

“NO DIGA MENTIRAS”:
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF HAROLD O. J. BROWN IN THE
EMERGENCE OF THE EVANGELICAL PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF THEOLOGY

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ERSKINE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DUE WEST, SC

APRIL 4, 2015

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ABSTRACT

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by
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April 2015
151 pages

This thesis examines the contribution of Harold O. J. Brown (1933-2007) to the emergence of the evangelical pro-life movement in the years immediately following the U. S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision. Along with Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, Brown sought through writings and organized action to call evangelicals into social and political engagement on behalf of the unborn in the mid-to-late 1970's. Existing scholarship either passes over the contributions of these three men or, in acknowledging their contributions, pays far more attention to Schaeffer and to Koop than to Brown. By attending to Brown's life, writings, and activism, this thesis aims to display the degree to which Brown was both a pioneering voice of evangelical protest to *Roe v. Wade* and a substantial catalyst of evangelical activism on behalf of the unborn. In light of the evidence, the thesis argues that no narrative of the emergence of the evangelical pro-life movement can afford to overlook Brown's role and contribution.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Michael and Nancy Miller, who have encouraged me in every major endeavor I've undertaken in life. Without their influence and support I would not have gone to seminary straight out of college. Because they enabled and even encouraged me to do so, I was able to meet an amazing man and scholar who was on the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte) for just a few short years, the man I was privileged to know as "Joe".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am immeasurably indebted to several people whose contributions and made this thesis possible, including:

- Grace Brown, who suggested in my hearing almost three years ago that “someone should write a masters thesis on Joe’s life,” and who then gave me (and my voice recorder) hours of her time answering questions about her late husband and their remarkable life together, and later read the full manuscript with great care;
- my thesis advisor, Dr. Dale Johnson, whose personal knowledge of Brown and unfailing passion for my topic encouraged me throughout the whole course of this project;
- the several persons whom I interviewed (in addition to Grace Brown) in person or by phone, or with whom I corresponded by email, including (in the order in which they were contacted) Dr. Ronald Wells, Dr. Curt Young, Mrs. Melinda Delahoyde, Dr. Grant Wacker, Dr. Dominic Aquila, M. Jean-Marc Berthoud, Mr. Frank Schaeffer, Dr. Michael Sleasman, Dr. Douglas Sweeney, Dr. John Kilner, Dr. William Edgar, Dr. Jerram Barrs, and Dr. Robert Case;

- and the staff at the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College who helped me research the collections of *Christianity Today* over the course of two days this past July.

Additionally, one of the things Brown most impressed on his students was the value of friendship. There are several men I now claim as friends because Brown brought us together. They know who they are, and I am grateful for the encouragement and insight they provided me throughout this work. As Joe taught us to sing, *Vive la compagnie!*

A special thanks is owed to my congregation, the Greenville Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (Greenville, SC), which granted me a timely pastoral sabbatical this spring, on account of which I was able to spend almost six weeks giving my full attention to the writing of this thesis. The work is far better than it would have been without this uninterrupted time. I am truly humbled by the sacrifice that they (and especially the staff and elders) made on my behalf.

Lastly, I am thankful to my wife, Lindsay. With these 150 pages finally completed, I now know from experience why writers so frequently conclude their “acknowledgements” by saying the work would not have been possible without the help, patience, and support of their wives. That is certainly true of this work. I am sorry that Lindsay was never able to meet Joe, but I am equally as sorry that Joe was never able to meet Lindsay.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“... both sides in the abortion debate have lived for so long
not by banners alone but by myths as well.”

- Marvin Olasky¹

In a landmark ruling on January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court struck down all existing state bans against abortion, thus legalizing abortion in all fifty states during the first, second, and even third (with minimal restrictions) trimesters of pregnancy. A sweeping decision that exceeded even the expectations of the plaintiff's counsel (as we shall see), *Roe v. Wade* would prove too liberal to be imitated by the highest courts in Germany and France in similar cases that soon followed (as we shall also see). But in America, the decision meant that opponents of abortion found themselves, overnight, on the wrong side of the law.

The majority opinion, written by Justice Henry Blackmun, rested on three major interpretive moves. First, it explicitly dismissed the longstanding foundation of Western medical ethics, the Hippocratic Oath, on the basis that Christianity had prejudicially favored its acceptance. Second, it expanded and enshrined a legal “right

¹ Marvin Olasky, *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992), 283.

Koop, Schaeffer, Graham, and the CAC

Though C. Everett Koop claims he “was not, as is often reported, one of the founders of the Christian Action Council,” he admits that he “was in on the organization from its earliest days.”⁵ Koop and Brown met in 1975 at a meeting in New Orleans, where both were speaking to the same issue (Koop was repeating his speech, first given at Wheaton in 1973, predicting ten evil consequences that would come from abortion). In New Orleans, Koop and Brown “talked about the need to arouse America’s sleeping Protestants to the self-imposed evil and proposed organizing a group to do this.”⁶ Koop’s high profile gave the CAC wider name recognition, and as seed money from the Catholic businessmen began to run dry, Dr. Koop kept the operation financially afloat.⁷ As for Schaeffer, his relationship to Brown having been well established by this point, we simply note that both he and his wife Edith allowed their names to be used in connection with the CAC as official “council members”. Significantly, this was the one and only such organization that they endorsed in this way. For reasons that will be significant later, we note that this was the summer of 1975.

Brown entertained hopes that Billy Graham, by far the most influential figure in American evangelicalism at the time, would lend his name to the organization as Koop and Schaeffer had done. After all, Brown’s books carried Graham’s endorsements, and Graham stepped up to provide meeting space in Montreat, NC,

⁵ Koop, *Koop: The Memoir*, 340.

