A FRAMEWORK FOR THE CHURCH’S OPPOSITION TO ABORTION

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A little over forty years ago, on January 22, 1973, abortion was legalized in America as a result of the *Roe v. Wade* decision of the United States Supreme Court. Since then, many have voiced their opposition to the decision and worked to overturn it.

Christians, in particular, wholeheartedly reject abortion, because it involves the murder of preborn children. The Church understands that all people, including infants in the womb, have been made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Thus, the Bible teaches that life begins at conception (Psalm 139 13-16; Jeremiah 1:4-5; Psalm 51:5; Luke 1:40-44)¹ and that harm to a preborn child is a crime which deserves punishment (Exodus 21:22-25).² John Frame is correct in stating, “There is nothing in Scripture that even remotely suggests that the unborn child is anything less than a human person from the moment of conception.”³ According to the Reformed Presbyterian (RP) Testimony:

Unborn children are living creatures in the image of God. From the moment of conception to birth they are objects of God’s providence as they are being prepared by Him for the responsibilities and privileges of postnatal life. Unborn children are to be treated as human persons in all decisions and actions involving them. Deliberately induced abortion, except possibly to save the mother’s life, is murder.⁴

**POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CLIMATE**

The impact of the 7-2 Supreme Court decision in 1973 cannot be understated. Against the wishes of many, seven Supreme Court justices set in motion a form of legalized murder that even the president of the United States was not able to stop. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan unambiguously declared his disdain for the *Roe v. Wade* outcome: “Our nation-wide policy of

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² Ibid., 58.
abortion-on-demand through all nine months of pregnancy was neither voted for by our people nor enacted by our legislatures – not a single state had such unrestricted abortion before the Supreme Court decreed it to be national policy.”\(^5\) It is commendable that Reagan publically vowed to protect the preborn and proclaimed “the unalienable personhood of every American, from the moment of conception until natural death.”\(^6\) Despite his attempts, *Roe v. Wade* resulted in an America where “developing fetuses are not accorded protection under [the Fifth Amendment of the constitution] – nor any other amendment – because they are not deemed to be persons, at least until the point of viability (able to survive outside the womb).”\(^7\)

During the intervening forty years since the *Roe v. Wade* ruling, the culture has in many ways become desensitized to the atrocity of abortion, even amid the ever-increasing display of depravity that abortionists have personified. Although *Roe v. Wade* was formulated upon and sold with regard to a “highly professional model of medical care,” abortion, as a business, “has evolved into a streamlined service industry.”\(^8\) Abortion advocates, in many ways, have successfully shifted attention from the preborn infant to the inconvenienced mother by presenting abortion as a “decision.”\(^9\) Unfortunately, countless mothers have made selfish “decisions” to dishonor God by extinguishing the life of another. Randy Alcorn wrote, “the combined American casualties of the Revolutionary War, Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War 1, World War 2, Korean War, and the Vietnam War were one and a half million people. This was roughly the same number of children being killed by abortion in America every year.”\(^10\)

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\(^7\) Sproul, *Abortion*, 47.
\(^10\) Randy C. Alcorn, *Is Rescuing Right?: Breaking the Law to Save the Unborn* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 19.
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

As Alcorn illustrated, the death toll of abortions is astounding. At a rate of 1.5 million abortions per year, an estimated 60 million infants have been murdered via abortion since Roe v. Wade. For this reason, many conclude that the “number one social priority facing the church in America must be to end this slaughter of children.”11 The million dollar question, then, is “How should the church in America attempt to end abortion?”

Some have concluded that ending abortion calls for civil disobedience. Randy Alcorn seeks to demonstrate civil disobedience from the Bible. To do so, he includes examples such as the Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1), Moses’ mother and sister (Exodus 2), Rahab (Joshua 2), Obadiah (1 Kings 18), Daniel (Daniel 6), Mordecai (Esther 3), and the apostles of Christ (Acts 4-5).12 He concludes: “Scripture clearly indicates that there is justification for civil disobedience in at least the areas affecting worship, evangelism and the sanctity of human life.”13 To guide the reader in considering its appropriateness, Alcorn offers fifteen test cases of civil disobedience, including worshipping Christ during the first century under the Roman government, sharing the gospel in a Middle Eastern country, and giving aid to a Jew in Nazi Germany.14 At the onset, the necessity of civil disobedience seems obvious. What Randy Terry refers to as the “Higher Laws principle”15 is really nothing more than a reflection of the biblical conviction that “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). However, Terry is correct in concluding that the challenge lies in “applying the Bible’s teaching on obeying God rather than man to our lives.”16

12 Alcorn, Is Rescuing Right?, 40-49.
13 Ibid., 50.
14 Ibid., 29-34.
15 Terry, Operation Rescue, 121.
16 Ibid., 115.
Passive, Non-Violent Opposition

Terry, Alcorn, and others championed passive, non-violent opposition to civil law from the mid-1980s to 1994. Terry’s organization, Operation Rescue, became known for “rescues,” which consisted of blockading entrances to abortion clinics to prevent access and ultimately save lives. Due to the fact that “rescuing” entailed trespassing, it often resulted in arrests and/or fines. As a result, reputable Christians came down on different sides of the issue. Alcorn writes, “rescuing has been a confusing, frustrating and sometimes explosive issue in the Christian community … The lines are being drawn, brothers and sisters in Christ are being polarized.”

