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## “ABORTION IS ABOUT GOD”

### *Piper's Passionate, Prophetic Pro-Life Preaching*

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**E**vangelicalism—in the Reformed camp or elsewhere—is not exactly overflowing with models of how to preach exegetically faithful, powerfully prophetic, culture-engaging, hope-giving, gospel-centered sermons on the politically charged and personally painful topic of abortion. But for the past twenty years John Piper has been doing just that.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I want to survey Piper’s sermons and writings on abortion as an encouragement and a model for preachers—and all believers—to honor God and defend the defenseless by proclaiming God’s Word and engaging the world on the issue of abortion.

In order to let Piper speak as much as possible, I’ll quote and paraphrase him extensively in what follows. I begin with a bit of biographi-

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<sup>1</sup>For a complete list of these sermons, see the list appended to this chapter. Throughout this chapter, I will simply cite the sermons by year in the body of the text. Each sermon can be read or listened to in its entirety for free at the [Desiring God](http://DesiringGod.com) Web site.

cal overview, sketching Piper’s development as a pro-life pastor. I’ll then attempt to summarize the main exegetical arguments in his pro-life sermons, since expositional preaching on abortion is a challenge. Finally, I will suggest some application lessons that pastors can learn from Piper’s pro-life preaching.

### **Piper’s Slowly Opening Eyes on the Silent Holocaust of Abortion**

Piper was installed as the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church on July 13, 1980. In 1982 he publicly raised the issue of abortion for the first time in the form of a newsletter article entitled “Abortion, Father’s Day, and Infant Doe.” It traced the timeline of an infant boy in Minnesota who died when his parents refused an operation for his surgically correctable condition. The reason? He had Down syndrome and his parents didn’t want him to live. The couple was not charged with wrongdoing for letting their son die.

Calling abortion “a most grievous sin,” Piper wrote, “Abortion is, in my judgment, manslaughter and a breach of the sixth commandment.” He connected the increase of abortion to the increase of infanticide and concluded, “The reason abortion has led to the killing of infants is because it already *is* the killing of infants.” He then encouraged the people of Bethlehem to respond in the following ways: (1) avoid entertaining even the thought of an abortion; (2) teach your children that abortion is an abomination in God’s sight and an assault on his glory; (3) keep informed about pro-life legislation; and (4) support ministries to young women in crisis.

It would be another five years before Piper devoted a sermon to abortion, which he did on January 18, 1987. After explaining what was happening and why, Piper turned to how we should respond. Here his counsel was wider and more proactive than the “modest suggestions” offered in 1982: (1) submit yourself to God, being a visible and audible Christian; (2) pray earnestly and regularly for awakening in the churches; (3) use your imagination to see abortion for what it really is; (4) support alternatives to abortion with money and time and prayers; and (5) use your democratic privileges of free speech and representation and demonstration to press for legal protection for the unborn.

This counsel seems to represent a strategic shift in Piper’s thinking whereby Christians are to engage the issues not only in their homes (through sanctification, prayer, teaching, and being informed) and in crisis-pregnancy ministry, but also in the public square through actions that make the case for legally protecting the unborn.

Two years later, after being arrested for peaceful pro-life civil disobedience,<sup>2</sup> Piper referenced an editorial that lamented “the silence of the evangelicals” on abortion. Piper applies this to himself first:

I want to publicly confess a great blindness and indifference and apathy in my own life and ministry. I am in no position to point my finger at any of you. I bear a greater responsibility as a leader. My silence has been more shameful than yours. I am praying now that I would be forgiven and granted another chance to do my part in ending “the silent holocaust” of abortion.<sup>3</sup>

It is not as if Piper had suddenly become pro-life. The shifting issue in 1989 was over the degree of personal outrage and the resolve to address the issue publicly—both from the pulpit and at the abortion clinics. Signing the article, “With slowly opening eyes, Pastor John,” it is clear that Piper had now made a decisive move with regard to his public, pastoral advocacy against abortion. Since 1989, Piper has preached every January on the topic of abortion.

### Piper’s Exegetical Grounding for Abortion Opposition and Pro-Life Action

Pastors who want to preach against abortion and equip their congregations in the cause for truth and life often struggle with how to do this exegetically. Natural-law arguments are one thing, but how does one address abortion by expositing Scripture when the Bible never explicitly deals with the situation of someone intentionally seeking to kill life in the womb?

Piper’s sermons on abortion do not follow a set formula, but most of them contain the following elements: (1) a review of facts and argu-

<sup>2</sup>Piper, along with other pastors and members at Bethlehem, was arrested twice (December 19, 1988, and January 20, 1989) for attempting to save the lives of the unborn at Planned Parenthood of Minnesota in St. Paul. In a January 1989 newsletter article he wrote that “[we] simply sat in front of the door to say by our action: without violence we will do what we can to stop child-killing here today. . . . Wouldn’t you sit down in front of a door to separate a baby from a killer?” Five days before the second arrest he offered his public justification for such a rescue attempt in his sermon “Rescuing Unborn Children: Required and Right,” from Proverbs 24:10–12. Piper argued from the text that rescue is always “right” (i.e., permissible) but is not “required” by direct biblical injunction; rather, it is one way our consciences might dictate that we apply this proverbial command. The following January (1990) Piper preached another sermon prior to a planned rescue, offering justification for showing solidarity with those suffering (namely, the unborn). There he specifically stressed the importance of nonviolence: “This war will not be won by bullets. It will be won by brokenness and humility and sacrifice. It will be won when we identify with the children in our suffering rather than with the abortionist in his killing.” The physical rescue movement fizzled after this time, as the method became ineffective due to the swift response of law enforcement in removing protestors and the success of abortion-choice advocates in raising legal charges, including racketeering.

