

So you're thinking of voting for a pro-choice candidate...

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I'm pro-life.

Or, put another way, I believe the sacred personhood of an individual begins before birth and continues throughout life, and I believe that sacred personhood is worth protecting, whether it's tucked inside a womb, waiting on death row, fleeing Syria in search of a home, or playing beneath the shadow of an American drone.

I've also voted for both pro-life and pro-choice candidates for political office, including Barack Obama in 2012 and 2008, and George W. Bush in 2004 and 2000.

So I speak as someone who has struggled with, and in some cases regretted, her decisions at the ballot box, and who recognizes no single political party boasts a consistent pro-life ethic, just as no single political party embodies the teachings of Jesus or the values of his Kingdom. (If you think this is the first year your vote fails to reflect Christian principles, I've got some bad news.) I speak too as someone acutely aware of the inconsistencies and uncertainties in my own pro-life convictions, which continue to be challenged and changed in the midst of lived experience.

While I've written in the past about feeling caught between the pro-life and pro-choice camps, I've never used my platform to endorse a presidential candidate. But as so many others have said, this year is different. Knowing many of my pro-life friends feel torn between voting for an unpopular but highly qualified pro-choice candidate in Hillary Clinton and an incompetent narcissist who poses a unique threat to our American democracy in Donald Trump, I'd like to make a proposal:

You should vote for Hillary Clinton.

And I'd like to suggest that voting for a pro-choice candidate in this election, or any election, need not overburden your conscience.

Here's why:

In the eight years since we've had a pro-choice president, the abortion rate in the U.S. has dropped to its lowest since 1973. I believe the best way to keep this trend going is not to simply make it harder for women to terminate unwanted pregnancies but to create a culture with fewer unwanted pregnancies to begin with. Data suggests progressive social policies that make healthcare and childcare more affordable, make contraception more accessible, alleviate poverty, and support a living wage do the most to create such a culture, while countries where abortion is simply illegal see no change in the abortion rate.

By focusing exclusively on the legal components of abortion while simultaneously opposing these family-friendly social policies, the Republican Party has managed to hold pro-life voters hostage with the promise of outlawing abortion, (which has yet to happen under any Republican administrations since *Roe v. Wade*), while actively working against the very policies that would lead to a significant reduction in unwanted pregnancies.

So even though I think abortion is morally wrong in most cases, and support more legal restrictions around it, I often vote for pro-choice candidates when I think their policies will do the most to address the health and economic concerns that drive women to get abortions in the first place. For me, it's not just about being pro-birth; it's about being pro-life. Every child deserves to live in a home and in a culture that welcomes them and can meet their basic needs. Every mother deserves the chance to thrive. Forcing millions of women to have

children they can't support, or driving them to Gosnell-style black market clinics, will not do. We have to work together—pro-life and pro-choice, Democrat and Republican, conservative Christian and progressive Christian—to create a culture of life that celebrates families and makes it easier to have and raise kids. This is the only way to make our efforts at rarifying abortion truly sustainable.

This year, Hillary Clinton has better policy proposals to help improve the lives of women, children, and families than Donald Trump, whose pro-life convictions are lukewarm at best, and whose mass deportation plan would rip hundreds of thousands of families apart, whose contempt for Latinos, Muslims, refugees and people with disabilities would further marginalized the “least of these” among us, and whose support for torture and targeting civilians in war call into question whether Christians who support him are truly pro-life or simply anti-abortion.

(It should be noted that Gary Johnson, whose name I hear a lot from evangelical voters, is also pro-choice. For my thoughts on voting third party, see the comment section below. And for a similar take on all this, but from the perspective of a pro-life activist with special needs kids, be sure to read Shannon Dingle's post, “I'm pro-life. And I'm voting for Hillary. Here's why.” It's excellent.)

Those are my views in summary, but I'd like to unpack them in four main points:

First, voting pro-choice is not the same as voting for abortion.

