

Life Matters Most: Contending for Truth in a Culture of Death

A Sermon for Sanctity of Human Life Month, January 2009

We are rarely physically healed <u>without</u> a scar – a physical reminder of something that was broken that God has put back together. Athletes in particular are notorious for their pride in their "battle scars," with the ability to recount the sometimes grisly details of their various surgeries.

The apostle Paul may or may not have been physically attractive, but it's certain that his crusade for the Gospel left him with physical as well as emotional scars. At least once, he remarked upon the toll his ministry took on him physically:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

- 2 Corinthians 11:24-28¹

Yet near the end of his life, Paul had the divine assurance that everything he had endured for the cause of Christ was worth it: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

How tragic it would have been, and how much weaker the church would be, if Paul and countless other saints had decided that the Gospel wasn't **worth fighting for**. Paul's scars bore witness to his passion for God. Today, I ask you: what scars do you bear, and what do they say about what you find worth fighting for?

All Christians are called to fight for the truth of the Gospel, if necessary. Peter writes, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Peter 4:14). Because January is Sanctity of Human Life Month, I would encourage you specifically to uphold one of the most self-evident truths in Scripture: that God is sovereign, and that man has no right to destroy innocent life He has created. If you carefully analyze the motives and the mindset of the abortion industry and their advocates, and the sector of the scientific community advocating for human embryonic stemcell research, it is a fundamental rejection of God's sovereignty.

¹ Scripture references in this outline are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Today the church is at a crossroads regarding a defining moral issue – the right to life. What we do, or don't do, in the coming year will make an <u>eternal</u> difference in the lives of millions of families across this nation. The reason for this crossroads is that this month, a new presidential administration will take office that is outspoken and even proud of its disregard for innocent human life.

I <u>am not</u> speaking today as part of a misguided effort to demonize Barack Obama. We are to pray for and show respect for all of our government leaders, whether we supported them or not, whether we agree with them or not. But specifically, on the issue of life, the Obama administration is radical and unflinching in its support of abortion and embryonic stem-cell research. It is incumbent upon all Christians, both those who supported Barack Obama's election and those who opposed it, to counter any movement to make abortion more easily accessible in this nation. Even if you agree with every other policy position of the incoming Obama administration, it is incumbent upon you as a Christian to oppose its intentions to legitimize the destruction of innocent human life.

It's easy for us to declare the obvious biblical truth that "life matters most." Hardly any believer needs to be convinced of that. But it's time to go beyond mere agreement! We shouldn't pat ourselves on the back for agreeing with biblical truth. We must decide once and for all that life is **worth fighting for**, and then we must take up the battle.

Will we arrive in heaven with skin blemished only by too much time in the sun? Or will we bear the scars that signify we have been in a battle for what we believe?

A. The Burning Platform

In the world of the Fortune 500, a proposal for change requires a "burning platform" – an overwhelming reality that makes the status quo not only unacceptable, but also unthinkable. The events of September 11, 2001, created a burning platform for our nation's foreign policy – suddenly, and obviously, there was no question that combating terrorism had become the most urgent of national priorities. Without a burning platform, it simply takes too much energy and creativity for a large organization to do things differently than they've been done before.

On the issue of life, the church doesn't have the option of the status quo. We <u>have</u> a burning platform – our nation's callous disregard for human life. The sad truth is that while we have stayed in our sanctuaries, abortion has been devastating a generation, scientists have gained popular support for their desire to destroy human life with impunity and judges have been allowed to order the death of people whose only crime is being inconvenient to their caregivers.

We don't have to debate whether or not there is a burning platform in this nation on the issue of life. There is. It's just a matter of whether the Church will take action to address it or not.

If you need any convincing that our nation's callous attitude toward human life leaves the Church with no choice but to fight for life, understand these overwhelming realities:

 The number of abortions performed in the United States each year skyrocketed after the U.S. Supreme Court made *Roe v. Wade* and a companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, the law of the land in 1973. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood, the number of abortions peaked at 1.6 million in $1990.^2$

- Those 1.6 million babies would be entering college or the workforce right now. That's more than the combined population of Detroit, Mich., and Austin, Texas.³
- We're supposed to be thrilled that the number of abortions dropped since 1990 – to a little less than 1.21 million in 2005, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute.⁴ But it's hardly cause for celebration. If that number holds for the foreseeable future, it would be the equivalent of wiping a city the size of San Jose, Calif., from the map every year.
- Between 1973 and 2005, America has aborted an average of nearly 1.4 million babies per year. A city of 1.4 million would be the nation's seventh largest – far bigger than San Antonio, Texas, and more than twice the size of Memphis, Charlotte or Baltimore.⁵
- The number of abortions for every 100 live births rose as high as 35.9 in 1980, and as recently as 2002 was nearly 25. That means that over the last quarter century, a <u>minimum</u> of one out of every five pregnancies in this nation ended in abortion. Often, the percentage has been even higher.
 - To gauge the impact of that fact, visit the preschool room in this church. Instead of eight children, realize that there should be at least 10 children there. If there are 20 children, there should be 25! For every four

 ² "Trends in abortion in the United States, 1973-2000," The Alan Guttmacher Institute, January 2003.
³ U.S. Census Bureau data found at www.infoplease.com.

