

LIFE FIRST OF ALL: WHY DEFENSE OF LIFE SHOULD BE THE TOUCHSTONE OF ACTIVISM

It is Christmas Day, 2008. On this day, Christians the world over celebrate the greatest event of the sending of life into the world which that world has ever known. It is therefore perhaps especially appropriate to think about the promotion and defense of life on this day.

For at least two or three decades, Bible-believing Christians in the United States and Canada overwhelmingly made opposition to abortion their defining political stance. Whatever else a politician did with which they either agreed or disagreed, their fundamental loyalty was primarily to be won by working toward the outlawing of abortion - or at least, appearing to do so.

Shifting Priorities

Somewhere along the way, however, something changed over the course of the past decade.

Christians began to argue that other issues were at least as important, if not moreso. More and more Christians began to vote in terms of “economic justice.” In the USA, increasing numbers of Christians have begun to vote in terms of how the candidate addresses issues such as the environment and war.

This development is no doubt due in large part to a slowly increasing awareness that the kingdom of God embraces the whole of life, and not simply a part. There is no question that living faithfully as Christians requires a commitment with regard to how we relate to others (including economically) and to our environment.

No doubt, there is also that other frustrating factor: After years of voting for ostensibly anti-abortion presidents, Christians in the United States see little if any apparent progress on the federal level. It is understandable that if those who promise to be “pro-life” accomplish virtually nothing against the long cold march of abortion, some Christians begin to reason that one may as well differentiate between candidates on a different basis.

Yet while I find that position understandable, I do not concur. In the case of Americans, there have indeed been small victories, and there has been at least the opportunity to begin to rebuild a Supreme Court that is less revisionist, less activist and thus more Constitutionally bound, and

hence opposed to *Roe vs. Wade*, the landmark 1973 Court decision that legalized abortion in the USA.

These efforts, as frustratingly piecemeal as they have been, have not entirely been for naught; the results have simply not been as visible and immediate as we could wish. (One could compare this to the Cold War, which ended with “an overnight sensation” - but only because of decades of patience and hard work by a lot of different people.)

That work, however, stands to be undone to a large degree, in part because many Christians have just voted for the most pro-abortion president in the history of the United States. While in Illinois leadership, Obama was instrumental in ensuring the murder of babies who survived abortions, and he has gone on record as intending to sign the so-called Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA) into law almost immediately - an abominable piece of legislation aimed at annihilating laws defending life and freedom of conscience for those who oppose abortion, root and branch.

Thankfully, however, it appears that the only Supreme Court justices Obama is likely to be called upon to replace will be existing pro-abortion ones, so he probably won't be able to push the makeup of the court back further toward the Left. That also nonetheless means that he will likely be able to forestall the decisive shift in the balance of power within the Court that would potentially bring a reversal within grasp. This could push the legal case back for decades, so we can pray that Obama is unable to replace more than at most one justice during his term (and pray that he doesn't get more than one term).

In Canada, we have no legal protection for the unborn. It is open season. With that context, it is not surprising that the broader attitude toward life is weakening, and the pro-euthanasia forces have gained a tremendous amount of ground - to the degree that in many places, even if euthanizers are arrested, juries will not convict. The desensitization is well underway.

This has happened, not because we have had prime ministers who have failed the pro-life movement, but because we have had no pro-life prime ministers at all for some decades. The strongest statement that Stephen Harper has ever made is that he opposes abortions being paid for by public funds, but he doesn't think abortion itself ought to be illegal. Moreover, Harper has made it clear that he has no intention of allowing his party to raise the issue, even though many of his MPs are emphatically pro-life.

While this situation is indeed grim, we must recognize (1) that we are in a war - and every war is grim; and (2) that through our service, we *can* save lives both now and in the future.

But the question remains: Is this really the main sociopolitical front to which we ought to be devoting our energies?

Why Abortion Should Be Our Priority Issue

It is my position that of all the issues which face us - and there are many - the defense of life is the most central and critical of them. We cannot trade off this issue in favour of others, for several reasons.

1. When we are dealing with abortion, we are dealing with *murder*. It is frankly the most heinous crime against neighbour which has been decriminalized in our society. The very seriousness of this issue is sufficient to keep it at the top of the list.
2. Abortion is the easiest touchstone for Bible-believing Christians, and indeed other Christians, to agree on. It requires no complex reasoning which depends on a great deal of theological or hermeneutical sophistication.
3. While abortion can be mitigated by way of private initiatives, it remains the case that it is the matter which harms the most victims and in the most serious way through its legality. That implies that it should be number one on the sociopolitical agenda of Christians.

Not everyone will agree with every rationale provided above, so let me expand a bit.

With regard to our *first* point, some Christians - even ones not ordinarily pacifist - will say that the recent military actions in the Middle East are murderous, and therefore opposition to such should be at least as high on the believer's agenda as is abortion.