Regarding the 2016 election, the Washington Post recently declared that “for evangelicals, the question has become: which is a worse sin, abortion or racism?” While the people quoted within the article offer far more nuanced perspectives, the headline betrays a common but reductive sentiment—that people who vote for pro-choice candidates are voting for abortions. I can't tell you the number of times I've been called a “baby killer” by conservative Christians, some of whom routinely sent me images of mutilated fetuses during my pregnancy, which is no way to treat any woman, regardless of her views on abortion.

But characterizing all pro-choice voters as pro-abortion is inaccurate and unfair. In fact, a majority of Americans (56%) say abortion should be legal in most cases, even though nearly half (49%) believe it is immoral. Even those numbers don't tell the whole story. While it would be easier to debate one another if reproductive issues fell neatly into black-and-white categories of right and wrong, good and evil, most of us recognize this is simply not the case. The fact that a woman's body naturally rejects dozens of fertilized eggs in her lifetime raises questions about where we draw the line regarding the personhood of a zygote. Do we count all those “natural abortions” as deaths? When does personhood begin—at fertilization? implantation? the presence of brainwaves? the second trimester? There is disagreement among Christians about this, (and historically, even among evangelicals), so is it really my place, or the government's job, to impose my beliefs on people of all faiths and convictions? If abortion is criminalized, should every miscarriage be investigated by police? Should in vitro fertilization be outlawed? Most of us would question whether this couple should have been forced to deliver their stillborn baby, or this woman told by her insurance company that terminating a desperately wanted but unviable pregnancy counted as an abortion. Given the complex nature of these and other issues, the degree to which the government should make decisions on behalf of women and families regarding pregnancy is, and should be, debatable.

I think it's safe to say that few people who vote for Hillary Clinton this year will do so because they want the abortion rate to go up. Every person I've spoken with personally, whether pro-life or pro-choice or somewhere in between, wants to see abortions reduced. That said, I'm concerned by efforts from some in the democratic party to move beyond the “safe, legal, and rare” posture on abortion to one that treats it as just another routine health procedure. (The recent “comedians in cars getting abortions” sketch is a troubling reflection of this trend.) I intend to speak out about this, and other concerning changes to the democratic platform, and would encourage other pro-life progressives to do the same.

Second, criminalizing abortion won't necessarily reduce abortions.

Recent data published by The Lancet journal shows that countries where abortion is illegal or heavily restricted—mainly in Africa and Latin America— don't have lower abortion rates than the rest of the world. In those countries, the rate is 37 abortions per 1,000 women, compared to 34 per 1,000 in countries where it is legal. In fact in Latin America, a region with highly restrictive abortion laws, one in three pregnancies (32%) ended in abortion in 2010--2014, higher than any other region.

This data underscores an important reality: that women will continue to seek out abortions even if they are illegal. This was certainly true in the U.S. before *Roe v. Wade*, and remains true for women who resort to dangerous and clandestine methods of terminating pregnancies in countries where it is illegal.

Still, we have to be careful of comparing apples to oranges when it comes to the statistics. Most of the countries where abortion is illegal also suffer from widespread poverty and limited access to contraception—huge drivers in the abortion rate. In addition, some surveys show that here in the U.S., states with more abortion restrictions do in fact have lower abortion rates, suggesting legal changes may indeed have some effect.

So, with those considerations in mind, I think it's safer to say that while legal restrictions on abortion might put a dent in the abortion rate, they won't put an end to abortion as we know it, and, most importantly, they won't do a thing to alter the number of unwanted pregnancies. Rather than waiting around for a hypothetical and unlikely legal scenario to play out, our efforts would be better spent working to decrease the number of unwanted pregnancies using the tools we already have...which brings me to my next point.

Third, Pro-life advocates should support, rather than oppose, efforts to help low-income families care for their children.

When President Obama recently announced an initiative aimed at improving the distribution of free or low-cost diapers to poor families struggling to care for their babies, many conservatives sneered, calling it the ultimate example of a “nanny state.”

