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THE VANISHING PRO-LIFE APOLOGIST: PUTTING THE "LIFE" BACK INTO THE ABORTION DEBATE

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SYNOPSIS

The past few years have witnessed a stunning development in the pro-life movement. Many pro-life leaders now think we can make abortion rare by downplaying the moral question, "Does abortion take the life of a defenseless human being?" They favor a new strategy that appeals to the self-interests of women rather than moral truth. One leader asserts that an emphasis on unborn babies will only drive women of childbearing age away from the pro-life movement. But this new strategy is dangerous because it leaves the pro-abortion culture largely unchallenged. At the same time, it unilaterally strips the pro-life movement of its most powerful tools of persuasion. If pro-life advocates are to make abortion unthinkable, they must speak frankly about the nature of abortion.

For the past 26 years, pro-life apologists have argued that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless human being. The rationale for their argument is clear-cut and can be expressed in the following syllogism:

1. Intentionally killing an innocent person is a moral wrong.
2. Elective abortion is the intentional killing of an innocent human person.
3. Hence, elective abortion is a moral wrong.

Despite the clarity and soundness of this argument, some pro-life leaders now question its ability to persuade. They contend that although abortion is an objective moral evil, pro-life advocates should reconsider their arguments or risk alienating women of childbearing age.

THE CHANGING PRO-LIFE FOCUS

Paul Swope, for example, calls it a "failure to communicate" when pro-lifers focus primarily on the fetus rather than the felt needs of women. "The pro-life movement," he writes, "must show that abortion is not in a woman's own self-interest, and that the choice of life offers hope and a positive, expanded sense of self."¹

Swope believes pro-life advocates have won the moral and philosophical debate over the status of the fetus, but have failed to address the needs of women. He cites research indicating that even "pro-choice" women agree that abortion is killing. "The women believe that abortion is wrong, an evil, and that God will punish a woman who makes that choice." Yet, the choice of abortion becomes one of self-preservation (at least socially), and since the woman did not intend to get pregnant, she reasons that "God will ultimately forgive her."²

Until recently, the pro-life response was to point out that hardship did not justify homicide, but Swope thinks that a focus on babies only makes matters worse. He writes, "The pro-life movement's own self-

chosen slogans and educational presentations have tended to exacerbate the problem, as they focus almost exclusively on the unborn child, not the mother.”³

Pro-life feminist Frederica Matthews-Green agrees, “Pro-Lifers will not be able to break through this deadlock by stressing the humanity of the unborn. [T]hat is a question nobody is asking. But there is a question they are asking. It is, ‘How can we live without it?’ The problem is not moral, but practical.”⁴

There is merit to what both say. Pro-lifers must do more than stress the humanity of the unborn, especially with those facing the terror of unplanned pregnancy. This is why crisis pregnancy centers are so important. It is also true that for some abortion-minded women, appeals to self-interest may dissuade them from killing their babies.

But Swope and Matthews-Green are not saying we should reframe the debate in the *narrow* context of crisis counseling. Rather, they are telling the pro-life movement *in general* to speak less of the fetus and more to the self-interested needs of women. Although both have made important contributions to our cause, I think they are mistaken for the following reasons.

1. It is simply not true that the pro-life movement has won the debate over the status of the fetus. Both authors rightly point out that a majority of Americans support legal abortion even though most *say* that it is morally wrong. They interpret these contradictory findings to mean that while pro-lifers have won the moral debate over the humanity of the fetus, practical considerations keep many Americans committed to abortion.

Swope and Matthews-Green are confusing what the public *says* with what it truly *believes*. People hold contradictory and incoherent views on abortion precisely because they don’t really believe that the unborn are filly human, despite their rhetoric to the contrary. As philosopher Francis Beckwith points out, why do women only kill their fetuses when confronted with practical difficulties, rather than their already born children, if they truly believe their fetuses are fully human?⁵

Put differently; is there any reasonable person in America today who would argue that while he personally opposed the enslavement of blacks, he wouldn’t oppose the legal right of his neighbor to own one if he so chose? In fact, when people tell me they personally oppose abortion but think it should be legal anyway, I ask a simple question to audit their core beliefs about the unborn. I ask *why* they personally oppose abortion. Nearly always, the response is, “I oppose it because it kills a baby,” at which point I merely repeat their own words. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight: You say you oppose abortion because it kills a baby, but you think it should be legal to kill babies?” Those who are intellectually honest respond with stunned silence before conceding, “Gee, I never thought of it like that.” But many others reply glibly, “Well, its not the same thing.”