⁴ "An Overview of Abortion in the United States." Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health and The Alan Guttmacher Institute, January 2008.

⁵ <u>www.infoplease.com</u>, loc. cit.

children you see, at least one more child their age <u>never</u> had the chance to live because his or her mother participated in an abortion.

- Another sign of our nation's growing disrespect of human life involves the issue of human embryonic stem-cell research. The majority leader of the U.S. Senate has listed stem-cell research as one of his top priorities. Unfortunately, he wasn't talking about banning this immoral practice – he was talking about spending even more of your tax dollars to pay for it!⁶ This despite the fact that human embryonic stem cells have not led to even one clinical trial to treat human diseases or medical conditions.
 - Apparently, Sen. Reid is unaware that an <u>ethical</u> form of research, taking stem cells from developing babies, children or adults without harming them, is showing astounding results. Recently, for example, scientists reported the ability to grow a heart valve for a stilldeveloping baby, using stem cells drawn from the amniotic fluid surrounding the baby.⁷ Type 1 diabetics may soon be able to be equipped with a pancreas that produces insulin at the appropriate rate, grown from the patient's own stem cells. It all sounds like something from a science-fiction novel, but it's happening using what scientists call adult stem cells.
 - Human embryonic stem-cell research therefore is not only immoral, but also a colossal waste of tax dollars.

⁶ Nedra Pickler, "Sen. Reid: Ethics, Stem Cells Top Agenda," The Washington Post, Nov. 28, 2006.

⁷ Lindsey Tanner, "Heart valves grown using stem cells," The Baltimore Sun, Nov. 17, 2006.

B. Words of Life

Make no mistake, I am asking for your passion and your action on behalf of innocent human life – whether that takes the form of an embryo in a laboratory, a baby in its mother's womb or an infirm man or woman taking some of his or her last breaths on earth. Rest assured that I would not ask you for an investment of time, talent and treasure if life were not a foundational Christian value, or if the Bible were not clear about the lengths we must go to defend it. To do otherwise would lead to tragic results, like the man who frantically climbed the ladder of success and only at the top learned that the ladder was leaning against the wrong building.

Clearly, the Bible condemns killing innocent people.

• Exodus 20:13: "You shall not murder."

The key biblical question then becomes, "Is a fetus or an embryo the moral equivalent of a person?" God's Word emphatically says, "Yes!"

- **Genesis 1:26-27**: "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."
 - Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

 Psalm 139:13-14: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. [14] I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. [15] My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. [16] Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them."

For the Christian, life <u>must</u> be worth fighting for, because God is pro-life – these Scriptures are just part of the evidence for that statement.

An intellectually honest view of Scripture must lead to the conclusion that God opposes abortion, with no exceptions. God also opposes human embryonic stem-cell research, with no exceptions. And God opposes euthanasia for the infirm, because it flies in the face of a sovereign God to let mankind decide when a life should end.

Defending life happens to be an historically American value, no matter what abortion advocates claim. Pastor Rod Parsley, in his best-selling book "Silent No More," notes that the Founding Fathers committed themselves and their reputations to the absolute standard of "the laws of nature and nature's God." A respect for human life was fundamental to the rule of law in they eyes of those who established our government more than 230 years ago. Thomas Jefferson would later underline that principle, saying "The chief purpose of government is to protect life. Abandon that, and you have abandoned all."⁸

⁸ Rod Parsley, "Silent No More" (Lake Mary, Fla.: Creation House, 2005), pp. 138-139.

Being sure of a conviction, of course, is just the first step toward righteous action. Christians aren't just called to <u>believe</u> the truth; they're called to <u>act on</u> it. Jesus was clear that the well-intentioned were doomed unless they acted on their convictions:

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

- Matthew 25:41-46

C. Words of Action & Influence

The first and primary calling of the Christian, of course, is to win souls for the Kingdom of God. The Great Commission is familiar to nearly every believer:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

- Matthew 28:19-20

The Church is starting to learn that activism – speaking out on life and other moral issues – is an important means of winning souls. You and I witness our faith when we stand up for righteousness and justice in the public arena, whether we call attention to the genocide in the African nation of Sudan, uphold the importance of an increase in the federal minimum wage or stand for the biblical definition of marriage. Why? Because on each of these important issues, as well as on the issue of life, Bible-believing Christians find themselves on the same side of the debate as people of vastly different religious faiths, and even people of no religious persuasion whatsoever. Activism gives us a common ground with the very people God has called us to reach, as well as the means to influence them for Jesus Christ.