It was frustrating to see an idea that was so obviously pro-life and pro-family get lampooned by the very people who say they want millions of low-income women to have millions more babies. I know I'm not the only one who gets red faced whenever a self-proclaimed pro-life politician or pastor belittles and demeans “welfare queens” and “moocher moms,” seemingly unaware of the hypocrisy of forcing women to have children they can't afford while simultaneously dismantling the social safety net helps them care for those children.

The fact is, most women who choose to have abortions do so because they feel they cannot manage the financial burden of carrying out the pregnancy and raising another child. The latest survey from Guttmacher found that 49% of abortion patients in 2014 had incomes of less than 100% of the federal poverty level (\$11,670 per year) and 26% had incomes of 100-199% of the federal poverty level. The survey reports, “the reasons patients gave for having an abortion underscored their understanding of the responsibilities of parenthood and family life. The three most common reasons—each cited by three-fourths of patients—were concern for or responsibility to other individuals; the inability to afford a child; and the belief that having a baby would interfere with work, school or the ability to care for dependents.”

Imagine you're a mother of two working 40 hours a week at a minimum wage job in food service, while your husband hunts for a job. (At \$7.25 per hour, that works out to \$15,080 a year.) Childcare takes about 30 percent of those earnings, rent groceries and other bills the rest. Now imagine that, like a third of American workers, you don't get any paid sick days, so every time one of your children gets an ear infection or catches the flu, your pay is docked for taking time off to care for them. Imagine too that you can barely afford your health insurance, much less days off for doctor visits, and your employer doesn't offer any paid maternity leave.

Now imagine you get pregnant...

This is the reality faced by millions of women who consider abortions each year, and the sad irony is the same pro-life politicians who want to force them to have their babies typically oppose raising the minimum wage, ensuring paid sick leave and parental leave for all American workers, and protecting the 20 million people who can finally afford health insurance thanks to the Affordable Care Act. They also tend to oppose additional funding for successful programs like WIC, which provides food assistance to low-income pregnant and postpartum women and their children.

Creating a culture of life isn't just about standing in a picket line with a "Choose Life" sign. It's about seriously addressing the problem of income inequality in this country so that no woman has to choose between getting an abortion or raising her child in poverty. It means celebrating parenthood by making America the most generous country in the developed world when it comes to maternity and paternity leave, not the least generous, and it means working together on efforts to reduce the costs of food, diapers, childcare, pediatrician visits, college tuition, adoption, and resources for special needs children.

Like her or not, agree with her or not, Hillary Clinton has devoted much of her life to tackling these very issues, and she's made them a centerpiece of her campaign. (Check out Shannon's post for more on this.) Some of Clinton's plans include guaranteeing 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave, expanding early childhood education, capping childcare expenses at 10 percent of a household's income, helping the families of children with autism and other special needs get access to more resources and support, and insuring more families through the Affordable Care Act. In the past, she has worked with Republicans on legislation that reformed the foster care system and encouraged more adoptions, issues I know matter to many pro-life evangelicals who advocate on behalf of adoption and open their homes to children.

Sometimes I think it's easier for us to talk about "saving millions of babies" than it is to work at creating a culture that can sustainably welcome those babies as they grow into children and adults. Speaking in abstract terms about blank, amorphous "innocent lives" keeps us from confronting the reality that if most of these children are born at or near the poverty line, then the lives we are saving are more likely to be troubled ones, and if nothing changes, those lives will get caught in vicious cycles powered by poverty and systemic racism. If today's "innocent human life" is tomorrow's "welfare queen," you might want to consider whether your convictions are truly pro-life or simply pro-birth. Will your fight for life continue when those babies grow up and the lives we're talking about are kids stuck in the foster care system or in failing schools, teenagers struggling with addiction, immigrants looking for work, or young black men worrying that a traffic stop might end their lives?

Thinking holistically about pro-life values means thinking beyond the labor and delivery unit. If we don't address income inequality in this country, and if we don't support robust plans to improve healthcare and education, we simply can't sustain the very lives we're advocating be protected.

Fourth, (and I've made this point so often before I won't belabor it), if we want to dramatically reduce the abortion rate in this country, we must support efforts to make contraception more accessible and affordable.

