

## A WARNING TO PRO-LIFERS

Three separate perspectives, with problematic ideas about pro-life strategy, have been promoted in recent weeks. The first was a National Post article by Barbara Kay in which she called the Genocide Awareness Project (GAP), which visually compares abortion to the Holocaust, the “worst” use of the pro-life movement’s time and resources and called for a shift in pro-life messaging to bridge to people like her. Then there was a World Magazine piece by Marvin Olasky which criticized pro-lifers who display abortion imagery and who liken abortion to the Holocaust, emphasizing a need for a less controversial approach. Finally, there was a meeting I attended where the event host criticized GAP, arguing that the pro-life movement needs to align its strategy to that of a marketing model in order to avoid turning people off.

Resisting activities which ruffle feathers and rock boats is reminiscent of the Alabama clergymen who, in 1963, wrote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., criticizing his peaceful but controversial efforts at social reform, claiming they were not only “unwise and untimely” but “extreme.” History has shown who was right.

In responding to those clergymen, Dr. King wrote this:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

Indeed, what is worse: those who cover up abortion while agreeing with abortion, or those who cover up abortion while opposing abortion?

Just as there were those who opposed racism and segregation and yet were confused about how to oppose the injustice effectively, so too is that the case with abortion. This commentary will endeavor to address some confusion about pro-life strategy.

### Popularity Versus Persecution

The idea that the pro-life movement needs to change its image by eliminating graphic pictures is rooted in the perspective that in order to achieve social change, we need to first be focussed on how we come across or are perceived by society. In other words, we need to change how people perceive *us* in order to change how they perceive *the injustice*.

But that is *not* how successful social reformers throughout history have transformed their cultures. Not William Wilberforce, not Mahatma Gandhi, not Rosa Parks, not Dr. King, to name just a few. These people and their movements did not work to change how people perceived them. They worked to change how people perceived the injustices at hand. They were more concerned about people *being* good than they were concerned about people *feeling* good. As a result, they faced severe persecution: threats, arrest, physical attacks, and even death.

Their example conveys an important lesson: persecution is not necessarily a sign of ineffectiveness. On the contrary, it may be a sign of effectiveness. To determine this, one must ask “why?” one is being persecuted. If the answer is because the messenger is mean, then that is grounds to change. However, if the answer is because the message is challenging, uncomfortable, and inconvenient (yet true and just) then one must persevere amidst the persecution.

Does this mean historical social reformers didn’t care *at all* about how they came across? No. They certainly ensured their conduct was above reproach and that they acted in a spirit of love, respect, and truth. They ensured their character complemented their message. Yet even with that, their characters were attacked *because* of their message. But these social reformers were willing to accept that abuse. Their *primary* concern was not what people thought of them; it was what people thought of the injustice. Likewise, the pro-life movement does not exist to change how people perceive pro-lifers; they exist to change how people perceive abortion. And so, the movement should learn from historical social reformers who accepted that, no matter how upright their characters were, their uncomfortable and graphic message would make them unpopular.

They knew that exposing and confronting injustice came with a price: trading in popularity for persecution. It meant accepting the vilification which inevitably followed. It helps to consider that, historically and presently, oppressors do two things:

1) suppress evidence and 2) villainize those who expose the evidence in an effort to dupe them into helping sweep that evidence under the carpet.

Vilification is a means to shift the public's focus from abortion to the pro-lifer (by keeping abortion in a positive light and casting pro-lifers in a negative light) and to get pro-lifers to *react* by shifting focus from abortion to casting themselves in a positive light. It is designed to get pro-lifers to be self-focussed, to make them worry about how they come across. It is designed to get pro-lifers' attention off of abortion and onto themselves. This is done because abortion advocates can easily defend "choice," and thus can easily make pro-lifers look bad for opposing "choice." The challenge for the pro-life social reformer is to not be influenced by this tactic. Instead, the pro-lifer must use the best available evidence—imagery—to restore meaning to the word "choice" so that being against the choice to kill a baby is rightly seen as good, and supporting the choice to kill a baby is rightly seen as bad.

