

Our Culture of Choice

by Johan D. Tangelder

Why is it so difficult to make our case for the sanctity of life from conception to natural death?

It's because many see opposition to abortion-on-demand as imposing one's view of morality on other people. We are told that we should be free to choose what we think is good for us. The freedom to choose seems to have become a "sacred" value in our Western society. We are daily confronted by a multitude of choices. Much has been written about our consumer society, its glorification of material pleasures, and its endless stimulation of public wants – wants, not needs – through advertising. Digital technology and private markets are multiplying the choices consumers have in our Western society and giving them the autonomy of diversity and choice. Why should a woman, therefore, not have the choice of an abortion if she so desires?

Feminism

There's a history behind today's reverence for "choice."

In the 1960's the feminist movement was impacted by that era's rejection of customary standards of dress, behavior, and sexuality. Where older feminists combined women's maternal and family concerns with a liberal concern for equality, younger feminists tended to be closely connected to Marxism or socialism. By the end of the 1960's abortion was an issue that moved rapidly to the top of the agenda. The desire for abortion law reform mobilized a very wide range of groups, including the National Council of Women and labor unions.

In 1969 the Canadian Criminal Code was revised. Abortions were legalized for the first time, but only if they were performed by a doctor in an accredited hospital under specific conditions.

This wasn't enough for the leftist feminists. The women's liberation movement made its first significant appearance with the 1970 Abortion Caravan, a protest against the so-called inadequacies of the reforms of 1969. And on Mother's Day 1970, in the city of Montreal, a demonstration was held to support free access to abortion. In early 1972 the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was founded. It received hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund their pernicious and politically correct extreme causes.

On January 28, 1988, feminists tasted victory. The Supreme Court of Canada invoked the Charter of Rights to strike down the federal abortion law as unconstitutional. Ever since that fatal day Canada has been without a law to protect the most vulnerable of our society – unborn human beings.

Though the feminist won a major victory, they are still lobbying to ensure government support for abortion. For example, in 1990, Anne Swarbrick, who was at that time Ontario's Minister of Women's Issues, stated her government's position as follows: "Our commitment is definitely there to provide women access to abortion. We are not

wavering on our commitment. I think women can rely on me and the other feminists in the cabinet to ensure that."

Many feminists are fearful that their gains will be in jeopardy if they lose their right to abortion. The thought that abortion might become restricted again or even illegal drives some abortion advocates to make wild accusations. In the 1980s, American feminist Lynn Walker claimed, "The pro-lifers are dangerous people. They are not pro-children. They are anti-sex. And when they are done with women's rights, next come the Jews." And such accusations are still being made in the so-called enlightened 21st century.

The feminist movement also found support in liberal pro-choice Protestant denominations. By linking the pro-choice position to that of pro-women, they gained widespread endorsement. Dr. R.C. Sproul points out that in a vital sense, the pro-choice position rode the coattails of the pro-women position in theological liberal churches. Sproul comments that those who were struggling for the consolidation of women's rights in the church perceived that adopting a pro-choice position was critical, or the activism for other rights might be weakened.

But to be anti-abortion does not equal being anti-women. On the contrary, I am convinced that being pro-life equals being radically pro-women. Women have value and dignity because of their basic humanity, not because of their gender. Abortion is not a gender issue, it is a human life issue.

A Subtle Strategy

Whenever pro-abortionists failed to persuade the public to adopt a clearly pro-abortion stance, they adopted a subtle strategy to achieve their goal. They emphasized the cherished principle of freedom of choice. They aimed to get people to affirm each person's "inalienable" right to choose abortion without government intervention or coercion. Furthermore, they claimed that one's faith should not interfere with politics.

Many people fell for this argument. We have now as a standard statement, "I'm personally not in favor of abortion, but I don't think I should impose my view on others." Or, in another version, "My religion is against abortion, but I don't have the right to impose my religious beliefs on anyone else." But this is an impossible view to hold.