People who talk like this cannot possibly have thought much about the status of the fetus, let alone have resolved the issue in our favor. When it comes to first trimester abortion, polling data suggests the public has indeed resolved the issue, but it hardly agrees with us. A whopping 62 percent support the practice precisely because they don’t think the unborn at that stage of development are human persons.⁶ This is not a practical problem, but a deeply moral and intellectual one.

2. A strategy centered primarily on the self-interest of the woman sets a dangerous precedent for the pro-life movement. As Dr. Beckwith points out, even if appeals to self-interest temporarily reduce the number of abortions, it does not follow that our culture is becoming pro-life.

Say, for example, that Planned Parenthood releases a study demonstrating that women who abort live on average 10 years longer than those who don’t. Or, take an exact case from Boston where the National Abortion Access Project is running ads (soon to be released nationally) depicting abortion as “the responsible choice” for women who don’t want to “pay the price and have the baby.”

What principled argument against abortion can Swope or Matthews-Green make in either case? Beckwith writes, “Nurturing an unprincipled, self-interested culture may have the unfortunate consequence of

increasing the number of people who think that unless their needs are pacified they are perfectly justified in performing homicide on the most vulnerable of our population.”⁷

Swope replies that moral persuasion simply does not work with many women. Consequently, he produces pro-life television ads that speak to the self-interest of women rather than the morality of abortion. He claims to have data proving the ads not only save babies, but change public opinion as well. “A 30 second ad with the objective of reaching women of childbearing age is simply not the place to teach about abstract moral obligations,” he writes.⁸

Perhaps so, but we shouldn’t then claim that these ads genuinely convert people to the pro-life view. True conversion on any ethical issue requires moral and intellectual assent. How can there be moral and intellectual assent if nothing in the ads speaks to moral or intellectual issues? What you get in this case are not *true* converts to the pro-life position, but *self-interested* converts who may readily abandon their newly found pro-life views. As one abortion rights leader put it, “The overwhelming majority of Americans are against abortion except in cases of rape, incest, and their own personal circumstances.” That is the heart of the issue.

Data from the pregnancy care profession seems to confirm this. Pro-life crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) outnumber abortion clinics nearly two to one, but there are still 1.3 million abortions annually. In fact Care Net, the nation’s largest affiliate of CPCs, reports that 80 percent of clients seen by its centers are *not* abortion minded.¹⁰ That means the vast majority of women considering abortion blow right by the local CPC on their way to Planned Parenthood. This is true despite Care Net’s laudable 1993 goal of making pregnancy care centers “so accessible and so effective in serving women that we put abortionists virtually out of business by the end of the decade.”¹¹

Four years ago, I visited a well-funded midwestern CPC whose staff took me through comfortably furnished residential quarters that can house 40 pregnant women, most in their own private rooms. Residents enjoy impressive meals and round-the-clock medical care. The CPC also has a large, well-stocked library, classrooms in which clients pursue various courses of study, and an impressive list of services offered to women not in need of residency. The facility has the capacity to care for hundreds of nonresident clients as well. It’s hard to imagine a crisis pregnancy center that is more caring and more in tune with the self-interested needs of its clients.

Despite this CPC’s effective management and comprehensive services, it saved 80 babies that year in a metro area in which some ten thousand were killed! At times, the facility was less than half full. When pregnant women reject help from one of the best-run CPCs in the country, we don’t have practical problems; we have moral and philosophical problems. We struggle in the practical realm precisely because the culture does not agree with us that abortion is a serious moral wrong. But this center is hardly alone.

