

The *SBJT* Forum: Engaging the Abortion Issue

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Gregory Alan Thornbury, James Parker III, and Chad Owen Brand have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are some practical strategies for addressing the abortion issue?

D. A. Carson: We have just "celebrated" ("endured"?) the thirtieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. Countless commentators have weighed in to express their thanks for the Supreme Court's decision, and voiced their determination to preserve it; no fewer have articulated their resolution to keep pushing for court appointments that will ultimately bring that decision down.

Transparently, the mood of the country has changed somewhat during the last three decades. While many pro-choice voices still defend the Court's decision with virulent rhetoric, and while the media, by and large, hue that line, only a deaf ear could fail to pick up other voices. On many university campuses today, one can hear students refer to themselves as "survivors": they are painfully aware that they could as easily have been aborted as the tens of millions who were actually destroyed. In 1999, the Higher Education Research Institute published a survey of 275,811 incoming college freshmen, which showed that only 52.5% of the men and 49.5% of the women thought abortion should be legal. This represents a 14% decline since 1990. A poll published in 2000 by the *Los Angeles Times* showed that

only 43% of Americans support a simple continuation of *Roe v. Wade*—down from 56% in 1991. It has been widely reported that during the last presidential elections, 27% of those polled said they were more likely to vote for George Bush because he was pro-life, while only 18% of those polled said they were more likely to vote for Al Gore because he was pro-choice. Some high-profile feminists, such as Germaine Greer in her 1999 book *The Whole Woman*, are now arguing that abortion has become just one more tool of oppression in the hands of the male-dominated medical community, which has consistently failed to inform women of the risks. Greer speaks out of bitter experience: several abortions have left her sterile.

In the entire field of bioethics, questions surrounding abortion represent only one tiny part of the complex issues that must be addressed. In terms of the number of people affected, however—not only the aborted, but also the mothers, family members, and those touched by the decisions—no subject in bioethics is more far-reaching.

I do not intend to lay out the case against easy abortion. That has been done by many writers. Most Christians, and

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many others, find the arguments convincing. What I shall do in the space allotted me is to offer some practical suggestions about how those of us who hold such views should proceed from here. For this is not the time to do nothing more than wring our hands in despair and bemoan the wickedness of the age.

(1) Circulate hard facts. Whether in private conversations, or (for those with broader influence) in more public arenas, focus on the facts, those stubborn pieces of data which, on the long haul, turn out to be strangely convincing. Back in the late sixties and early seventies, abortion rights advocates insisted that abortion would make illegitimacy dwindle away, and that every child who actually then came to birth would be “wanted,” not unwanted. In consequence, it was argued, large social problems would diminish; child battering would become a thing of the past; young couples would not be trapped in miserable, forced marriages; women could remain in university or in the workforce if they unexpectedly became pregnant. The social gains would result in a massive reduction of welfare: we were asked to believe that abortion is in part an economic issue. And in any case, experts were predicting that without abortion, human overpopulation would usher in scarcely imaginable disaster. Paul Ehrlich, an expert on the Checkerspot butterfly, wrote *The Population Bomb*, a 1968 best-seller, in which he argued that in less than two decades, all ocean life would die of DDT poisoning, and thousands of human beings would die of smog in New York City and Los Angeles. Pollution would reduce life expectancy in the US to forty-two years. We were constantly bombarded with stories of some innocent, young girl going to a back-room abortion

quack and then dying of the internal bleeding. Besides, wealthy women could always find a proper doctor to do the job; it was the poor who were disadvantaged, so that access to abortion was simply a matter of social justice.

Three decades later, what are the facts? Illegitimacy is a much greater social problem today than it was in the early seventies. In 1970, 10.7% of live births were to unmarried mothers. By 1975, only a couple of years after *Roe v. Wade*, the rate was 14.5%. Today the rate is 33%; among black children, the rate today approaches 70%. Paul Ehrlich doubtless knew a lot about the Checkerspot butterfly, but his projections regarding human population trends were not only wrong, they approached sheer silliness. The claim that failure to secure court-protected abortion would result in tens of thousands of mothers endangered by back-street butchers was not true in 1972; ironically, it may be closer to the truth now. In 1940, the National Center for Health Statistics said there were 1,313 deaths from illegal abortions, most from infections, not bleeding. By 1966, the figure was 159 deaths: antibiotics had come a long way. By 1972, the last statistical year before *Roe*, the figure was 41. Of course, abortion activists insisted that most of the deaths took place in secret, and were not counted in the statistics. Probably there was some truth to the claim, but it is hard to overlook the sharp drop anyway. Nor is it all that clear that those who practiced abortion were untrained: not a few doctors broke the law, but they were still doctors. Former medical director for Planned Parenthood, Dr Mary Calderone, estimated in 1960 that nine out of ten illegal abortions were being performed by licensed physicians. Estimates of how many abortions took place

per year range from about 200,000 to 400,000. The contemporary figure is many times higher, and it is far from clear that the standard of care has improved. Approximately two-thirds of contemporary ob-gyn doctors refuse to do abortions; a majority of the remaining third perform no more than four or five abortions per year. This has encouraged the multiplication of abortion specialists, and because abortion is such a sensitive subject, the supervision of their clinics is woefully inadequate. A probing series in *The New York Times* in 1991 uncovered “filth” and depicted “butchery” at dozens of dirty, unlicensed clinics. This paper, so “liberal” in its leanings, was prompted to write the exposé after several hideous abortion deaths hit the national headlines. Several writers have pointed out that if a researcher takes the time to look, it is easy to pull up hundreds of newspaper accounts of documented abortion deaths that have occurred during the past decade in walk-in abortion clinics in all our major cities. And does *anyone* still think that the prevalence of abortion reduces welfare rolls? Has the number of battered or unwanted children declined? We have merely made our society coarser than it was some decades ago, more self-centered, less concerned with any human life other than my own. And there are costs beyond the public “social” costs. In addition to the awful guilt that many women feel, a Wirthlin poll, published in 1998, discovered that 56% of women felt that abortion had hindered their relationships with men. Circulate the hard facts.