Everyone operates with a belief system – whether secular, Christian or whatever. Pro-abortionists assume that moral and religious beliefs are nothing more than individual preferences. They do not believe in the authority of a personal God who reigns over everyone. Orthodox Christianity, however, affirms that its position on issues of life is true – not just a sentiment inside a person's head but based on what God has revealed in Scripture. And God's standard for life is universally valid, like it or not. Conscience cannot be divorced from conduct. Ideas always have consequences. All of life is religion. All of us have a particular perspective from which we approach the vital issues of life.

Politicians

Politicians are no exception in privatizing their religion. For example, I find it most extraordinary that some of our leftwing politicians who speak the loudest about keeping one's faith private, also speak out loudly in favor of abortion-on-demand. And

they promote same-sex marriage and every other leftwing cause. If you oppose them, you are attacked as a "redneck," or behind the times.

Strangely some of the most adamant pro-abortion politicians are members of the Roman Catholic church, an institution with a rigorous, well-defined pro-life theology as well as a tradition of enforcing adherence to its beliefs. There are also Protestant politicians who belong to pro-life churches but who are either silent about abortion or actually promote it in their votes and policies. Could church discipline bring them to repentance and a change of heart? It is unacceptable and indefensible for Christian politicians to say that they personally oppose abortion on the one hand, but on the other hand they refuse to support the legal protection of the unborn. Commitment to life is not a matter of personal piety; it is about social justice. Laws against abortion and other evils do not impose morality. They protect the weak from violence, one of the government's defining roles. It is likewise not sufficient or coherent for Christian politicians to say they are personally opposed to abortion and yet refuse to vote against it, claiming to reflect the public will. There is also no refuge in the claim that the courts have spoken. Christian politicians must attempt to persuade parliament to reverse or revise any law or verdict which undermines or removes the protection of innocent life.

My Will Be Done

Our culture of choice fits comfortably with the radical individualism that is increasingly the hallmark of our affluent Canadian society. The pro-choice advocates want to be in charge of their own destiny and create their own values. They don't believe in moral absolutes. They claim that each individual should be given "the freedom to choose" their own moral standards.

But in the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord submitted Himself to the will of His heavenly Father. He said to Him, "Not my will but Thine be done." Today, many people say, "Not Thy will but mine be done." They want power over themselves and everything else, including the quality of life from conception to natural death.

However, a society that is ruled by the autonomous will becomes a hazardous place for the weak. It has made our society less than just, less than decent, less than human. Consequently, we see in our Canadian society a distorted picture of freedom, where people want to be "free" from the responsibility to care for others. The ultimate and inevitable outcome of this new freedom is the individual's private power to choose life or death, for self or even for others. This new freedom finds its broadest, most blatant expression in abortion. Why should pro-abortionists care about the life of an unborn baby when it conflicts with the will of a fully developed woman?

Free Choice is Not Absolute

However, freedom of choice is not an absolute freedom. No human being is a law unto himself. I wonder if pro-choice advocates object to laws protecting their personal property rights. Does the thief breaking into a home to steal a television have the inalienable right to make that choice? Does a man have the right to choose to rape a woman? Choosing to punch a pillow is rather innocent; choosing to punch a woman is contemptible. These extreme examples make it obvious that freedom of choice cannot be

considered as an absolute right. Not all choices are morally good. Furthermore it is a well-documented fact that many teenagers are pressured by their parents or boyfriends, and older women by their husbands to avoid having children they want to bear and raise. There is no unrestricted choice. Choices have consequences either for good or evil. The right to choose does not give anyone the right to destroy a human life.

As Ken Connor of Family Research Council puts it, "They want to talk about pro-choice, but it's not about choosing between chocolate and vanilla. We are talking about the right to choose to kill an unborn child."

The unborn do not have a choice. No unborn baby has ever had the right to choose or deny its own violent destruction. Indeed, the most dangerous place in Canada for a human being is inside the womb of a woman. Dr. Sproul comments, "For millions of unborn babies the womb has become a cell on death row. The inmate is summarily executed without benefit of a trial or a word of defense."