<sup>3</sup>John Piper, “Why Would Three Pastors from Bethlehem Get Arrested?” *Star* [church newsletter], January 9, 1989.

ments about abortion (its definition, prevalence, immorality, etc.); (2) an examination of biblical passages that show why abortion is wrong and why Christians should be involved in exposing this dark work; (3) gospel application for the guilty (for abortion killing, abortion support, or abortion apathy); and (4) practical ways that Christians can take a stand for truth in order to save lives for the glory of God. In the next section I make no attempt to summarize all of Piper's abortion sermons in their entirety, but rather focus on the exegetical work that he does in each. My goal will be to let Piper himself speak as much as possible in these extracts, so that readers can hear his own words and follow his own exegetical arguments.

*Understanding Why We Murder the Unborn: James 4:2*

In his first sermon on abortion (1987) Piper asks, "Can we say anything from Scripture about what is happening when a life in the womb is aborted?" The first text he turns to is the familiar Psalm 139:13:

For you formed my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

Piper observes that "the life of the unborn is the knitting of God, and what he is knitting is a human being in his own image, unlike any other creature in the universe." He then turns to a lesser-known text, Job 31:13–15 (summarized in a later section, below). From these two texts Piper concludes that "the destruction of conceived human life—whether embryonic, fetal, or viable—is an assault on the unique person-forming work of God."

For why this is happening, Piper turns to James 4:2: "You desire and do not have, so you murder."

We kill marriages and we kill unborn babies because they cut across our desires; they stand in the way of our unencumbered self-enhancement. And we live in a culture where self-enhancement and self-advancement is god. And if self-enhancement is god, then the One who is at work in the womb shaping a person in his own image is not God and the assault on his work is not sacrilegious, but obedience to the god of self.

Behind and beneath the rhetoric of abortion is the agenda of Satan, who was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). So men and women who cause abortion to abound refuse to submit to their Creator. They worship instead the god of self-enhancement and follow the steps of the ruler of this world (Eph. 2:2–3).

***Publicly and Peacefully Identifying with the Unborn: Hebrews 10:32–35***

In 1990 Piper focused on rescuing unborn children from slaughter. Hebrews 10:32–35 focuses on two groups within the church: one suffering abuse and affliction through imprisonment, the other publicly and compassionately identifying with their suffering brothers and sisters by visiting them in prison. The latter “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property,” knowing that they “had a better possession and an abiding one” (v. 34). Piper, expounding and applying the text in light of a planned rescue operation at an abortion clinic, explains their rationale:

Because when the compassion of Christ for people who are suffering unjustly combines with the confidence of kingdom hope, the power of courage and freedom and meekness is unleashed, and some (not all) are called to let the light of the kingdom shine through peaceful, public solidarity with the unborn, and if necessary, through suffering.

Kingdom compassion requires that Christians intercede and identify in some way.

***Listening to God Not Men: Acts 4:13–22***

In 1991 Piper’s exegetical work explored how to interact with those who reject God’s truth. Piper highlighted three things in Acts 4:13–22 that are relevant for life in a secular world, especially with regard to abortion: (1) The kind of people who will stand up to the authorities (v. 13) is not necessarily the educated or skilled but, rather, the bold, forthright, and clear because they have real fellowship and experience with Jesus. (2) The leaders respond to the evidence of truth mounting against them (vv. 16–17) by turning a deaf ear and a blind eye; their minds selectively see what will justify the desires of their heart, and that’s what needs to be changed. (3) Our response to the threat of the authorities (v. 19) should be to stand up in public and tell God’s truth as we see it without worrying that secular listeners may not agree with even our most basic assumptions. Applying this to abortion as well as other issues, Piper says, “Your job is not to win. Your job is not to control this society. Your job is to say what God wants said. . . . We are not called to win; we are called to witness.”

***Exposing the Dark and Unfruitful Work of Abortion: Ephesians 5:11***

In 1992 Piper built the heart of his sermon around Ephesians 5:11: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” Many Christians obey only the first part of this verse, practicing only a “passive avoidance ethic” and ignoring the second part of the duty to actively expose the works of darkness. But walking as children of light

(Eph. 5:8) entails our not doing works of darkness and our exposing the works of darkness that others do. An application is that God is calling all Christians to expose the dark and fruitless work of abortion. In this way Christians serve as the conscience of their culture and the light of the world.

*Honoring the President: 1 Peter 2:13–17*

Piper's 1993 sermon was delivered just three days before the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, an adamant supporter of abortion on demand. Piper begins his exegetical work in this sermon by recounting the Bible's perspective on human government. Those who rule over us have been given authority by God, and we are to be subject to them (Rom. 13:1, 5; 1 Pet. 2:13–14) as God's servants (Rom. 13:1, 4). We are to pray for them and thank God for them (1 Tim. 2:1–2), and we are to respect and honor them (Rom. 13:7; 1 Pet. 2:17).