Those who advocated “rescuing” argued from the “law of love,” i.e., doing for others what we would want them to do for us. They argued that it is done “out of a sense of conviction or moral necessity, compelled by a biblically and morally sensitive conscience that knows it is ultimately accountable to God and his law.” Along these lines, Mark Belz argued that a rescuer “believes it is his duty to do what he can to protect and preserve the life of the unborn child who is only moments away from death … This ‘belief’ is not a subjective one. It derives from the positive duty implicit in the Sixth Commandment.”

Passive, non-violent civil disobedience (i.e., “rescuing”) was endorsed by well-known Christian leaders, such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Chuck Colson, and D. James Kennedy. Even Norma McCorvey, better known as Jane Roe of Roe v. Wade, became “a full-fledged, key-carrying member of Operation Rescue.” Advocates also touted good motives and biblical arguments. However, President Bill Clinton signed the FACE (Freedom of Access to Clinic

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17 Alcorn, Is Rescuing Right?, 9-10.
18 Ibid., 86.
19 Ibid., 122.
20 Mark Belz, Suffer the Little Children: Christians, Abortion, and Civil Disobedience (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989), 75.
Entrances) act into law in 1994, which made blockading abortion clinic entrances a federal crime with steep penalties.\textsuperscript{22} As a result, “rescuing” has essentially become extinct, and many who were convinced that it is a “moral necessity” have since given it up in favor of legal approaches, such as sidewalk counseling and picketing. Unfortunately, for most advocates, it proved to be a moral necessity only when the penalties were not so extreme.

**Active, Violent Opposition**

The glaring question that Operation Rescue and other promoters of passive, non-violent opposition had difficulty answering was, “If civil disobedience is the correct course of action, then why not exercise active, violent opposition if it will save more lives?” In other words, is it arbitrary to limit civil disobedience to passive efforts only? Some, including Lutheran Pastor Michael Bray have believed so and have extended the logic of civil disobedience to include active, violent opposition. In his book titled *A Time to Kill: A Study Concerning the Use of Force and Abortion*, Bray argues that “the use of force does not constitute a greater degree of rebellion than do various forms of protest.”\textsuperscript{23} He presents a positive argument for the legitimacy of the use of “godly force”\textsuperscript{24} to save the lives of babies, including bombing abortion clinics and murdering abortionists.\textsuperscript{25} To refute the arguments of Bray and others, Frank Pavone offers an intriguing analogy: “In our day, what actually promotes violence is the pro-choice mentality. When someone kills an abortion provider, he/she is practicing what pro-choicers have preached for decades: that sometimes it is OK to choose to end a life to solve a problem.”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 9, 12.
\textsuperscript{26} Pavone, *Ending Abortion*, 135.
Individual vs. Governmental Opposition

Bray defends the individual’s right to violent rebellion by citing Gideon, Samson, and others along with Genesis 9:6. However, this verse in no way promotes individual, vigilante-style retribution; instead, “When justly administered, capital punishment is a scriptural application of civil authority.” An individual has not been given “the sword” and “is not called to strike the king’s agent on his cheek; rather, he is to accept the blows on his own cheek.”

John Knox asserted that private citizens have the right “to actively resist the government when rulers fail to bring correction.” He wrote, “most justly may the same men depose and punish him, that unadvisedly before they did nominate, appoint, and elect.” Yet, Jesus rebuked Peter for cutting off the ear of Malchus, told him to put his sword away, and declared that those who live by the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26:52). John Calvin rightly asserted that citizens have the duty to be “compliant and obedient to whomever [God] sets over the places where we live” because He providentially establishes and removes kings (Daniel 2:21, 37-38; 5:18-19). Anything less could result in anarchy. Calvin did not oppose all resistance to civil magistrates but correctly taught that it was the role of lesser magistrates, not individual citizens:

For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord’s to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer. I am speaking all the while of private individuals. For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of the kings … I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty.

