

Grace for the Day

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Abortion: To Kill a Killer

By Rev. Peter Eng

Preamble

On May 31, 2009, Dr George Tiller was shot and killed at his church while he served as an usher. By now, you would have heard that it was because he was a doctor famous for performing late-term abortions.

Was it right for the gunman to kill him? Let's discuss this question from the Christian perspective (Part 1). At the same time, we will use this occasion as a platform to discuss a Christian view on abortion (Part 2). We need to develop a perspective that is based on Scripture wherever that may take us—even if we differ from the goals of the pro-life movement.

To Kill a Killer

What are the biblical considerations in the murder of Tiller? To address this, I suggest we get some clarifying information:

1. What type of late-term abortions did Tiller perform? Did he perform late-term abortions on demand, and without regard to life; or were there mitigating factors in these late-term abortions such as: threat to the physical life of the mother, rape and incest, or severe abnormality of the fetus. (These mitigating factors are arguable even if we do not agree with them.) If these or other mitigating circumstances were present, Tiller's moral culpability may be ameliorated.

2. We cannot miss the irony of Tiller being gunned down in church where he was serving as an usher. What type of church is that? Do they have a position on abortion? Were they ignorant of Tiller's actions? Did they turn a blind eye?

Once we have the above information, we can formulate a Scriptural response.

Tiller's Abortions

There is no doubt that Dr Tiller performed late-term abortion. I believe this is broadly expressed as abortion performed on a fetus that is viable for life outside the womb, and it is often demarcated at 21 weeks of pregnancy.

The state of Kansas is considered the abortion capital in the US because the laws governing late-term abortion are weak and doctors performing late-term abortions are protected from the need to make disclosures. The paucity of official records makes it hard to determine if Tiller was the helper of desperate women or the enabler of abortion at will. That determination has to come from some other source(s).

Incriminating data against Tiller have been removed from the Internet sources, but such information is published in pro-life sites (e.g. www.abortionessay.com/files/Tiller.html)

The general statistics concerning Tiller appears to be as follows. About a quarter of the abortions Tiller performed were on account of fetal abnormalities (regardless of viability), and three-quarters were perfectly

viable babies. In almost every instance, the life of the mother was not under threat. He regularly performed partial birth abortion (presumably before it was banned).

Partial birth abortion is a particularly heinous form of abortion, performed even up to just before full-term. The abortionist delivers the baby's feet first and leaves the head in the mother. The skull of the baby is punctured and the brain is sucked out. Thus the baby is delivered dead.

The legal loophole that allows abortion on a whim is abortion for the mental health of the mother. Ostensibly, three-quarters of Tiller's abortions were performed for the mental health of the mother, which needs to be no more than, "I am not ready to be a mother."

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be mitigating circumstances surrounding Tiller's late-term abortions. The information suggests Tiller had no compunction in killing pre-natal babies even in late-term and would do so using any method, including the gruesome partial birth abortion, and there is no evidence that he tries to qualify his patients. It is quite clear that he is an ardent supporter of abortion on demand. I regret to say that my search for some mitigating circumstances for Tiller has been unsuccessful, with the exception that his patients do well after the abortion—which is not relevant to the morality of the abortion.

Tiller's Church

Tiller belonged to the Reformed Lutheran Church in Wichita Kansas. It is likely that Tiller's abortions were known to the local church since he had been the repeated target of violent protests by some pro-life elements. This church is under the denomination called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). A local church may or may not faithfully exercise the denomination's position, but it is supposedly bound by the standards of the denomination.

Concerning the Bible, the ELCA statement reads: *"This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life."*

This statement acknowledges the Bible as inspired, but does not contain the typical Evangelical affirmation that it is inspired *by the Holy Spirit* (as opposed to an inspired piece of human literature); and it does not contain the affirmation that the inspiration is *verbal* (the words) *and plenary* (the whole). It affirms the authority of the Bible, but qualifies that authority as the *"source and norm* for the church's proclamation, faith and life," rather than as the supreme or sole authority.

While the denomination calls itself Evangelical, it is struggling with the mainline denomination issue of whether or not to accept homosexuals into their ranks of clergy. This is a sure sign that it is Evangelical in name but not in practice. This is because a homosexual lifestyle is clearly prohibited in the Bible and the mere fact that they are debating whether to allow homosexuals into the clergy strongly suggests they do not regard the Bible as authoritative.