But if you believe that aborting a child means killing a child, how then do you honor the president of the United States if he has the power and desire to make abortion more accessible? How do pro-life Christians honor a pro-choice president? Piper offers eight points to his answer, personally addressing them to President Clinton: (1) We will honor the president by humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand, acknowledging that we are ourselves sinners and in need of mercy and forgiveness from God. (2) We will honor the president as an utterly unique human being created in the image and likeness of the living God with untold potential. (3) We will honor the president by acknowledging that government is God's institution and the president is in power by God's appointment. (4) We will honor the president by submitting to the laws of the state and the nation wherever they do not conflict with our higher allegiance to Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords. (5) We will honor the president by not withdrawing into little communes of disengaged isolation from American culture, but (following 1 Pet. 2:15) by trying to do as much good as we possibly can for the unborn, and for unwanted children, and for women in distress, so that we will not be thought insolent or inconsistent in asking from the president what we are not willing to do ourselves. (6) We will honor the president by opposing his position as long as we can with nonviolence instead of violence, with reasoning instead of rocks, with rational passion instead of screaming, with honorable speech instead of obscenities, with forthright clarity of language instead of dodging the tough realities and tough words, with evidence instead of authority, and with scientific portrayals of life instead of authoritarian blackouts (cf.

2 Cor. 4:2). (7) We will honor the president by expecting straightforward answers to straightforward questions. (8) We will honor the president by trusting that the purpose of our sovereign and loving God to defend the fatherless and contend for the defenseless and to exalt the meek will triumph through his presidency.

***Beholding the Majesty of God in His Supreme Creation: Psalm 8***

In 1994 Piper unpacked Psalm 8, observing that it begins and ends with the same statement:

O LORD, our Lord,  
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
 (vv. 1, 9)

Verses 3–5 teach that God manifested his majesty through his supreme creation, human beings. Piper explains the relevance of Psalm 8 to abortion (and racism):

The vision is that God is majestic above all the majesties of the universe and this majesty—though dimmed and besmirched and defiled by sin—shines in the glory of God’s supreme creation, human beings. And the truth that flows from this vision is that we cannot worship and glorify the majesty of God while treating his supreme creation with contempt.

In verse 4 David asks, “What is man?” and makes three points in response: (1) humans are made by God (“You have made him”); (2) they are radically different from animals (“a little lower than the heavenly beings”); and (3) they are “crowned . . . with glory and honor” (v. 5). This, Piper suggests, is the reason that the infant humans and nursing babies of verse 2 can overcome the enemies of God. Piper says:

Let all the adversaries of God take note and tremble. If they treat God’s supreme creation with contempt, they will lose. They will be silenced. And so I appeal to you, do not join with the adversaries of God in killing unborn children or scorning any race of human beings. Because the truth of this text stands sure: You cannot worship and glorify the majesty of God while treating his supreme creation with contempt.

***Fasting for the Safety of Little Ones: Ezra 8:21–23***

Piper’s 1995 Sanctity of Life sermon was part of a larger 1994–1995 series on fasting (which formed the basis for the book *A Hunger for God*). Piper exegetically connected abortion and fasting by looking at

the book of Ezra. In 8:21 Ezra proclaims a fast, “that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.” It is here that Piper got the idea of fasting for the safety of children, or “little ones” (NASB). The Israelites sought God with life-and-death seriousness and humility, and verse 23 records the result: God listened to their entreaty.

While endorsing pro-life engagement in various ways (education, political action, crisis pregnancy care, sidewalk counseling) Piper insists that “at root the issue we are facing is a spiritual one—the darkness and depravity of the human heart and mind.” Piper asks, “Might not the cry of our hearts for such an awakening of conscience and faith be made more full and earnest and fruitful through fasting?”

***Boiling in the Spirit for the Cause of Truth and Life: Romans 12:9–11***

The text for Piper’s 1997 sermon was sparked by his encountering an unfamiliar word in an essay by William Bennett: *acedia* (apathy, boredom). Piper agreed with Bennett that in America today there is a deep cultural *acedia*—a “cultural yawn.” This is contrary to the Christian mind and heart, which calls for zeal, fervency, and strength in the service of Christ and his kingdom. Against this cultural apathy and boredom come the words of Romans 12:11: “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent [Gk. ζέοντες, boiling] in spirit, serve the Lord.” Those who boil in the Spirit will find ways to pour their lives into the cause of life and truth.

***Abortion Is about God: James 4:1–10***

In his 1998 sermon Piper expressed gratitude for non-Christian arguments for why abortion is wrong. Nevertheless he is adamant that accounts without God are ultimately trivial. A biblical perspective on abortion recognizes that this issue is ultimately about God, for at least four reasons: (1) the child in the womb is created by God in the image of God; (2) only God can forgive the sin of killing unborn children; (3) the root cause of abortion is a failure to be satisfied in God as our supreme love; (4) the political and cultural events that will make abortion unthinkable and illegal are in God’s hands.

In the sermon Piper explains that the ultimate evil of abortion is not that it kills children or that it damages women—which it does. “The ultimate evil,” he said, “is that it assaults and demeans God.” But that, he says, “is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about. How God planned and brought about a plan to forgive people who have committed the ultimate outrage of discounting his glory and treating it as less valuable than their own private preferences.”



*Visiting the Unborn in Their Affliction: James 1:26–27*

Piper’s 1999 sermon centers on James 1:27: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Piper’s application argument proceeds a fortiori (from the greater to the lesser): “If God wants us to care about the orphan whose life is endangered because his parents are dead, he would want all the more that we care about the child whose life is endangered because his parents choose to make him dead.”

Piper uses the same form of argument regarding the affliction or distress of the orphan, for there is no greater place of distress than the womb of a woman being given over to abortion. And even the command to care for widows has application for women who choose abortion: “Women who abort are often desperately alone. They are in a worse situation than many widows.” If we are to care for orphans and widows, we should also care for babies in the womb and women who are contemplating or have committed abortion.