⁶ Brown, “No Diga Mentiras,” *The Religion & Society Report* (October / November 2006), 5.

⁷ Robert Case, interview with author, March 30, 2015.

for the brainstorming session that gave rise to the CAC. To that extent, Stephen P. Miller is correct when he claims that “Graham... helped to found a pioneering Protestant antiabortion organization, the Christian Action Council.”⁸ However, when it came time to be “in” or “out”, Graham backed away, much to Brown’s lingering dismay. Brown suspected that Graham’s attorney, who also worked with the ACLU, scared Graham and his board away from endorsing the CAC (advising that such stated opposition to a Supreme Court decision could threaten the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s tax-exempt status).⁹ Grant Wacker, professor at Duke Divinity School and Graham’s recent biographer, believes that Graham’s reticence was in keeping with his general character.¹⁰ According to Wacker, Graham had a history of providing initial support to causes like the CAC, but stopping with that. Wacker cites Graham’s involvement with “Protestants Against Kennedy” in 1960, which he initially helped but from which he then retreated (for which Norman Vincent Peale reportedly never forgave him). Similarly, in 1973 Graham refused to sign the “Declaration of Social Concerns”, even though he said he agreed with “almost everything in it” (though never clarified what he meant by “almost”). In Wacker’s words, “Graham dipped his toes in a lot of ponds, but when it came time to take a bath, he wouldn’t do it.”¹¹ However, Wacker also recalls, “Graham did have a Jewish attorney with the ACLU. He was very proud of that—it showed he could

⁸ Stephen P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 205.

⁹ Dale Johnson, conversations with the author, 2012-2013.

¹⁰ Grant Wacker, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014).

¹¹ Grant Wacker, interview with author, November 1, 2013.

reach across lines.”¹² In Brown’s mind, Graham’s relegating abortion to a non-essential in his ministry meant that Graham’s Gospel, though accurate in what it did proclaim, was truncated by virtue of what it did not proclaim.¹³

Lastly, early supporters of the CAC included the Rev. Jesse Jackson.¹⁴ Though he changed his position on abortion years later, Jackson originally maintained in that abortion, disproportionately affecting the African Americans community, was a method of “black genocide”.

Early Responses to the CAC

Based out of a small office in Washington D.C. (Melinda Delahoyde remembers planning sessions with members seated on the floor using a pullout sofa for a table), the CAC aimed to lobby legislators on Capital Hill through personal contacts and through a regular newsletter, called Action Line. Robert Case, serving as the first Executive Director for the organization (1976-1977), remembers how lobbying by evangelicals was unheard of at the time:

I remember once, Charles Grassley was a congressman, and I went to make a courtesy call as I did to all the conservatives. I waited outside Grassley’s office – told him I was from the Christian Action Council. I waited half an hour. Finally I said to an aid, “I can mobilize Grassley’s evangelicals in his voting district, I’m not with the National Council of Churches,” and I got right in! Once they realized I was an evangelical and not with the National Council of Churches, they would talk to me. [Formerly] the only people who would try to talk to these guys were from the NCC, so they weren’t used to

¹² Grant Wacker, interview with author, November 1, 2013.

¹³ See p. 110, footnote 77.

¹⁴ Jackson signed a statement issued by the Christian Action Council in late 1975 calling for a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. See “Protestant Leaders Back Abortion Plan,” *The Telegraph Herald* (Dubuque, Iowa), November 27, 1975.

Thus we beheld his glory, but in its very revelation it was hidden, and so it is with the best of his servants, who, taught in his school and following his example, tend to spend their lives giving away what “great” men have so often learned to keep for themselves.

This may explain why Brown, so well known and esteemed by the many who knew him personally, was not more known to the wider public—he never invested in being known. Rather, he spent his life giving away his prodigious talents on behalf of the thousands, if not millions, of those who “could not speak for themselves,” but had Harold O. J. Brown speaking for them.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

We conclude by returning to our original question: how did the pro-life position come to be so embedded in the current evangelical identity that few today remember the initial indifference of the evangelicals to *Roe v. Wade*? Our research leads us to recognize the utter insufficiency of the Balmer thesis, and to recognize further that the Martin-Carlson thesis is on the right track. Three figures – Brown, Koop, and Schaeffer - forged, and then carried, the mantle of the nascent evangelical pro-life movement. In many discernable ways, their contributions were interdependent, forming a braid of intellectual clarity (Brown), credibility (Koop), and creativity (Schaeffer) that reconnected American evangelicals to the pro-life Christian tradition. Consequently, for any narrative about the entrance of evangelicals into the pro-life movement after *Roe v. Wade* to be complete, it must

attend not only to the substantial contributions of Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, but also to the pivotal contribution of Harold O. J. Brown.

In terms of the development of the evangelical pro-life movement from 1973-1979, the archived letters and papers of Koop and Schaeffer have yet to be researched. The letters of William F. Buckley would likely reveal correspondence with Brown. Lastly, research into Brown's posture towards Reagan – at first supportive, then critical after Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor to the court – may demonstrate in Brown's life an example of the uncompromising "watchman-witness" called for in his writings.

For those interested in Brown's writings beyond the abortion issue, several well-developed topics invite further investigation. Critiques and reflections on Roman Catholicism mark Brown's career from articles in the 1960's through his work with *ECT* in the 1990's. Within the field of American evangelicalism, his defense of inerrancy (and cautions against defending inerrancy *exclusively*) await retrieval. Brown's substantial reflections on American history (being the work of a Harvard-trained historian) hold the prospect of contributing to the "Christian America" discussion (Brown's views are much closer to those of Hatch, Marsden, and Noll, than to that of Schaeffer, of whom he is critical on this point). Lastly, his writings in the field of bioethics, which expand far beyond the issue of abortion, invite investigation.

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