The abortion position of the ELCA is as follows:

"The church recognizes that there can be sound reasons for ending a pregnancy through induced abortion." These are the threat to a woman's physical life; when pregnancy has resulted from rape, incest or sexual violence; and fetal abnormalities incompatible with life."

This is a sound position with which many pro-lifers can identify. It makes provision for abortion only under specific situations. We need not agree with these exceptions, but we can recognize that these are not frivolous exceptions.

Based on its view of the Bible, the ELCA is left of what is typically considered Evangelical; but in its view on abortion, is pro-life and somewhere in the center of the pro-life spectrum.

Let me explain why I think the ELCA is middle-of-the-road pro-life. Some pro-lifers who would allow abortion for abnormalities even if these abnormalities are still compatible with life. (For example, if the child has down syndrome, genetic blindness, etc, these would allow abortion.) The ELCA allows abortion only when the abnormalities are incompatible with life. So they take a stricter view than some pro-lifers.

There are also pro-lifers who take a stricter view than they. The ELCA allows abortion for victims of "rape, incest or sexual violence." Some pro-lifers argue that this is not sufficient ground for abortion.

I think it is fair to assess the ELCA as moderate pro-lifers. It is also apparent that Tiller's position is not consistent with the position of ELCA.

I am too far removed from the scene to know if the church is working with him to urge him towards a higher view of life, or if the church simply ignores the abortions that Tiller did, and by their willful indulgence, they failed to provide spiritual leadership to Tiller. That is a discussion the ELCA should have with Tiller's church and I think it is wiser for us to leave them to that conversation.

So Is It Right to Kill Tiller?

Now that we have the information on Tiller and his church, we look at the Bible to see if Tiller's killer was morally right to kill him.

There is no doubt that murder is illegal. What is legal and moral are not always congruent. Slavery was legal, but not right. Polygamy was legal, but not right; homosexual practices can be made legal, but they will never be right; lying is legal

(unless under oath), but it is not right; etc... You get the point.

The Bible regards the unborn child as a human life, and to kill that pre-natal child was the same as killing a post-natal child (Exodus 21:22-23). Tiller the abortionist has the moral culpability of a serial killer.

A murderer should suffer the death penalty. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Gen 9:6). If the law of the land is based on the Bible, then Tiller would be a murderer, and should be executed for murder. But that is not the law of the land. The law protects Tiller to perform abortion as he did. And the Bible has something to say about the powers of the government.

Let us go back in time to the first century Roman Empire when Christianity first took root. Roman law gave the head of the household, the father, the right of life and death over his children and his slaves. This law is contrary to the Bible, and from time to time, capricious men would have killed their own children or slaves. It was immoral, but it was legal.

This moves the discussion to what happens when the government of a country legalizes what is immoral. Are Christians supposed to implement our understanding of what is right without regard to the state? Paul wrote these words to the Romans who lived under the authority of Nero:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ...do what is right and he [the ruler] will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the

sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. (Roman 13:1-5).

The imperfect Roman laws were based on pagan myths and ideology. But that did not free Christians from obeying the state. The only exception is when the law demands obedience on something that is immoral. When Paul wrote these words, the assumption was that Nero, who governed well in his earlier years, was acting as a responsible ruler.

The Christian call to civil disobedience comes only when we are *required* to do things that are injurious to our conscience.

The law in America *allows* abortion, it does not *require* abortion, as in China. Christians in China who are required to go for abortion, should practice civil disobedience by refusing it. But Christians in America are not required to go for abortion. There is no justification for civil disobedience. Roman laws with regard to life did not give Christians the right to operate above the law. Imperfect American law does not justify the murder of George Tiller.

It is Muslim theology that asserts all of society must live by their laws. Christian theology gives us room to live under imperfect laws or social norms.

Having established that it is not Christian to approve the personal killing of the killer, how do we then formulate a Christian worldview to abortion?

The pro-life movement has been doing much to support the plight of women with unwanted pregnancies and also lobby to overturn Roe v. Wade, making abortion illegal. If we are pro-life, it is almost assumed that we support both aspects of what the movement is doing. To advance pro-life legislation, the movement has

invariably become politicized. So pro-life now becomes:

- 1) active social support for women with unwanted pregnancies;
- 2) support for pro-life legislation;
- 3) support for the Republican Party.

#1 can be fully embraced. But we need to look at #2 and #3 very carefully. They may or may not be consistent with a Christian world view.

That discussion is in our next article. Look out for "Abortion: A Christian Response."

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.