Study after study after study after study shows this to be true.

Not only would improved access to contraception impact the abortion rate in the U.S., it would dramatically reduce maternal and infant deaths around the world. There are more than 220 million women in developing countries who don't want to get pregnant, but who lack access to family planning information and contraceptives. Every year, nearly 300,000 of them will die during pregnancy or from complications giving

birth, and many more will be permanently disabled. More than 2.6 million babies will be stillborn, and another 2.9 million will die before they are a month old.

As Melinda Gates explains in here, giving women the opportunity to time their pregnancies and space out their children through effective, low-cost contraception is key to turning these numbers around. Some estimate it could save as many as 2 million children every year, and dramatically curb maternal mortality rates.

If that isn't pro-life, I don't know what is.

Finally, a word to evangelicals about Donald Trump...

According to Pew Research Center, white evangelical Christians overwhelmingly support Donald Trump for president. A solid 78 percent plan to vote for him. While a few prominent evangelical leaders have spoken out against Trump's character and policies, others have endorsed him as evangelical's best bet for retaining power and influence over the culture. Some evangelicals have gone so far as to declare Trump "born again," even though he says he has no need for God's forgiveness.

If these numbers hold, and on election night a reporter looks into a camera and says evangelical Christians proved Trump's most faithful supporters, the reputation of the evangelical movement will be tied to Trump for years to come. This will put evangelicals in the difficult position of having to explain...

- how you can claim God's love for kids with special needs while supporting a man who openly mocks people with disabilities,
- how you can oppose sexual immorality while shrugging off the transgressions of a strip club owner who brags about his sexual exploits and extramarital affairs and who publicly sexualized both of his daughters,
- how you can make grand announcements about your efforts to move toward racial reconciliation while working to elect as president a man people in his own party acknowledge is racist, and who is widely supported by white supremacist groups,
- how you can appeal to "religious liberty" to justify denying wedding cakes to gay and lesbian couples without challenging a candidate who wants to increase surveillance of Muslim neighborhoods, create a database of Muslim citizens, and ban Muslims from visiting the U.S., which would suggest the only "religious liberty" you want to protect is your own,
- how you can claim your conservative views on women's roles aren't anti-woman while supporting a misogynist who says he likes to have a "young and beautiful piece of ass" on his arm, calls women "bimbos" and "fat pigs," and distributed unflattering pictures of a political opponent's wife as a campaign tactic,
- how you can claim it's unfair to characterize evangelicals as anti-intellectual while following a man who believes conspiracy theories from the National Enquirer, thinks climate change is a hoax, says vaccines cause autism, and displays such breathtaking ignorance regarding the state of the world and foreign policy that no former presidents will endorse him and multiple generals, foreign policy experts, editorial boards, and heads of state have denounced him as dangerously uninformed,
- how you can quote Bible verses about "welcoming the stranger" while supporting a candidate who wants to turn away desperate refugee families,
- how you can call yourself "family values" voters while supporting Trump's mass deportation, which would orphan or displace 4.5 million children who are U.S. citizens but who have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant,

- how you can claim it's a "morally good choice" to elect a president who wants to bring back waterboarding and other forms of torture, who wants to target the families of terrorists because "that's what they do to us," and who admires the tactics of Vladimir Putin and Saddam Hussein

As Richard Rohr said, "the evangelical support of Trump will be an indictment against its validity as a Christian movement for generations to come."

Evangelicals, I implore you: Don't support Donald Trump. Don't support a racist demagogue who can't even quote a single Bible verse properly and who takes to Twitter to viciously insult everyone he disagrees with. He's playing you. Whatever promises he's made regarding Supreme Court appointments should be weighed against a pattern of lies and failure to follow-through (hello, tax returns?).

Donald Trump is not your pro-life savior.

Of course, neither is Hillary Clinton.

But Clinton is far better positioned to keep the abortion rate at the record low it saw under President Obama while the Republican Party works for the next four years to produce the kind of candidate the people of this country deserve.