Jesus talked about influencing souls in the Sermon on the Mount:

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

- Matthew 5:13

The crowd that gathered to hear Jesus knew exactly what he meant by these words. Today salt is common – less than a dollar a pound for the type you have at the table. But in Jesus' day it was a valuable commodity. Roman soldiers were often paid in salt and it was from that practice that we get the expression that a man is "worth his salt." Jesus is telling us how much value we have – salt is something we are, not something we <u>should</u> be or <u>could</u> be with enough training – and by comparing us to salt, it's reasonable to assume we are to do the two major things that salt does:

• **Enhance** the character of everything around us. A cook will tell you that salt, used properly, makes everything

else in a dish taste better than it would otherwise, even baked goods we don't associate with the flavor of salt.

• **Preserve** the good around us. In Jesus' time, perishable foods like meet or fish were cured in salt instead of being refrigerated. Then, as now, salt stops decay.

Jesus' caution with salt is that if its savor, or saltiness, is lost, it's worthless. Again, those present at the Sermon on the Mount knew exactly what Jesus was talking about. Much salt in Palestine, such as that found on the shores of the Dead Sea, is contaminated with other minerals. Because of those impurities, it's flat and even repulsive to the taste.

When we become contaminated by impurities in our lives, we can repel the very people God intends for us to influence. That's why, if you are called to minister the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others, you must be vigilant about living a pure and holy life. When you do, nobody can ever accuse you of being tasteless, ineffective or useless to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus also compared his audience, and us to something almost even more common than salt – light:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

- Matthew 5:14-15

Once again, Jesus says that we <u>are</u> light, not that we <u>should</u> <u>be</u> light. If you witness your faith at all, people will change their behavior because you are there. Has anyone ever cursed in your presence, then made a point of apologizing to you specifically? You may not have witnessed the Gospel to them directly, but because you have been light in their presence, others know there's something different about you, and at some point God will lead them to ask you what it is. That's the kind of impact Jesus was talking about.

Light can be rendered useless as well, as Jesus points out in verse 15. Light that is hidden benefits nobody, not even the person bearing the light. Far better that we obey Jesus' command in the very next verse – "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

We must provide a subtle influence, much like salt does when it's used properly. And we must also be influential in an obvious way, like a lighted candle in an otherwise darkened room. *Nowhere is our influence needed more in today's wayward culture than on the issue of life.*

D. God's People Respond

It's especially critical that God's people commit to being salt and light on the issue of life in the year 2009. The new administration is committed to a pro-death agenda that is determined to block further restrictions on abortion and an expansion of federal funding of human embryonic stem-cell research.

Pastor Rod Parsley has often said, "The enemies of life have been lying well, and the Church, unfortunately, has been telling the truth badly." My conviction is that we have to get better at telling the truth in a hurry, or abortion will become even more ingrained in the national culture than it is now, scientists will be able to destroy any life they feel like destroying in the name of research, and judges will be able to order the death of anyone they want!

Just one example of the lies of the pro-death movement deals with human embryonic stem-cell research. The party line that most of America has bought goes like this: 100 million people (that's one out of three Americans) are sick and only embryonic stem cells can help them, but the pro-life movement is preventing their imminent cure because they have prevented the use of federal tax dollars to prevent progress and cures, and are causing American scientists to fall behind their counterparts abroad.

That statement has at least five lies in it, but the church can only counter them when it knows the truth. The facts are that, unfortunately, the federal government has spent more than \$100 million on human embryonic stem-cell research, all of it since 2001, and that has helped American scientists remain at the forefront of this field.⁹

The only way to counter lies is with the truth, and I am challenging each of you today to commit to telling the truth about life! Here are some of the simple action steps you can take:

- Learn as much as you can about the pro-death movement, the steps being taken to counter it, and what God's Word says about the issue.
- Make the pro-life case in your spheres of influence. Let your friends and neighbors know where you stand. I guarantee you most of the people you know are ignorant of the facts of these issues. As just one example, the news media today consistently refers to the issue of "stem-cell research" as though there were only one type.

⁹ Yuval Levin, "Falling Behind?," National Review Online (www.nationalreview.com), December 4, 2006.

When people learn that it's possible to take stem cells from a body without destroying it, it gives them an entirely new perspective.

 It may be that your activism will encourage them to act on what they believe as well! That's what being salt and light is all about. You and your message will not be welcomed everywhere, but you should expect nothing else. A wise man once said, "Those who never see Satan face to face are those who are running in the same direction he is."

For the sake of the millions of unborn babies we hope to save, for the culture of life we hope to bring back to this nation, we must determine and act like life is worth fighting for.

I look forward to comparing scars with you this year.