According to research presented by the Family Research Council (FRC) at a 1998 Focus on the Family conference for crisis pregnancy center staff the number of abortion-minded clients visiting CPCs is declining nationwide. For example, 10 CPCs, noted for their size and strong leadership, were asked to report their statistics for 1994 to 1996. The number of abortion-minded clients increased in four centers, but decreased in six. The number of “service only” clients (those coming in for diapers, clothing, etc., but not at risk for abortion) increased in seven, remained unchanged in one, and decreased in two. The FRC report warns that if these trends continue throughout the CPC movement, it could “threaten the primary mission of centers — to reach women at risk for abortion.”¹²

It’s not that women at risk are unaware that CPCs can help. According to a 1997 survey by the Wirthlin Group, 66 percent of American women were aware of crisis pregnancy centers and the services they provide, while 49 percent knew of their local center. Most important, 87 percent of those aware of CPCs believed they have a positive impact on the women they serve.¹³ Despite excellent services and high approval ratings, these centers are failing to reach the women most at risk.

Crisis pregnancy centers are vital to the pro-life movement, but even if there were one on every street corner in America, it would never “put abortionists virtually out of business,” much less by the end of the decade. “I’m glad that some women can be loved into loving their babies,” writes Gregg Cunningham of

the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform. "But I won't let that fact blind me to the reality that there are many others who will kill their babies if they are not made more horrified of abortion than they are terrified of their own crisis pregnancies."¹⁴

3. Downplaying the truth about abortion patronizes the very women we are trying to help. Speaking of pro-choice women facing a crisis pregnancy, Swope writes, an "emphasis on babies, whether dismembered fetuses or happy newborns, will tend to deepen the woman's sense of denial, isolation, and despair, the very emotions that will lead her to choose abortion."¹⁵

Swope is right that pro-lifers must address the woman's emotional concerns but wrong to say that we must downplay the truth about abortion in order to do this. Are we to conclude that women can't look at abortion objectively? As feminist author and abortion advocate, Naomi Wolf, points out, this view is condescending to women:

The pro-choice movement often treats with contempt the pro-lifers' practice of holding up to our faces their disturbing graphics....[But] how can we charge that it is vile and repulsive for pro-lifers to brandish vile and repulsive images if the images are real? To insist that truth is in poor taste is the very height of hypocrisy. Besides, if these images are often the facts of the matter, and if we then claim that it is offensive for pro-choice women to be confronted by them, then we are making a judgment that women are too inherently weak to face a truth about which they have to make a grave decision. This view is unworthy offeminism.¹⁶

Some (though thankfully not all) CPCs have a policy forbidding the use of abortion pictures in counseling sessions, even when the client may consent to viewing them. As unpleasant as it seems, breaking people's hearts over abortion is often an indispensable predicate to changing their minds. Pictures change the way they feel, and facts change the way they think. Both are vital. "I wish it weren't so, but whatever might be a CPCs reasons for categorically rejecting the use of graphic depictions of abortion, those reasons had better be more important than the lives of the babies who will die because of that policy," writes Cunningham.¹⁷

4. Downplaying the truth about abortion is totally unnecessary and strips the pro-life movement of its most powerful tools of persuasion. We can win if we force abortion advocates to defend killing babies. The national debate over partial-birth abortion (PBA) is a case in point. Though President Clinton has twice vetoed legislation banning the procedure, the debate has helped pro-lifers in at least five ways.

First, public opinion has shifted modestly in our favor. Although Swope disputes that this has anything to do with PBA, the evidence is compelling.¹⁸ Since the partial-birth issue was first raised in 1995, the percentage of those who think abortion should be legal under any circumstances has dropped on average from 33 percent to 22 percent.¹⁹ The trend among women 18 and over is also encouraging. According to a 1999 study by The Center for Gender Equity, more women oppose abortion than support it. Fifty-three percent now say abortion should be illegal altogether or allowed only in cases of rape, incest, or endangerment of the mother's life.²⁰ That's an eight-percent shift away from abortion rights compared to a poll taken two years prior.