*Engaging Culture for Christ: 1 Peter 2:9–17*

In the year 2000 Piper reviewed the arguments for why we know abortion is wrong but then stepped back to provide a wider framework for Christian involvement in society and culture. Using 1 Peter 2:9–17 he showed that (1) we all were once in darkness, along with the whole world; (2) God has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light; then (3) God sends us back to (but not into) that darkness to “proclaim his excellencies.” (4) We are to make God’s excellencies known to the darkened culture by both avoidance and engagement. (5) Our freedom in Christ does not cancel submission to cultural institutions (state, employers, family, etc.), but puts us on a whole new footing of submission to God. (6) Finally, we are to honor all people, but in ways appropriate to their roles in life.

*God’s Person-Forming Work in Every Womb: Job 31:15*

In 2001 Piper returned to the argument of Job 31:13–15, which he briefly looked at in his first sermon on abortion fourteen years earlier. Job ponders his accountability before God after a servant issues a complaint against him. Job says,

Did not he who made me in the womb make him?  
And did not one fashion us in the womb? (v. 15)

Piper makes four observations regarding the argument: (1) The ground of inalienable human rights is traced all the way back to the womb. (2) Job and his servant are both equal in that they are both utterly dependent, derivative creatures made by God. (3) The central, essential, and crucial work in the womb is not natural or biological development but the work of God in creating a person; to attack God’s creation is to attack God himself. (4) Job trembles in reverence and fear before God for neglecting or despising the rights of his servant because they are both created in the womb in God’s image by God himself.

Piper’s exegetical application from all of this is that “this issue of abortion—the taking of the life of the unborn—is a very important issue. It is not just a social issue, or a justice issue, or a woman’s issue, or a children’s issue, or a health issue; it is, beneath all those and more important than all those, a God issue.”

*Being Sinfully Ignorant: Luke 23:32–38*

In 2002 Piper examined Luke 23:34, where Jesus prays from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Piper’s preaching frequently involves setting up a problem and then resolving it, and this exposition is no different. He asks, “Why forgive a person for what he does not know he is doing?” If people don’t know what they are doing, it seems they are not morally guilty and hence don’t need forgiveness. Piper’s answer is that they are guilty precisely *because* they don’t know what they are doing. They *should* know, and the only explanation for their ignorance in light of so much evidence is that they must not *want* to see it. Piper then applies this principle to abortion:

Whether we know what we are doing or don’t know what we are doing, we are guilty and need forgiveness, because we *should* know what we are doing. Indeed, we do know what we are doing. . . . wrongfully killing unborn human beings whose right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is a gift of God (Acts 17:25).

*Exposing the Darkness of Abortion with the Light of Truth:*

*Ephesians 5:1–16*

In his 2003 sermon Piper compares Ephesians 5:8–14 and Matthew 5:13–16 on the roles of light and darkness. Paul says that “you are light in the Lord,” and Jesus says that “you are the light of the world.” Paul says that “the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true,” and Jesus says that the fruit of shining our light before others is “that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in

heaven.” Paul’s focus here is on the exposing work of light. Light causes truth to appear and things to be seen as they are, while deceptions and half-truths are exposed and blown away.

Applying this to the issue at hand, Piper argues that the only way for abortion to survive is for the darkness of reasoning and language to survive. As Christians, we must shine our light so that good deeds are done and dark works are revealed and exposed. We need both “the light of good deeds” (crisis pregnancy centers, adoption, sidewalk counseling, education, political engagement) and “the light of loving analysis and critique and exposure” (reading, thinking, conversing, writing).

Piper concludes the exegetical portion of his sermon by briefly commenting on the first three verses of Ephesians 5. Verse 1: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children.” We should imitate God by loving children the way he loves his children: “Let us love children: the idea of children, children in the making, and children on the earth.” Verse 2: “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Whereas “Christ died that we might live, . . . abortion kills that someone might live differently.” We were weak when we were rescued by Christ’s sacrifice (Rom. 5:6), and therefore we should be ready and willing to sacrifice and stand up for the weak. Verse 3: “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.” Sex by itself doesn’t make abortion. It’s sex plus covetousness. “Illicit sex and unencumbered freedom without children: for these we covet, and abortion is the result.”

### *Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil:*

#### *Genesis 3:1–13*

Piper’s exegetical work in this 2004 sermon is more extensive than in his other sermons, and in my opinion it is perhaps his most profound work on the origin and essence of abortion. Therefore I will summarize it and quote from it at greater length.

He begins with Genesis 2:16–17, where God commanded the man, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Having “the knowledge of good and evil” means claiming “the independent right to decide for oneself what is good and evil (true and false, ugly and beautiful).” God has this knowledge, but such independent knowledge would be devastating for men. God promised that such knowledge would kill man—and it’s still doing so today, both spiritually and physically. “All death is rooted in this insurrection.”

God alone is the source of what is objectively true and right and beautiful. But Satan suggests that if Adam and Eve eat from this tree, they will be like God (Gen. 3:1–5). Piper responds:

So true and so false! God is a flower of truth and right and beauty, and he has no roots and needs no water, no sunshine, no soil. He is absolutely self-sufficient. We are planted in God. We get all our water and light and nutrition from him. Yes, we can cut our stem and try to be like him. We can be our own source of life and light and truth and right and beauty. We can. And die.

Piper then turns his attention on the immediate effects of the fall, namely that “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (v. 7).

