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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Meet Dr. Willie Parker, a Southern Christian Abortion Provider

Nicholas Kristof MAY 6, 2017

No issue in America is more toxic than abortion, and that's partly because it is today so closely associated with religion. While many feminists see abortion as a matter of choice, some Christians see it as murder.

Then there are people like Dr. Willie Parker. Dr. Parker is black, feminist and driven by his Christian faith to provide abortions in the South, where women seeking to terminate a pregnancy have few options.

"I believe that as an abortion provider, I am doing God's work," Parker writes in his new memoir, "Life's Work." "I am protecting women's rights, their human right to decide their futures for themselves, and to live their lives as they see fit."

Since childhood, Parker had been taught that abortion was wrong, and for the first half of his career as an OB-GYN, he refused to perform abortions. But then he had what he calls his "come to Jesus moment," an epiphany that his calling was to help women who wanted to end their pregnancies.

Since 2002, he has been providing abortions, mostly on the front lines in Southern states, walking past picketers who scream that he is a baby killer. He puts up with the danger, he says, because it's morally right to help desperate women.

If that seems incongruous, let's remember that conservative Christianity's ferocious opposition to abortion is relatively new in historical terms.

The Bible does not explicitly discuss abortion, and there's no evidence that

Christians traditionally believed that life begins at conception. St. Thomas Aquinas, the father of much of Catholic theology, believed that abortion was murder only after God imbued fetuses with a soul, at 40 days or more after conception.

One common view was that life begins at quickening, when the mother can feel the baby's kicks, at about 20 weeks. When America was founded, abortion was legal everywhere until quickening, and it wasn't until the 19th century that states began enacting laws prohibiting abortions, beginning with Connecticut in 1821.

Even in the modern era, religion has taken a more complex view of abortion than is generally realized. In the 1960s, ministers and rabbis formed the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, advising pregnant women how to obtain abortions. More than 100,000 women sought their services.

In 1968, a symposium held by Christianity Today suggested that "family welfare" concerns were good enough reasons for an abortion. The Southern Baptist Convention passed resolutions in 1971, 1974 and 1976 calling on church members to work for the legalization of abortion in some situations.

In 1972, a Gallup survey found that Republicans were more likely (68 percent) than Democrats (59 percent) to say abortion should be "a decision between a woman and her physician." That's partly because abortion was seen as a Catholic issue but not a Protestant one, and most Catholics were Democrats.

"I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person," the Rev. W. A. Criswell, one of America's Southern Baptist leaders, said in agreeing with the Supreme Court's legalization of some abortions in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.

Yet today it's taken as self-evident among conservative Christians that life begins at fertilization — without realizing that this would have astonished many Christians throughout the ages.

Parker accepts that a fetus is alive — but says that life doesn't begin at conception, because an egg is alive as well, and so is a sperm. "Life is a process," he writes. "It is not a switch that turns on in an instant, like an electric light."

Parker is outraged at the profusion of laws around the country chipping away at abortion rights, and he objects that much of the critique of abortion is based on bad science — yet doctors are sometimes legally obliged to provide incorrect information to patients. Medical opinion is that a fetus cannot feel anything like pain until about 29 weeks, long after most abortions occur, he notes.

Parker tells of seeing a woman whose fetus had Potter syndrome, in which the lungs do not develop. The woman declined an abortion for religious reasons, and a baby girl was born at full term — and then, as was inevitable, died a painful death because she couldn't breathe.

“In this case, an absolute reverence for life led to a situation that, to my eyes, consisted of nothing less than pure cruelty,” he writes.

In another case, a 12-year-old girl was with her mother in the waiting room of an abortion clinic in Alabama. When the mother stepped outside to smoke, another patient tried to offer maternal guidance and steer the girl away from boys. “Who were you messing with?” the woman asked. “Don’t you know not to go around with those boys?”

“He isn’t a boy,” the girl replied. “He’s 53 and he’s my daddy.”

Dr. Parker reminds us that abortion is complicated. And that is why, in my view, we need choice.

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