Why the shift? For the first time in 25 years, the debate is about the abortion act itself and how it affects the unborn.²¹ "When someone holds up a model of a six-month-old fetus and a pair of surgical scissors, we say 'choice' and we lose," writes Naomi Wolf.²²

At a National Abortion Federation meeting in 1996, Kathryn Kohlbert cautioned delegates that if the debate over partial-birth abortion focuses on what happens to the unborn, their side will get "creamed." She urged focusing exclusively on the woman:

If the debate is whether or not the fetus feels pain, we lose. If the debate in the public arena is what's the effect of anesthesia. [on the fetus], we'll lose. If the debate is on whether or not women ought to be entitled to late abortion, we will probably lose. But if the debate is on the circumstances of individual women, and [how] the government shouldn't be making those decisions, then I think we can win these fights.²³

We have yet to convince many of the inhumanity of abortion in the first trimester. But graphic depictions of abortion have put our opponents on the defensive.

Second, the shift in public opinion has led to legislative progress. Despite recent setbacks in the states of Washington and Colorado, where ballot initiatives banning PBA suffered narrow defeats, the trend has been remarkably positive for the pro-life movement. For instance, New Jersey legislators — including many liberal Democrats — are supporting limits on abortion. According to *The New York Times*, the New Jersey experience is typical of the national trend where 31 states have now passed measures restricting access to abortion. Pro-lifers are forcing liberals to defend the abortion act itself. In New Jersey; lawmakers were actually shown videos of abortion procedures prior to a committee vote on PBA.²⁴

Mary Balch, director of the National Right to Life State Legislative Department, explains her success with liberal lawmakers: “All we had done was to say to them, ‘Pro-abortionists support removing a large, living unborn baby almost entirely from her mother’s womb, stabbing her in the head with scissors, and sucking out her brains. Are you willing to support that?’”²⁵

Swope replies that his strategy does not necessarily apply to legislative or political change, but only to reaching the general public. This misses the point entirely. Politicians will restrict abortion precisely because public opinion demands it. Most legislators, especially those who are pro-abortion, are not going to support pro-life legislation in the absence of intense pressure from constituents. What changed the minds of constituents in this case was not concern for the self-interest of women, but the brutal reality of abortion.

Third, both the American Medical Association and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology have issued reports condemning partial-birth abortion.²⁶ The AMA has gone even further, stating that late-term abortions are rarely, if ever, needed to save the mother’s life or physical health.²⁷ Though abortion advocates within the AMA have protested that the reports were politically motivated, they’ve presented no evidence to challenge the fact that partial-birth abortion procedures are nearly always performed on healthy women carrying healthy babies. Both organizations have a history of supporting abortion-on-demand, yet the debate over PBA forced each to issue statements questioning the morality of some abortions.

Fourth, PBA legislation has raised the issue of fetal pain, further calling into question the morality of abortion. An editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* states, “It is beyond ironic that the pain management practiced for an intact D&X on a human fetus would not meet the federal standards for the humane care of animals used in medical research.”²⁸ Other medical journals have raised similar concerns.²⁹

Fifth, the PBA debate has undermined the credibility of abortion advocates in general. Simply put they were caught lying, and even their staunchest supporters in the media felt cheated. Pro-abortion columnist Richard Cohen writes, “I was led to believe that these late-term abortions were extremely rare and performed only when the life of the mother was in danger or the fetus irreparably deformed. I was wrong.”³⁰ A short time later, Ron Fitzimmons, executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, admitted that he and others intentionally lied to the public when they said only four-hundred of these grisly procedures were done each year. He confessed that thousands of these procedures are performed annually on perfectly healthy mothers carrying perfectly healthy babies.³¹

The partial birth debate damaged the pro-abortion side because it focused on what abortion does to the unborn. Pro-lifers did two things right. First, we forced abortion advocates to defend the indefensible. Second, we marshaled factual evidence to show that our opponents were lying. That’s the essence of effective pro-life apologetics as we approach the twenty-first century.

CHANGING OUR BEHAVIOR, NOT OUR MESSAGE

The primary challenge confronting the pro-life movement is not persuading the public that our position is practical, but that our position is true. Public revulsion over partial-birth abortion has given us a rare opportunity to frame the debate in moral terms. But we are doing precious little to press our advantage.