I respond: (a) Abortion is *always* and in *every case* an *objective, intentional evil* against *innocent and helpless* victims, whereas most Christians will acknowledge that military action is at least sometimes just; and (b) In every war, there are issues behind the scenes which for security reasons the public never knows, and yet such knowledge may in some cases be ample to have us

reconsider our opposition to that war as immoral. This does not mean that Christians ought not think about the morality of the war in Iraq; it does mean, however, that the matter is not nearly as clearcut as is the case with abortion.

With regard to our *second* point, it is true that on occasion, even some professing evangelicals have denied that Scripture addresses the issue of abortion. While that is so, it is difficult to think of a serious, “live” sociopolitical issue where one would be *more* likely to achieve agreement. Once arriving at that point of “faith reassessment,” professing Christians tend to have less and less in common with historic Christianity on ethical issues, and are thus less likely to agree on what would otherwise be relatively straightforward matters (e.g. homosexuality).

With regard to our *third* point, although there are certainly other social issues which ought to concern us, and although there are informal service initiatives by which we can address the evils of abortion and save lives (more on this momentarily), yet it is nonetheless true that *abortion’s legality causes more direct and serious harm than anything else* we can place on our sociopolitical agenda.

Compare this to other issues - say, *poverty*. Even assuming that we could all agree on a level of poverty that is shameful and needs to be addressed (i.e. are we going to define this according to some arbitrary “poverty line,” or by more serious symptoms such as the threat of starvation or something along those lines), yet it is also true that private and ecclesiastical initiatives have historically done a lot more good than government-administered ones. Moreover, “poverty” is not something subject to simple legislation or court action, although legislators and courts frequently attempt to ameliorate it.

Even beyond that, we will end up back at our (2) again: For it can be reasonably argued that although we are our brother’s keeper, using the *State* as the agency of welfare is not only counterproductive but downright immoral. That is to say, it is relatively easy for most Christians to agree that abortion should be illegal; it is much less self-evident that the problem of poverty ought to find redress through government-enforced wealth redistribution.

In our view, the sheer *seriousness* of the attack on life which abortion represents qualifies it as our number one task to face. The ecumenical agreement possible fortifies this, and the fact that

many other ethical issues are more effectively addressed “from the ground” adds to the cumulative argument that our more directly political agenda should be *life first of all*.

Acting in Service of Life

That said, we do not at all mean to imply that abortion is simply a political or legal issue, or that it should be addressed primarily (much less *only*) by way of political means. To the contrary, we have various ways in which we can be reducing the number of abortions today.

Pregnancy Centers

As always, authority comes through service. Many women feel trapped by pregnancy, because they feel abandoned in terms of both emotional and financial support. Pregnancy centers which provide, not only sound counselling and Christian love, but also means by which single mothers (in particular) can be maintained in order to save the lives of their babies - these sorts of services have not only been an effective means for saving unborn children, but also ultimately of incorporating young women into loving church communities.

Education

Another area of service is in the basic matter of *education*. Many people, brainwashed in government schools and surrounded by the assumptions of the culture of death, have simply not been confronted with what ought to be plain. At the same time, given technological advances, we have unprecedented ability to depict the clear humanity of the unborn by way of various kinds of imaging. While there will always be those who harden their hearts, this form of education can nonetheless be an excellent tool for “bringing people around.” The truth is on our side, and we need to be confident in that.

Battling Euthanasia

We also must combat the desensitization that our society is now facing. When we take up the defense of life, we are not only taking up the battle against abortion; of necessity, we are also taking up the battle against related issues such as euthanasia. This battle is itself necessary and

worthwhile; and a correlative of this is that in fighting euthanasia, we will also be fighting abortion indirectly. For the mindset is one.

Although we live in a less ethnically-nationalistic culture than was post-World War I Germany, yet the notion that *certain lives are not worth living* is a parallel which poses a rising spectre that ought to motivate us. Moreover, experience in European countries where euthanasia has been introduced shows clearly enough that once the downgrade has begun, things only get worse: From an initial situation where only willing victims are killed, things progress to families making that decision - and finally, doctors acting on their own authority, deciding that it is best that a patient die.

A friend of mine has suggested that we need to start assembling “godfather” institutions that will protect and care for the aged if and when such a time comes that they can neither look after themselves nor speak for themselves. These acts of Christian love will have intrinsic value, and will also stand as witness against the desensitization that is engulfing our nations.

The Big Picture

Above all, we need to remember that all of our service for neighbour is first of all service for God and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means that while the prevention of murder and the love of neighbour are things good and necessary, true love of neighbour seeks the reconciliation which only the gospel can offer. While we don't need to be “preaching” constantly, let the gospel flavour all of our service in such a way that there is no question: We do this because of the grace of God in Christ - a grace which we want to share with all.

These are very preliminary thoughts, and others have done far more thinking (to say nothing of *doing*) than I have. But I trust that this will be a small stimulus as we seek to defend *life first of all*.

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