The first result of choosing to be god is the canyon between appearance and pretension. Now that I have chosen to be God, my non-godlike appearance is ridiculous. And humans have spent centuries with fine clothing (cool clothing) and make up and body-building trying to look less like the wreckage we are without God. The root of shame is the pretension to be god—the need to look invulnerable, self-sufficient, god-like (or goddess-like). The essence of the fall of Eve and Adam—and all of us in Adam—is the supreme pleasure we have in being independent, and deciding for ourselves what is true and right and beautiful, rather than finding supreme pleasure in God as the fountain of all that is true and right and beautiful. The essence of the fall is preferring to be god rather than enjoy God.

How does all of this relate to abortion? Piper argues that the link between the modern secular world (rooted in the garden of Eden) and the reality of abortion is found in the word *want*. “I do not *want* this child at this time.”

At this time in American history, that is one of the most powerful sentences a person can speak: “I do not want a child at this time.” It’s powerful, because in a world without God, and without submission to his will, the will—the “want”—of a mother has become the will of a god. I say it carefully and calmly and sadly: Our modern, secular, God-dethroning culture has endowed the will (the “want”) of a mother not just with sovereignty over her child, but with something vastly greater. We have endowed her will with the right and the power to create human personhood. When God is no longer the Creator of human personhood, endowing it with dignity

and rights in his own image, we must take that role for him, and we have vested it in the will of the mother. She creates personhood.

But then, as is usually the case, Piper closes with the gospel. Staying within the text of Genesis 3, Piper turns to verse 15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.

Instead of saying that the Seed of the woman would someday crush woman for her sin, God makes Eve “a means of salvation, not an object of judgment. The offspring of this woman will crush Satan. Jesus Christ died and rose again to forgive and reverse our love affair with being god instead of enjoying God.”

*Seeing Abortion as the Outworking of Racism and Sexism:*

*Exodus 1:1–22*

In 2005 Piper looked at the connections between abortion, race, and gender by recounting the early events of Exodus 1, observing that the Egyptians (the dominant ethnic group) took four increasingly radical steps to eliminate the threat of the Israelites (the minority ethnic group): (1) they initiated slavery (vv. 1–12), and then (2) they intensified the slavery (vv. 13–14). (3) Pharaoh then instructed the midwives to kill the infant males at birth (vv. 15–16), and (4) he later commanded the entire Egyptian nation to kill the infant male Israelites (v. 22).

Piper sees this Egyptian escalation of infanticide as analogous with our abortion situation, which is often the outworking of racism and sexism. The subtle infanticide against Israel, like abortion today, (1) preceded open infanticide, (2) was selective, and (3) was ethnically specific. Piper also notes that those who disobeyed the authorities by refusing to participate in such infanticide were rewarded by God (Ex. 1:17–21). Piper closes with a contrast between Moses and Jesus in order to show the power and the beauty of the gospel:

Moses delivered the people who were being oppressed. Jesus delivers oppressed and oppressor.

Moses delivered the hated race. Jesus delivers the hated and the hater.

Moses couldn't deliver the strangled babies or babies thrown into the Nile, but Jesus delivers the babies, the mothers, the abortion providers, the irresponsible boyfriends. He loves and saves every sinner who trusts in him.

Killing babies is not the path to freedom. Jesus Christ is.

*Asking the “Good Samaritan” Question: Luke 10:25–37*

Piper's 2006 sermon was on the Good Samaritan. He observes that the parable is framed first by the lawyer seeking self-justification in asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29), and ends with Jesus' return question, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor?” (v. 36). The intervening parable changes the question from “What kind of person is my neighbor?” to “What kind of person am I?” “What status of people are worthy of my love?” becomes “*How can I become the kind of person whose compassion disregards status?*” Applying this to abortion, Piper says:

When all the arguments are said and done about the status of pre-born human life and whether the unborn qualify for our compassion along with mommy and daddy and grandma and granddaddy—when we are done trying to establish, “Is this my neighbor?”—the decisive issue of love remains: What kind of person am I? Does compassion rise in my heart for both mommy and daddy and grandma and granddaddy and this unborn baby? Or do I just get another Coke and change the channel?

Piper also draws attention to the “practical compassion” of the Good Samaritan. The type of people who follow Jesus are willing to practice the concrete, hands-on, get-messy, sacrificial, time-consuming, stressful compassion of verses 34–35. And there is similar work for each of us to do in the practical compassion of caring for the unborn.

*Shining the Light of Christ and Truth into the Darkness:*

*Ephesians 5:16–17*

In his 2007 sermon Piper sought to put the evil of abortion in light of the gospel of grace, using Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Reflecting on Ephesians 5:2, Piper told his people: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us”—that is, for sinners, people who need forgiveness, including those who have had abortions, condoned abortions, or even demanded them. But “God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). Salvation in Jesus is available for every abortionist and everyone involved in abortion at every level.

When we are forgiven by Christ and called out of darkness, we are called to be light and to walk as children of light (Eph. 5:8–10). In fact,

we are to use our light to expose the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:11–14). Piper observes that “some of the strongest witnesses to the light of life are women who have had abortions and come out of the darkness into the light of forgiveness and light. They have *become* light. They are shining with the truth.”

*Sacrificing the Innocent Blood of Our Sons and Daughters: Psalm 106*

In 2008 Piper used Psalm 106 to show four parallels between child sacrifice and abortion: (1) It is “sacrifice” (v. 37)—the giving up of something valuable to get something better. (2) It is “sons and daughters” who are being sacrificed (v. 37)—sexually different, and members of a family. (3) The sacrifice involves “innocent blood” (v. 38)—these little ones do not deserve to be mistreated by fellow human beings. (4) This innocent blood is sacrificed to demons and idols (vv. 37–38). As Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 10:19–20, idolatry involves sacrificing to demons. The demons receive tribute when our innocent children are sacrificed for a greater “good.”