27 Bray, A Time to Kill, 158-160.
28 Ibid., 24. Genesis 9:6, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.” Note, all Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the NASB translation, 1995.
30 North, When Justice is Aborted, 99.
31 Bray, A Time to Kill, 167.
32 John, Knox, The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1993), 90.
34 Ibid., 2:1513-1514 (4.20.26).
35 Ibid., 2:1518-1519 (4.20.31).
BEING A VOICE IN THE CULTURE

As demonstrated, the types of individual civil disobedience described above are not recommended for believers in Jesus Christ. Individuals may not attempt to achieve their goals by rebellion or force; however they may do so via their voice in culture. R. C. Sproul pleads, “for God’s sake, speak up … Yours is only one voice, but it is a voice. Use it.”36 According to former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, “when a society refuses to cry out against injustice, then the roots of the family and of civilization itself are in jeopardy.”37 Therefore, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) is correct in teaching that “Both the Christian and the Church have a responsibility for witnessing against national sins and for promoting justice.”38 The desire to be an individual and corporate voice in the culture is commendable, but what can and should be done, and how can it be accomplished? Without delving into a detailed analysis, it is beneficial to offer a rough sketch of potential ways for the Church to be a voice of opposition against abortion in the United States of America.

First, individuals and churches may have a direct impact on abortion through voting and political lobbying. Frank Pavone writes, “Christians have a duty to be politically active, to register and vote, to lobby and educate candidates and elected officials, and to speak up about the issues that affect the common good … If we don’t shape public policy according to moral truths, why do we believe that moral truth at all?”39

Second, individuals and churches can impact abortion by supporting and/or volunteering at a Crisis Pregnancy Center. David Reardon observed, “In God’s ordering of creation, it is only the mother who can nurture her unborn child. All that the rest of us can do, then, is to nurture the

36 Sproul, Abortion, 151.
39 Pavone, Ending Abortion, 141.
mother. To help a child, we must help the child’s mother.”

Involvement in a Crisis Pregnancy Center is a great way to do so.

A third way to decrease abortion is to spend time on the “front lines” engaging in sidewalk counseling and/or picketing outside abortion clinics. According to one author, “The power of the individual to change history is never exercised more strikingly than when a person goes to an abortion clinic, confronts a woman who is going in, talks her out of having an abortion, and so preserves the life of the human child. That is something each of us can do as an individual.”

Fourth, it is imperative to “lay the groundwork for a society in which abortion is not the accepted answer to unwanted pregnancy” by advocating adoption. The Church of Jesus Christ ought to be those most willing to adopt and care for children (James 1:27). After all, willingness to do so reflects the character of God, who is a Father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5) and has adopted His children according to the kind intention of His will (Ephesians 1:5).

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Everything done to oppose abortion must be done within the context of love for God and for those created in His image. It is all too easy to get caught up in the “battle” and to lose sight of compassion for lost and hurting sinners who need Christ. Ronald Reagan reminded us of the necessary tenderness and concern we must have for both mother and child: “when we talk about abortion, we are talking about two lives – the life of the mother and the life of the unborn

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40 Reardon, Making Abortion Rare, 4.
42 Reagan, Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation, 34-35.
child.” Reardon presents a healing strategy which includes removing the plank from our own eye, reducing judgmentalism, and building bridges with empathy. To be an extension of Christ in a lost and dying world, the Church must love her neighbor sacrificially, as illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and feel “a sense of mission to care for ‘the least of these.’”

The Church must also remember that all of her efforts are to be bathed in prayer. Although prayer is no substitute for action, ministry which actively opposes abortion and cares for preborn children and their mothers cannot be done apart from humble reliance upon the all-powerful God through prayer. The impact of the sovereign Lord’s work via prayer cannot be understated. In her autobiographical sketch, Norma McCorvey (i.e., Jane Roe) concludes her acknowledgements with these words, “And finally, to all the Christians who have ever prayed for me throughout these years, both before I became a Christian and after – your prayers were heard and answered, and I thank you for uttering them, with all my heart.”

**Depravity and the Need for a Presuppositional Approach**

When confronting those who practice and/or promote the sin of abortion, the Church must bear in mind that unregenerate people are depraved. Realizing this one simple fact revolutionizes how the Church attempts to “convince” the world of the evils associated with abortion. The Church must recognize the claim that “fetuses are not human” as a cover for sinful, selfish people whose decision is, in reality, more influenced by convenience than morality. In 1990, Randy Alcorn declared, “there is a *strong* scientific consensus that human life