As Christians we must confirm that we do not have the freedom to do whatever we want with our own bodies or to rob God of those unborn children to whom He has already given life. Neither our own bodies nor our unborn children belong to us. They belong to God, for "it is he that made us, and we are his."(Ps. 100:3) Life is not a "thing" to be given or taken. It is a divine gift.

The Unborn are persons

So why do pro-lifers protest against abortion-on-demand? Because they realize that human lives are at stake. They believe that the unborn are precious. Richard John Neuhaus, rightly observes, "Wherever we find ourselves in the abortion debate, it is past time to recognize that we are in painful fact deciding who is and who is not a human being entitled to societal protection."

We cannot deny the humanity of the unborn. The mother is a person and so is the unborn. A mother will never say, "I am expecting a blob, or a conglomeration of cells." From the moment of conception the unborn is alive and biologically human, distinct from the mother, with an unmatched genetic code. John Calvin said, "The unborn child...though enclosed in the womb of the mother, is already a human being... and should not be robbed of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy."

An unborn baby is a work of God which He is building into His own likeness. There is a big difference between an unborn baby and an appendix. The Psalmist wrote, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made"(Ps. 139:13f).

It is a fact that the unborn is a member of our human race, called to partake in life. Recently, a court decision established this fact in law. In August 2003 the Mississippi Supreme Court declared in a 6-2 decision that a "fetus" is a person under state law and wrongful death claims can be filed on its behalf. If the life of an unborn is protected in one American state, why not in other states, and why not in Canada?

What Can We Do?

It is difficult to engage with those who are indifferent or hostile to our views and concern. We may get discouraged. We may wonder if we are making any progress in

protecting the unborn. How easy it is to back away and do nothing. The cost of influencing our society is high.

But it is worth it.

What can we do for the unborn? We should say unequivocally that anyone who is conscientiously pro-choice must understand that he or she is an ally, willingly or unwillingly, with the pro-abortion position. Pro-life advocates need to pressure politicians. Don't give up! If there is a political will, Canadian politicians can work for a law to protect the unborn. But we must not be strident. We must do so in the spirit of love. The apostle Paul wrote, "By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you..." (2 Cor. 10:1). When a small group from the Social Action Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada met with the parliamentary commission on abortion, a MP opposed to their views, said at the close, "I never knew evangelicals cared so much about the well-being of both women and the unborn."

And the church must speak forthrightly for life and discipline members who claim to be Christian but say they are pro-choice. Furthermore, the church must deny that there is a need for choice between the lives of children and the dignity and rights of women. Women and children alike need our support. The church must also speak for the poor, rejecting the argument that abortion is necessary in order that the poor may have an adequate living. Christians are called to care for the poor and the needy, to counsel and provide for women who are struggling with the question of abortion.

Don't give up opposing abortion! Pro-lifers, struggling for the unborn's fundamental right to live, should be encouraged by William Wilberforce's struggle to abolish slavery in the British empire and to improve the morals in his country. For many frustrating years, his efforts to abolish slavery were defeated by Parliament. He was harassed, maligned, ridiculed, and slandered. Wilberforce was sharply criticized for raising religious objections against the slave trade. On one occasion Lord Melbourne stated, "Things have to come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life." Doesn't that sound like today's *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail*? By the end of his life, Wilberforce thought there had been no improvement in the morals of his countrymen. In fact, he believed conditions were worse than ever. But historical studies show a marked transformation during his lifetime in nearly every area of English society. Overall order in society and church attendance had improved significantly and much of it as a direct result of his work. And he did see slavery abolished. On June 29, 1833, Wilberforce died – three days after the *Bill For the Abolition of Slavery* passed its second reading in the House of Commons, sounding the end for slavery. "Thank God," he whispered on his deathbed, "that I should have lived to witness a day in which England was willing to give twenty million sterling for the abolition of slavery." Wilberforce's example illustrates not only a wonderful victory over an unspeakable horror of slavery won at great personal cost, but also that we can't always see whether progress is made. Pro-lifers, stay the course - prayerfully and steadfastly!