Piper then turns to the “amazing grace” of verses 44–45:

Nevertheless [that is, in spite of sacrificing their children to demons], he  
     looked upon their distress,  
     when he heard their cry.  
 For their sake he remembered his covenant,  
     and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

This is where we get the strength to stand up and make a difference in the cause of abortion, for this is what Jesus Christ came to achieve for all who will receive it.

**Lessons for Pro-Life Pastors**

In this final section I want to suggest some lessons that pastors can learn from Piper’s pro-life preaching. I’ll continue quoting from Piper’s sermons to make these points.

*Insist That Abortion Is Mainly about God*

In my summary of Piper’s 1998 sermon, above, I listed his four main points about why abortion is about God. But his explanation is worth quoting at length: “Abortion is mainly about God. Abortion is about God, the Creator of the universe, the Giver and Sustainer of all life, the Judge of the living and the dead, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the Redeemer and Forgiver of all who trust him. Abortion is about

God.” Piper continues by stating that leaving God out of the picture trivializes abortion.

All things are trivial without God. God is the ultimate reality over the universe. All other reality is derivative and dependent and has no ultimate meaning at all without reference to God the ultimate reality. In him we live and move and have our being. If we leave him out of account, we know nothing of any lasting significance about ourselves or the world. Therefore the message that I have to give is that abortion is about God. And therefore it is not trivial. . . . The most important things to say about abortion are how it relates to God and how God relates to it.

In all of our labors to protect the unborn, let us remember that this issue—like all others—must be done to his glory, recognizing that all things are from God, through God, and to God (1 Cor. 10:31; Rom. 11:36).

*Preach the Word*

Many pastors struggle to deal with abortion exegetically because there are no cases in Scripture of someone intentionally trying to kill a baby still in the womb. But Piper’s exegetical summaries demonstrate the various ways in which a preacher might unfold the biblical perspective on the value of life and the horror of abortion. In his 1991 sermon Piper provided a concise summary of the evidence regarding God’s view of the unborn and their rights:

Many Christians involved in abortion turn a deaf ear to the Bible when it says that the growing life in the womb is the unique creative work of God knitting together a being in his own image (Psalm 139:13; Job 31:13–15); or when it speaks of babies in the womb with the very same words as babies out of the womb (Genesis 25:22; Luke 1:41; cf. 2:12, 16; 18:15); or when it warns repeatedly against shedding innocent blood (Psalm 106:38); or when it calls again and again for the protection of the weakest and most vulnerable members of the community (Psalm 82:3–4); or when it says that God alone has the right to give and to take human life (Job 1:21).

Faithful preachers will not only expound what the Word says about the value of those within the womb, but also explain to their congregation what it means to be salt and light in a world that wants to destroy the weakest members of the human race.

*Do Not Shrink Back Because Some Will Accuse You of Being Political*

Some Christians are uncomfortable with churches becoming too engaged on the issue of abortion. Doesn’t it bring politics into the pulpit? Doesn’t



it make the church of Jesus Christ sound like the “Christian Right” in America? Doesn’t it confuse the two kingdoms of God (God’s rule in the secular realm and his rule in the spiritual realm)?

Piper believes that the “political action of pro-life people is good. God ordains that governments exist for the protection of [their] people from violence (Romans 13:3f.).”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he is a Christian pastor and not a politician, and this affects the way in which he understands his calling with regard to abortion:

My main job is not to unite believers and unbelievers behind worthwhile causes. Somebody should do this. But that is not my job. Some of you ought to be doing that with a deep sense of Christian calling. My job is to glorify Jesus Christ by calling his people to be distinctively Christian in the way they live their lives.<sup>5</sup>

In his 2003 sermon he said: “I am a Christian pastor who wants to be biblical, and gives not a rip for being Republican or Democrat. Such things mean almost nothing to me. But the glory and will and the rights of Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Judge of all men, mean everything to me.” Therefore Piper aims in his sermons and writing to present a distinctively Christian approach to the pro-life cause.

He also argues that obedient Christians cannot help but be political in some sense. In his 1993 sermon he said, “This message does not aim to be political. But I realize that being a Christian today is increasingly putting us at odds with political positions. Just being an obedient Christian is increasingly becoming a social, political, legal issue.”

Although Piper supports political action on behalf of the pro-life cause, he does not believe it is the highest calling. As he said in 1998, “For all the great legal work that needs to be done to protect human life, the greatest work that needs to be done is to spread a passion—a satisfaction—for the supremacy of God in all things. That’s our calling.”

### *Call Your People to Fast and Pray*

Piper calls for fasting and praying about abortion in *A Hunger for God*:

I appeal to you to seek the Lord with me concerning the place of fasting and prayer in breaking through the darkened mind that engulfs the modern world, in regard to abortion and a hundred other ills. This is not a call for a collective tantrum that screams at the bad people, “Give me back my

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<sup>4</sup>1995.

<sup>5</sup>1992.

country.” It is a call to aliens and exiles in the earth, whose citizenship is in heaven and who await the appearance of their King, to “do business” until he comes (Luke 19:13). And the great business of the Christian is to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31), and to pray that God’s name be hallowed and his kingdom come and his will be done in the earth (Matthew 6:9–10). And to yearn and work and pray and fast not only for the final revelation of the Son of Man, but in the meantime, for the demonstration of his Spirit and power in the reaching of every people, and the rescuing of the perishing, and the purifying of the church, and the putting right of as many wrongs as God will grant.<sup>6</sup>

We must fast and pray, and call others to do the same, for God to do the humanly impossible.