This past January, I conducted a state-by-state survey of major pro-life events around the country. State pro-life groups were eager to send me their list of activities, as January is their most active month due to the anniversary of *Roe. v. Wade*. Listed were numerous banquets, rallies, Christian rock concerts, potluck

suppers, golf tournaments, marches, candlelight vigils, prayer services, and religious events. Shocking was the fact that not one of the events I surveyed remotely related to impacting the culture at the idea level or equipping our people to think and defend their views persuasively.³²

The American public is confused and holds contradictory positions on abortion because people think the issue is morally complex. This confusion can be cleared up if pro-life apologists frame the debate around one question, as Gregory Koukl, president of Stand to Reason, explains: "Imagine that your child walks up when your back is turned and asks, 'Daddy, can I kill this? What is the first thing you must find out before you can answer him? You can never answer the question "Can I kill this?" unless you've answered a prior question: What is it?"³³

The answer to the question "What is the unborn?" trumps all other considerations. It is key to answering virtually every objection to the pro-life view. The following dialogue illustrates why there is only one issue to resolve, not many:

Abortion Advocate: Abortion is a private choice between a woman and her doctor.

Pro-Lifer: Do we allow parents to mistreat their children if done in private?

Abortion Advocate: Of course not. Those children are human beings.

Pro-Lifer: Then the issue isn't privacy. It's "What is the unborn?"

Abortion Advocate: But many poor women cannot afford to raise another child.

Pro-Lifer: When human beings get expensive, may we kill them?

Abortion Advocate: Well, no, but aborting a fetus is not the same as killing a person.

Pro-Lifer: So, once again, the issue is "What is the unborn? Is the fetus a human person?"

Abortion Advocate: But you're being too simplistic. This is a very complex issue involving women who must make agonizing decisions.

Pro-Lifer: The decision may be *psychologically* complex for the mother, but *morally* it is not complex at all. When blacks are mistreated in a certain society; do we spin a tale about complex, agonizing decisions for the whites in power or do we condemn the evil of racism?

Abortion Advocate: Abortng a fetus that is not a person is one thing, discriminating against black persons is quite another.

Pro-Lifer: So we're agreed: If abortion kills a defenseless human being, then the issue wouldn't be complex at all. The question is, "What is the unborn?"

Abortion Advocate: Enough with your abstract philosophy. Let's talk about real life. Do you really think a woman should be forced to bring an unwanted child into the world?

Pro-Lifer: The homeless are unwanted, may we kill them?

Abortion Advocate: But it's not the same.

Pro-Lifer: That's the issue, isn't it? Are they the same? If the unborn are human like the homeless, then we can't kill them to get them out of the way. We're back to my first question, "What is the unborn?"

Abortion Advocate: But you still shouldn't force your morality on women.

Pro-Lifer: You don't really believe what you just said. You'd feel very comfortable forcing your morality on a mother who was physically abusing her two-year-old, wouldn't you?

Abortion Advocate: But the two cases are not the same.

Pro-Lifer: Oh? Why is that?

Abortion Advocate: Because you're assuming the unborn are human, like the two-year-old.

Pro-Lifer: And *you're* assuming they're not. So the issue is quite simple, isn't it? It's *not* forcing morality; it's *not* privacy; it's *not* economic hardship; it's *not* unwantedness; it's "What is the unborn?"

What we must change is not our message, but our behavior. Babies are dying whose lives could be saved if pro-life advocates were equipped to argue their case persuasively. We can win if we force abortion advocates to defend killing babies. The battle over partial-birth abortion indicates this.

When the pro-life debate has faltered, it's because the focus has been shifted from the real issue: What is the unborn? The reluctance of some pro-lifers to advance moral arguments is a tacit admission they either don't have a moral case to offer or lack the courage to proclaim it. Either way, these pro-lifers have not merely failed to communicate, they've abandoned the fight altogether. This we cannot do.