(2) Present such facts as the *moral* position, but never with a self-righteous or triumphalist stance. Quite apart from the fact that any informed Christian is aware that self-righteousness and triumphalism

are morally repugnant and deeply offensive to Almighty God (who would much rather witness our contrition, poverty of spirit, and self-conscious dependence upon him), we ought to remember that self-righteousness in the political arena is often self-defeating, and triumphalism is a turn-off. In short, while presenting the facts, we must take great pains not only to present them as the intrinsically *moral* position, but also to articulate that position with persuasive humility. And that means, among other things, that we should be careful not to make this primarily a *Republican* position, making it almost impossible for a committed Democrat to join us. This distinction is all the more urgent when we reflect on the politics of the African-American community. A higher percentage of African-Americans are pro-life than is the percentage of European-Americans. But if we drum the abortion issue as primarily a Republican issue, then African-Americans, the overwhelming majority of whom vote Democrat, will simply ignore the argument and continue to vote Democrat. The issue must be seen in terms of hard facts, and in terms of their intrinsic morality, without much reference to a political party at all.

(3) Go for the small gain. And then keep going. Some strategists have advised conservatives to vote *against* a ban on partial birth abortions and other steps, on the ground that by removing from public view the most ugly and repulsive of the various facets of abortion, it will be harder in the future to arouse public sentiment to ban all or most abortions. But this “all or nothing” strategy often comes up dry. It makes sense *only* if one is certain that the strategy will work. Failing that, it is merely a recipe for continued legislative defeat.

Politics is the art of the possible. The

“all or nothing” approach rarely works. Moreover, sometimes it is the persistent plodder who keeps gnawing away at a problem who eventually gets even the big piece of legislation passed.

On the short haul, then, we ought to go after a complete ban on partial-birth abortions. In this procedure the physician partly delivers the late-term baby, then kills it by piercing his or her skull and attaching a powerful suction device that sucks out the baby’s brain. It is surely an encouraging sign that President Bush, in his State of the Union address, promised to send to Congress legislation that will ban this ghastly brutality. Similar legislation failed to get by Congress six years ago, and then-President Clinton said he would veto the legislation even if it passed. But here there is an opportunity to make a small but important gain. Take it. It is not everything, but it is better than nothing, and all who work to pass such legislation should be strengthened and encouraged.

(4) Make sure that opposition to abortion is married to support for unwed mothers, counseling centers, practical help for under-age moms, and the like. Not only is such care mandated by the most elementary Christian compassion, but it also undercuts the arguments of those who say that confessional Christians neither understand nor care about the plight of women who, often out of something close to desperation, think that abortion is the only reasonable choice they have.

(5) Expose the emptiness of “hard case” legislation. Every time that a pro-choice spokesperson and a pro-life spokesperson enter into debate, it is not long before the former brings up the horrible problem of a fifteen-year-old who has been raped and

become pregnant. That does happen, of course, and those who have never been brutalized in this way cannot possibly appreciate its full horrors. Nevertheless, the reason why the expression “Hard cases make bad laws” is so common a truism is because it is true! People are being manipulated to allow abortion in the overwhelming majority of instances where there has not been rape by appealing to the smallest fraction of 1% where rape has occurred. One should not legislate for the hard case; rather, if need be, one makes exceptions for the hard case. Regardless of what one thinks is best in the case of rape, it would surely be an astonishingly important step forward if abortion were legally banned in all cases *except* rape. And one of the most obvious ways of nullifying the “hard case” arguments that are regularly advanced as irrefutable pro-choice arguments is by exposing their emptiness. Demonstrate not only the axiom that “hard cases make bad legislation,” but call the person’s bluff by allowing that you could support legislation that banned abortions in all instances except the “hard cases” that the other party has in mind. It will quickly become transparent that the appeal to “hard cases” is often little more than a rhetorical ruse to maintain abortion in its present form.

(6) Recognizing that the activist court of the last few decades is ultimately going to call the shots on these matters, the business of judicial appointments has become more and more important. Small wonder that the process of Senate ratification of judicial appointments during the last couple of years has become more and more politicized. That means, in turn, that informed Christians should give careful thought to the ways in which they may strengthen the resolve, the insight, and the

influence of those who are determined to appoint, or ratify the appointment of, judges who will be less than eager to turn the judicial branch into a legislative branch, and who do not think *Roe v. Wade* is the moral high ground, but an indefensible judicial intrusion into the responsibilities of both houses of Congress. In the nature of the case, we are not going to get there quickly. But that is why persistence and perseverance may, on the long haul, by God's grace, prove to be the crucial attitudinal stances needed to bring about the end of this inhumane and sometimes barbaric evil.