### *Work to Destroy the Root of Bad Ideas*

Abortion engagement can be a means of preevangelism, preparing the way for the gospel. Piper makes this point in his 1996 sermon:<sup>7</sup>

If millions of Christians keep sowing seeds of truth . . . there will be a leavening effect that will shape ideas and restrain bad behavior and lead people toward the light.

If the truth is a seamless fabric, then speaking the truth anywhere on any issue will strengthen the cause of truth everywhere on every issue. God only knows how often the gospel of Jesus Christ has been made more hearable because preconditions of truth have been laid down by a thousand prior influences of right speaking. This is part of the salt that preserves the mental life of society so that it can be touched more effectively by the gospel message, which is also salt.

Piper’s call here echoes J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), who wrote about the way in which false ideas are the greatest obstacle to the reception of the gospel in our culture:

It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power of God. That can overcome all lack of preparation, and the absence of that makes even the best preparation useless. But as a matter of fact God usually exerts that power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the

<sup>6</sup>John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 172.

<sup>7</sup>This sermon, “Challenging the Church and Culture with Truth,” was the last in a series on six “Fresh Initiatives” that were unveiled in 1995. It was not specifically devoted to abortion, though there is a key section of application, given that it was delivered on Sanctity of Life Sunday.

greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.<sup>8</sup>

We must preach the gospel, but we must also work to expose the poisonous root of godless ideology.

*Expose “Choice” as a Sham Argument That Logically Leads to Anarchy and Tyranny*

One recurring theme in Piper’s preaching is that the argument and language of “choice” in this debate is actually a sham. All choices, Piper argued in 1992, are limited by life:

It is hypocritical to speak as though choice were the untouchable absolute in this matter and then turn around and oppose choice in matters of gun-control and welfare support and affirmative action and minimum wage and dozens of other issues where so-called pro-choice people join the demand that people’s choices be limited to protect others. It’s a sham argument. All choices are limited by life.

The following year Piper made essentially the same point: “We submit to the right of government to limit our right to choose in hundreds of areas, especially when the good of others is at stake. We understand that governments exist to limit the right to choose and we submit to that.”

But there’s more going on here than simply that those who are pro-choice are hypocritical and inconsistent. Piper argues that pro-choicers elevate choice to such a degree that anarchy is the logical result. Here’s how he put it in his 1991 sermon: “There will be no law but the law of individual choice (=anarchy) if the foundation stone of life’s value is destroyed.”

Piper likes to illustrate this by referring to a fetal homicide law in Minnesota. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* once described the effect of the law in this way: it “makes it murder to kill an embryo or fetus intentionally, except in cases of abortion.” Preaching on this in 1996, Piper examined the argument and the connection to anarchy:

<sup>8</sup>J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” in *What Is Christianity and Other Addresses*, ed. Ned Stonehouse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 162–63.

Now what makes the difference here? Why is it murder to take the life of an embryo in one case and not murder in the case of abortion? Now watch this carefully, because it reveals the stunning implications of the pro-choice position.

The difference lies in the choice of the mother. If the mother chooses that her fetus live, it is murder to kill it. If she chooses for her fetus not to live, it is not murder to kill it.

In other words in our laws we have now made room for some killing to be justified not on the basis of the crimes of the one killed, but solely on the basis of another person's will or choice. If I choose for the embryo to be dead, it is legal to kill it. If I choose for the embryo to live, it is illegal to kill it. The effective criterion of what is legal or illegal, in this ultimate issue of life and death, is simply this: the will of the strong.

There is a name for this. We call it anarchy. It is the essence of rebellion against objective truth and against God. It takes us back to the Yale law professor who said that modern man is torn between wanting to discover what is right and wanting to create what is right—wanting to be ruled by truth and wanting to rule truth. The pro-choice worldview opts for creating what is right rather than discovering it, and ruling truth rather than being ruled by it.

When the pro-choice philosophy chants, “We will not lose the right to choose,” it says in effect that the act of choosing is unfettered and unlimited by objective reality and truth outside the act of choice. The act of choice is absolute in itself. It does not have to conform or submit to law, or human dignity, or God. It is the final statement of rebellion. It says, In my choice I create law. In my choice I create my own human dignity. In my choice I do not bow to God, I become god.

This is ultimately why a church that has a passion for the supremacy of God in all things must speak and act against the standard pro-choice worldview, and for the cause of the unborn.

Piper returned to the “might makes right” theme in his 2004 sermon:

In a world without God, the will of the strong creates (or nullifies) the personhood of the weak. How can there be a fetal homicide law that is not broken by abortion? Why is abortion not fetal homicide? There is one essential answer. In the case of the fetal homicide, the mother wants the baby. In the case of abortion, she does not. The will of the mother is god.

And the awesome thing is that we endow her will not just with sovereignty over her unborn baby, but with the authority to define it: If she wants it, it is a baby, a person. If she does not want it, it is not a baby, not a person.

In other words, in our laws we have now made room for some killing to be justified not on the basis of the rights or crimes of the one killed,

but decisively on the basis of the will, the desire, of a stronger person. The decisive criterion of personhood and non-personhood, what is right and wrong, what is legal and what is illegal, is the will of the strong. Might makes right. Might makes personhood. Might makes legal. This is the ultimate statement of anarchy. It is the essence of the original insurrection against God, and against objective truth and right and beauty.