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43 Ibid., 21.
44 Reardon, *Making Abortion Rare*, 99-104.
46 McCorvey, *Won by Love*, x.
begins at conception.”47 Science has confirmed this fact, but people are still hardened – At three weeks after fertilization, the first nerve cells have formed, the heart, circulatory system, and brain begins to form, and blood begins pumping.48 Yet virtually all abortions take place after the third week. Unfortunately, it is not surprising that increased scientific knowledge has not slowed down the abortion mills. People run from the Light (i.e., Christ), not due to lack of information, but because they hate Christ and love the darkness (John 3:19-20). Frame says it well: “Those who deny God do so, not because they lack evidence, but because their hearts are rebellious.”49

Due to depravity, natural arguments are simply not effective and never will be. Some, such as R. C. Sproul, attempt to argue for the sanctity of life on the basis of natural law. Sproul maintains that natural law “is rooted in various sources,” such as the laws of nations, self-evident truths, and natural science.50 He states, “Abortion – whatever else it may be – is an act against nature.”51 Others, like David Reardon, appeal to the selfishness of the mother by over-reliance on the argument that “one cannot hurt a child without hurting the mother.”52 In reality, the determined sinner does not care if abortion is against nature and would rather believe the abortion advocates who claim that “the medical risks associated with abortion and childbirth are diminishing.”53

Therefore, natural approaches do not work with “a natural man” who “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him.” (1 Corinthians 2:14). For this reason, the Church needs to stop floundering from one approach to the next and take up a more

47 Alcorn, Is Rescuing Right?, 12.
50 Sproul, Abortion, 41-42.
51 Ibid., 44.
52 Reardon, Making Abortion Rare, 5.
53 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Abortion, 1.
biblical approach.\textsuperscript{54} To do so, she must begin with Scripture. Greg Bahnsen writes, “Christian believers must not walk, must not behave or live, in a way which imitates the behavior of those who are unredeemed; specifically, Paul forbids the Christian from imitating the unbeliever’s \textit{vanity of mind}. Christians must refuse to think or reason according to a worldly mind-set or outlook.”\textsuperscript{55} Scripture exhorts believers to “[destroy] speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and [take] every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Thus, Christians must take a presuppositional approach which “presuppose[s] God’s word and renounce[s] intellectual autonomy.”\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{The Great Commission to Individuals and Nations}

Given the depravity of the unbeliever and the need for a presuppositional approach, the Church must see the gospel as the only hope for the long-term, irreversible elimination of abortion. Through His gospel, Christ converts hearts, minds, and lives. Therefore, the mission of the Church to oppose legalized abortion fits within the Great Commission to evangelize and disciple the nations. Rich Ganz hits the nail on the head: “What is the Christian solution to the problem of abortion? Repentance. The solution is to turn from the sin of committing murder by abortion and to turn from the false religion that approves abortion. The solution is to turn to the Lord and to keep His commandments.”\textsuperscript{57} Where true evangelism and discipleship are found, lives are changed and perspectives on abortion begin to fall into line with Scripture.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 20.
Finally, it is critical that “government … be on the side of good and not evil.”\textsuperscript{59} Thus, the Church must call the government to implement laws that are in accord with Scripture. Harold O. J. Brown writes, “The Law of God is necessary for the establishment of a human society in which the Gospel can be heard, in which there will be a measure of justice, and in which there will be the possibility of turning to God.”\textsuperscript{60} In reference to Matthew 22:21, Pavone writes, “The coin belongs to Caesar, for it bears Caesar’s image. Human beings belong to God, for they bear God’s image! … Caesar must obey God.”\textsuperscript{61} Once this structure is in place, it becomes clear that, “in God’s eyes abortion is both immoral (endangering the eternal soul of man) and criminal (endangering the social standing of man). Thus, it requires both the Christian’s disapproval and the State’s vigorous prohibition and equitable punishment.”\textsuperscript{62}

**CONCLUSION**

Abortion has been legal in America for over forty years, and there will be no end in sight until the nation desires to “do homage to the Son” (Psalm 2:12). Civil disobedience is not the answer to this great evil. The Church can be a voice in the culture through voting, political lobbying, involvement with Crisis Pregnancy Centers, sidewalk counseling and picketing, and adoption. However, a bigger picture lies beyond these necessary short-term efforts. Motivated by love and energized by prayer, the body of Christ must assume a presuppositional approach as she seeks to faithfully carry out the Great Commission to a world of depraved people, calling individuals, governments, and nations to obedience to the only Lawgiver and King, Jesus Christ.

\textsuperscript{59} Sproul, Abortion, 86; cf. Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2:1487 (4.20.2); 2:1496 (4.20.9).
\textsuperscript{60} Harold O. J. Brown, “Legal Aspects of the Right to Life,” in Richard L. Ganz, ed., Thou Shalt not Kill, 124.
\textsuperscript{61} Pavone, Ending Abortion, 140.
\textsuperscript{62} Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., The Christian Case against Abortion (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publications, 1990), 70.
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