NOTES

1. Paul Swope, "Abortion: A Failure to Communicate," *First Things*, April 1998.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Frederica Matthews-Green, *Real Choices* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1994), 32.
5. Francis J. Beckwith, letter to the editor, *First Things* (October, 1998).
6. Susan Yoachum, "California Pro-Choice — Early-on Poll Says Late-Term Abortions Opposed," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 March 1997, and *The New York Times/CBS poll* (January 1998).
7. Francis J. Beckwith, "Taking Abortion Seriously," unpublished paper, 1999. This paper will be presented at the 51st Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Danvers, Massachusetts, 17-19 November 1999.
8. Reply to Francis J. Beckwith's letter to the editor, *First Things*, October 1998.
9. David Shaw, "Abortion Bias Seeps into News," *The Los Angeles Times*, 1-4 July 1990.
10. Care Net Volunteer Training Manual, 1995, 24.
11. "Action Line" (the former newsletter of the Christian Action Council, the group now known as Care Net), January 1993; see also Kim Lawton, "20 Years after Roe," *Christianity Today*, 11 January 1993, 38.
12. Kurt Young, "Assessing Center Impact Increasing Center Effectiveness," Family Outreach Council, February 1998. This paper was presented at a Focus on the Family conference specifically to address the decline in abortion-minded clients.
13. Poll cited in *National Rights to Life News*, 7 May 1998.
14. 12 April 1993 letter from Gregg Cunningham to Scott Klusendorf.
15. Swope.
16. Naomi Wolf, "Our Bodies, Our Souls," *The New Republic*, 16 October 1996.
17. 12 April 1993 letter from Cunningham to Klusendorf. I have letters on file from CPCs that have responsibly used graphic visual aids to deter women from abortion.
18. Swope credits his ads (in states where they run) rather than PBA for the shift, but this flies in the face of nearly every opinion poll taken since 1997. Pollsters consistently cite PBA for the change in public attitudes. See also n. 21.
19. *USA Today/CNN* poll, 1997; cited in Ruth Padawer, "Partial Birth Battle Changing Public Views," *USA Today*, 17 November 1997.
20. Study conducted by the Center for Gender Equality, January 1999. Cited in John Leo, "The Joy of Sexual Values," *U.S. News and World Report*, 1 March 1999. Another sign of slippage in support for legal abortion is UCLA's annual survey of college freshman, where in 1998 only 50.9 percent favored the practice, down from 65 percent in 1990.
21. Even pro-abortion feminists concede this. Faye Wattleton, Executive Director of the Center for Gender Equity said the debate over PBA has affected women's overall views on abortion. "We've been seeing an erosion of support [for abortion], and that probably grows out of the late-term abortion debate." (Cited in *The Boston Herald*, 4 February 1999.)
22. Naomi Wolf, "Pro-Choice and Pro-Life," *The New York Times*, 3 April 1997.
23. Diane Gianelli, "Abortion Rights Leader Urges End to Half-Truths," *American Medical News*, 3 March 1997.
24. Abby Goodnough, "Trenton Turning from Its longtime Support of Abortion Rights," *The New York Times*, 22 February 1998.
25. "The Untold Story of Partial-Birth Abortion," *National Right to Life News*, 15 March 1999.
26. On the AMA, see M. L. Sprang and M. G. Neerhof, "Rationale for Banning Abortions Late in Pregnancy," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 26 August 1998. On the ACOG, see Diane Gianelli, "AMA Report: Third Trimester Abortions Rarely Necessary" *American Medical News*, 26 May 1997.
27. Gianelli, "AMA Report."
28. Sprang and Neerhof.
29. Xenophon Giannakouloupoulos, et al, "Fetal Plasma Cortisol and B-Endorphin Response to Intrauterine Needling," *The Lancet* (July 9, 1994): See also Diane Gianelli, "Anesthesiologists Question Claims in Abortion Debate," *American Medical News*, 1 January 1996.
30. Richard Cohen, "Late Abortions Can Transcend the Issue of Choice," *The New York Times*, 26 September 1996.
31. David Stout, "An Abortion Advocate Says He Lied about Procedure," *The New York Times*, 26 February 1997. See also Gianelli, "Abortion Rights Leader Urges End to Half-Truths."
32. I am speaking here only of major events as advertised by pro-life groups. I do not mean to imply that local pro-life groups or individuals did nothing to persuade the public.
33. Gregory P. Koukl, *Precious Human Unborn Persons* (San Pedro, CA: Stand to Reason, 1997), 4-5.