Choice is a good value but a bad god. Pastors must help their congregations to see and explain the difference.

### *Give Hope to Sinners by Preaching the Gospel*

When we talk about abortion, we are talking about not just destructive ideas but a deadly practice, resulting in real people who are being killed every day. We are not just talking about sin, but talking to sinners—those who support the right to abortion, those who promote the practice of abortion, those who have aborted their own children, or those who have sat silently through the holocaust of the unborn. There are no innocent people in the pew. They must be informed, and they must be stirred to action. But faithful preaching also requires setting before sinners (that's all of us) the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here are a few examples of how John Piper has extended the gospel with regard to abortion. In 1989 he gave sinners hope that their past need not determine their future: “No one is cut off from Christ because of past sin—any past sin. What cuts a person off from Christ and the fellowship of his people is the endorsement of past sin. For the repentant there is forgiveness and cleansing and hope.” In 2002 Piper again reminded the guilty that Jesus stands ready to forgive the repentant: “Jesus offers you forgiveness this morning for aborting your child, or encouraging your girlfriend or your daughter to abort [her] child, or for working in an abortion clinic, or for being apathetic and doing nothing about this great evil and injustice in our society.” In 2004 he stressed that God is offering salvation in place of judgment:

I think God wants every woman, and every man, to take heart this morning that his offer to you is salvation, not judgment. The offspring of the woman, Jesus Christ, came into the world to save women who have dethroned God, taken his place, defined personhood as tissue, and willed the death of their own child. It can't be reversed, but it can be forgiven. That is why Christ died.

Every person listening to me now needs this salvation—men and women and children. Some only feel it more than others. And those who feel it

most are most fortunate. Turn to Christ for forgiveness and embrace him as your Lord and the Treasure of your life.



### Gratitude and Prayer

I thank God for John Piper’s faithful work in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and exploring the whole counsel of God in order to expose the dark work of abortion. May the Lord multiply this work, and may our pulpits across this land be filled with preachers who follow his passionate, prophetic, pro-life preaching. I close with a prayer to God from Piper, expressing our weakness but God’s power:

We are not able in ourselves to win this battle.

We are not able to change hearts or minds.

We are not able to change worldviews and transform culture and save 1.6 million children.

We are not able to reform the judiciary or embolden the legislature or mobilize the slumbering population.

We are not able to heal the endless wounds of godless ideologies and their bloody deeds.

But, O God, you are able!

And we turn from reliance on ourselves to you. And we cry out to you and plead that for the sake of your name, and for the sake of your glory, and for the advancement of your saving purpose in the world, and for the demonstration of your wisdom and your power and your authority over all things, and for the sway of your Truth and the relief of the poor and the helpless, act, O God. This much we hunger for the revelation of your power. With all our thinking and all our writing and all our doing, we pray and we fast. Come. Manifest your glory.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>9</sup>Piper, *A Hunger for God*, 171 (paragraph breaks added).

### Sermons by John Piper on Abortion (1987–2010)

This chapter was written before Piper's 2009 and 2010 sermons were delivered. They are included here to provide an up-to-date list at the time of publication.

- “Abortion: You Desire and Do Not Have, So You Kill,” James 4:2 (January 18, 1987)
- “Rescuing Unborn Children: Required and Right,” Proverbs 24:10–12 (January 15, 1989)
- “Kingdom Compassion and the Killing of Children,” Hebrews 10:32–35 (January 21, 1990)
- “Abortion: Shall We Listen to Men or God?” Acts 4:13–22 (January 27, 1991)
- “Exposing the Dark Work of Abortion,” Ephesians 5:11 (January 26, 1992)
- “Being Pro-Life Christians under a Pro-Choice President,” 1 Peter 2:13–17 (January 17, 1993)
- “What Is Man? Reflections on Abortion and Racial Reconciliation,” Psalm 8 (January 16, 1994)
- “Fasting for the Safety of the Little Ones,” Ezra 8:21–23 (January 22, 1995)
- “Challenging the Church and Culture with Truth” (January 21, 1996)
- “Be Strong and Fervent in Spirit in the Case of Truth and Life,” Romans 12:9–11 (January 19, 1997)
- “Where Does Child Killing Come From?” James 4:1–10 (January 25, 1998)
- “Visiting Orphans in a World of AIDS and Abortion,” James 1:26–27 (January 24, 1999)
- “Christ, Culture, and Abortion,” 1 Peter 2:9–17 (January 23, 2000)
- “God at Work in Every Womb,” Job 31:13–15 (January 21, 2001)
- “Father, Forgive, For We Know What We Are Doing,” Luke 23:32–38 (January 27, 2002)
- “The Darkness of Abortion and the Light of Truth,” Ephesians 5:1–16 (January 26, 2003)
- “Abortion and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” Genesis 3:1–13 (January 25, 2004)
- “Abortion, Race, Gender, and Christ,” Exodus 1:1–22 (January 23, 2005)
- “Love Your Unborn Neighbor,” Luke 10:25–37 (January 22, 2006)
- “When Is Abortion Racism?” Ephesians 5:16–17 (January 21, 2007)
- “Abortion: The Innocent Blood of Our Sons and Daughters,” Psalm 106:32–48 (January 27, 2008)
- “The Baby in My Womb Leaped for Joy” (January 25, 2009)
- “‘Born Blind for the Glory of God’: Eugenics by Abortion Is an Abomination to God,” John 9:1–7 (January 24, 2010)