate" (especially regarding genetic deformity) may be found in Simmons, *A Theological Response* 7, 11.
48. See, for example, especially *Problem Pregnancies* 29-30; also *Covenant and Creation* 43-48.
49. For the text with notes, see Stallsworth 11-16.
50. For a similar approach, see also Terry Schlossberg and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Not My Own: Abortion and the Marks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
51. It should be pointed out that I served as a consultant for the writing of the *Durham Declaration* and have, therefore, a natural bias toward it despite some possible weaknesses in it.
52. Pheme Perkins, "Jesus and Ethics" in *Theology Today* 52/1 (1995) 49-65 at 64.
53. See, most recently, his "Abortion, Theologically Understood" in Stallsworth 44-66.
54. Perkins 64.
55. Richard Hays, "Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics" in *Interpretation* 44 (1990) 45.
56. Ibid. 45.
57. See note 1 for bibliographical information.
58. See bibliographical information in note 1.
59. E.g., throughout the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.
60. *Gospel of Life*, p. 50.
61. I wish to thank the interdisciplinary group of members of University Faculty for Life who heard this paper for their feedback. Special thanks goes to Sue Abromaitis, Professor of English at

Loyola College in Maryland, for her comments.

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- i. *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish, and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove, IL and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1982) 91-101; "Shalom and the Unborn" in *Transformation* 3/1 (1986) 26-33; "Ahead to Our Past: Abortion and Christian Texts" in Paul Stallsworth, ed., *The Church and Abortion: In Search of New Ground for Response* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 25-43; "Abortion and the Biblical Metaphor of God as Mother" in Joseph W. Koterski, ed. *Life and Learning IV: Proceedings of the Fourth University Faculty for Life Conference, June 1994* (Washington, DC: University Faculty for Life, 1995) 253-270.
 - ii. See Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
 - iii. Kathy Rudy, "Abortion, Grace, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral" in *Quarterly Review: A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry* 15/1 (1995) 75.
 - iv. In J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak On: Abortion* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989) 29-33.
 - v. Toronto: Life Cycle Books (1987) 4-17.
 - vi. See Melton 31-32.
 - vii. In the interest of space, I have chosen in the following paragraphs not to document every question and difficulty mentioned. It will be readily apparent to careful readers of the biblical text that these are legitimate interpretive problems.
 - viii. New York: Simon & Schuster (1990).
 - ix. Melton 151.
 - x. Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* (Papal Encyclical): *Evangelium Vitae* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995).
 - xi. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox (1992) 151.
 - xii. Paul D. Simmons, *A Theological Response to Fundamentalism*

on the Abortion Issue (Washington, DC: Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice [formerly Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights], 1987, rev. 1990).

xiii. *Ibid.* 10.

xiv. *Ibid.* 10-12.

xv. Washington, DC: Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (formerly Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights), n.d.

xvi. For a fuller critique of Simmons and Ward, see my "The Sounds of Silence: Abortion and the New Testament Canon" in *Proceedings of the Second University Faculty for Life Conference* (Washington, DC: University Faculty for Life, 1993).

xvii. Because the proceedings of this conference were not, as far as I know, made available to the public, I have decided not to name the specific individuals or denomination involved.

xviii. The more Jewish Christians thought circumcision necessary, the more Gentile Christians thought it superfluous or contradictory, and the two groups seem to have compromised by finally classifying it with the "indifferent matters" (what the Stoics called *adiaphora*).

xix. See my *Abortion and the Early Church*.

xx. For a similar use of Acts 15 and related texts to justify, by analogy, "the acceptance of 'nonabstaining' homosexual Christians," see Jeffrey S. Siker, "Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion: Confessions of a Repenting Heterosexist" in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 178-194. Curiously, editor Siker concludes the book on "both sides of the debate" in a way not unlike the keynote began the conference on both sides of the abortion debate (though Siker is more explicit). Interestingly, the conference ended with an odd worship service in which the main point of the sermon, based on a biblical story about Hebrew women, was that the only bad choice for women is a coerced "choice."

xxi. In Melton 25-28.

xxii. Melton 26.

xxiii. Exodus 21:22-25, John 8:1-11 (the woman caught in adultery), Matthew 7:1-5 ("judge not..."), and James 2:2-13 are used to illustrate compassion and justice.

xxiv. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Respecting the Moral Agency of Women" (Washington, DC: Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, 1989).

xxv. Ibid. 4.

xxvi. The similar theological criticisms of modern understandings of moral freedom made in the 1993 papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* are relevant at this point.

xxvii. Sleeper 149.

xxviii. *The Other Side* (June 1980).

xxix. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 70. Because Harrison does not capitalize "scripture," I have not capitalized it in quoting her or in restating her position.

xxx. Ibid. 71.

xxxi. Ibid. 70-71.

xxxii. Ibid. 69.

xxxiii. See *ibid.*, chapter 2, "The Morality of Procreative Choice," pp. 32-56, and chapter 4, "Toward a Liberating Theological Perspective on Procreative Choice and Abortion," pp. 91-118.

xxxiv. Ibid. 68-70.

xxxv. Ibid. 92.

xxxvi. *Problem Pregnancies: Toward a Responsible Decision* (New York: Office of the General Assembly, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1976) 23-24.

xxxvii. Ibid. 27.

xxxviii. Ibid. 28.

xxxix. *The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community and Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion* (New York and Atlanta: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1983). For a critique, especially of the document's use of Scripture, see William S. Kurz, "Genesis and Abortion: An Exegetical Test of a Biblical Warrant in Ethics" in *Theological Studies* 47 (1986) 668-680.

xl. Ibid. 31-32.

xli. Ibid. 32.

xlii. Ibid. 32.

xliii. Ibid. 36.

xliv. Ibid. 32 See also pp. 35, 48.

xlv. Ibid. 47.

xlvi. Ibid. 33.

xlvii. Ibid. A similar appeal to "the biblical doctrine of stewardship," in which "[c]hoice, not chance, becomes the divine mandate" (especially regarding genetic deformity) may be found in Simmons, *A Theological Response* 7, 11.

xlviii. See, for example, especially *Problem Pregnancies* 29-30; also *Covenant and Creation* 43-48.

xlix. For the text with notes, see Stallworth 11-16.

i. For a similar approach, see also Terry Schlossberg and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Not My Own: Abortion and the Marks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

ii. It should be pointed out that I served as a consultant for the writing of the *Durham Declaration* and have, therefore, a natural bias toward it despite some possible weaknesses in it.

iii. PHEME PERKINS, "Jesus and Ethics" in *Theology Today* 52/1 (1995) 49-65 at 64.

iiii. See, most recently, his "Abortion, Theologically Understood" in Stallsworth 44-66.

lv. Perkins 64.

lv. RICHARD HAYS, "Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics" in *Interpretation* 44 (1990) 45.

lvi. Ibid. 45.

lvii. See note 1 for bibliographical information.

lviii. See bibliographical information in note 1.

lix. E.g., throughout the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

lx. *Gospel of Life*, p. 50.

lxi. I wish to thank the interdisciplinary group of members of University Faculty for Life who heard this paper for their feedback. Special thanks goes to Sue Abromaitis, Professor of English at Loyola College in Maryland, for her comments.