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The Execution of Justice: The Real Meaning of Paul Hill

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“If you believe abortion is a lethal force, you should oppose the force and do what you have to do to stop it,” Hill insisted, even as he was strapped to the gurney awaiting the lethal injection that would put him to death. [see CNN coverage]

The facts of the case were never in doubt. Paul Hill premeditated the 1994 murders of Dr. John Britton and his bodyguard, James Barrett, outside a Pensacola, Florida abortion clinic. He awoke that morning determined to act, drove to the women’s clinic, and waited for the doctor to arrive. As he later recounted, “God answered my prayers, and the abortionist arrived two or three minutes prior to the police guard. When I lifted the shotgun, two men were sitting in the front seat of the parked truck When I finished shooting, I laid the shotgun at my feet and walked away with my hands held out at my sides, awaiting arrest.”

At his trial, Hill attempted to present a defense claiming that his actions had been justifiable homicide, since he had killed the two men in order to prevent the murder of unborn children. The judge refused to allow this argument in court, and Hill refused to present any other defense. He was sentenced to death and rejected any effort to appeal the verdict.

During the nine years he spent on Death Row, Hill offered a public defense of his actions by means of an internet website sponsored by a group called the “Army of God.” He said that his hope had been that “using the force necessary to defend the unborn gives credibility, urgency, and direction to the pro-life movement which it has lacked and which it needs in order to prevail.”

He accused the mainstream pro-life movement of failing to defend unborn life. “They are steady everywhere on the battlefield except where the battle currently rages,” he asserted. The pro-life movement has gone soft and weak, he accused, and the killing of an abortion doctor would invigorate the movement, call it to consistency, and lead to a great public movement against abortion. As he explained, “This would convict millions of people of their past neglect and spur many to future obedience.” Put simply, this did not happen.

What about his defense argument of justifiable homicide? Paul Hill was certainly correct to call abortion the murder of an innocent unborn human life. Those who argue otherwise must claim that the unborn baby is less than fully human. Of course, this is the logic of the pro-abortion movement and of the U. S. Supreme Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion. But the Christian conscience must not negotiate on the moral status and protection of all human life from conception until natural death.

Paul Hill’s monumental moral error came when he assumed the roles of judge, jury, and executioner in killing Dr. Britton and his escort. The Bible instructs Christians to “be subject to the governing authorities.” [Romans 13:1] Christians are not to take the law into their own hands. The killing of unborn human infants is murder—but so was Paul Hill’s killing of John Britton and James Barrett.

We are engaged in one of history's great battles for human life and human dignity. America has given itself over to a logic of sexual libertarianism and the Culture of Death. Abortion is a national scandal for which this nation will one day be judged. But America is not beyond hope and our political system offers an opportunity for correction by means of legal and political action. Christians have the responsibility to contend for life, to defend the unborn, and to work for the end of legal abortion, but we have no right to take up arms against the laws of our nation and its rightful authorities.

Paul Hill did not see it this way. "Any nation that legalizes abortion throws a blanket of fear and intimidation over all its citizens who rightly understand the issues involved," he claimed. "By legalizing abortion, the government has aimed its intimidating weaponry at any who dare to interfere with the slaughter."

Those who defend Hill's killing of the two men have compared him to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was executed for his part in a conspiracy against Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer did join the conspiracy to kill Hitler, but only after it was clear that no legal or political process could lead to the recovery of the nation and the end of Hitler's death machine. Even then, Bonhoeffer was not certain that his actions were fully right. He called for Christians to act humbly, acknowledging that moral questions on what he called "the borderland" could not be settled with absolute certainty. In the end, he believed that joining the conspiracy against Hitler was more right than wrong. When it failed, he paid for his complicity with his life.

Paul Hill is no Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He could not be described as humble. "I expect a great reward in heaven," Hill said. "I am looking forward to glory. I don't feel remorse." And America, for all of its many faults and failures, is not Nazi Germany. We do have a means of legal and political correction. It will take much hard work and require the difficult process of moral rearmament—but we have no right to declare the United States government beyond rescue and repair.

If Paul Hill's murder of an abortion doctor is justifiable homicide, what about the killing of a stem cell researcher who destroys a human embryo? The destruction of that embryo is also a form of murder, but it does not justify murder in response. Once Paul Hill's argument is accepted, moral anarchy will inevitably result.

Was Paul Hill really surprised when his murder failed to arouse the American conscience? Instead of giving the pro-life movement a great push forward, as he claimed to have hoped, he gravely injured the pro-life cause by making a abortionist on that day the victim of murder rather than a perpetrator.

The pro-life movement rightly condemned Paul Hill's vigilante justice. His execution should remind us that there is a right way and a wrong way to fight any battle—even the battle for human life.