As history has shown, public perception of social reformers was not very high until public perception of the injustice changed. Then, when that shift happened, the public embraced the very people and the very movements they once despised. Often, however, this occurred after the death of those social reformers. Furthermore, this social change occurred because the ugly, disturbing, unpleasant, gut-wrenching facts were shown. These social reformers were willing to sacrifice popularity for the sake of truth. The irony is that in doing so, they received popularity in the long run. Suffragette Susan B. Anthony expressed this well:

Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences.

### Being Reactive

The idea that pro-lifers need to change what they're doing *simply* because people respond badly is not only flawed, it is entirely reactive—which is what the other side wants.

One need only look to the recent campaign to "Make a donation to Planned Parenthood in Sarah Palin's name," where abortion advocates used the "threat" of Palin's potential rise to the American vice presidency as an impetus for contributions (bringing in almost \$1 million). Should Palin have become less pro-life in order to get people to stop making donations? Should Dr. King and Gandhi have ceased their tactics because people got angry (and eventually killed them)? If not, then why should pro-lifers change what they say and do simply because their opponents don't like it? To do so is to allow the other side to dictate what one does; it allows them to set the terms for debate; it gives them the upper hand; it enables them to talk about what they *can* defend ("choice"), rather than make them defend what they cannot (baby killing).

And so, Kay's advice that pro-life student clubs focus the abortion debate on women's health, saying, "What campus union could in conscience refuse an information session on women's health?" plays into the hands of abortion advocates. If campus unions, dominated by abortion advocates, object more when the subject is fetuses and less when it is women's health, that's a good indicator that pro-lifers should stick to their message.

### Shifting the Focus from the Unborn to Women

After all, when pro-lifers put too much emphasis on the risks women face from abortion, they lose ground. As an abortion advocate could point out, there are risks inherent to many medical procedures, so why not take the risk for the greater benefit one will likely achieve? In other words, someone could think, "Well, I *could* be negatively affected by an abortion, but how much *more* could I be negatively affected by having a child I don't want?"

Even more to the point, if pro-lifers claim that abortion is wrong because it hurts women, what happens if it doesn't hurt women? Or, what happens if the benefits appear to outweigh the hurt? Would this mean abortion becomes morally acceptable?

If pro-lifers allow ourselves to be distracted by arguments focussing primarily on why abortion is not in a *woman's* self-interest, then we are implicitly reinforcing the pro-abortion position and not our own: we are legitimizing the pro-abortion principle that the woman's interests take precedence over the child's *life*.

Canadian society is steeped in a focus on the self to the detriment of the well-being of others. This is why the abortion-rights movement is so successful: it relies heavily upon self-interest as justification for abortion. This mentality, therefore, should be rejected, not reinforced.

Abortion is *not* wrong because it hurts women. Abortion is wrong because it intentionally kills an innocent human being. *That* is why it hurts women both psychologically and physically. The pro-life message must not confuse the *reason* abortion is wrong with the *effects* abortion has on women. Testimonies and personal appeal are powerful—and important—but they shouldn't replace the foundational message about what abortion does to the unborn.

### Positivity

Of course, educating about how abortion kills babies will inevitably involve negative feelings. Know this, however: it's not possible to change people's understanding of "choice" and be "positive." That's because dismembering, disemboweling, and decapitating innocent babies is not a positive thing. Of course, this killing of these babies is considered legitimate because the babies aren't perceived as persons—the very status denied to Jews and Blacks in order to rationalize their extermination and enslavement. It is that key issue—the unjust denial of personhood—that must be raised in the abortion debate, and yet it's also the issue that is least seen or understood. This blindness is precisely why people like Kay take issue with our comparison of abortion to the Holocaust.

Those who do not see any similarity between the Holocaust and abortion either do not understand the Holocaust or they do not understand abortion. It is impossible to comprehend both and not see the parallels: innocent human beings, denied their personhood status, used for experimentation, treated as objects, legally killed in centres set up for the express purpose of terminating their lives, and disposed of like waste. The murder of Jews was justified on the basis that their religion or culture made them inferior; likewise, the murder of the unborn is justified on the basis that their age, location, or level of development makes them inferior (after all, once they are born, they are safe under the law). And while those who do the unthinkable may not be evil, their *actions* undoubtedly are—and it's actions, not actors, under examination at GAP.

### Marketing

Exposing the evil of abortion is not likely to be supported by marketing experts and branding agents because doing so makes the pro-lifer very unpopular. But it's important to keep in mind that these marketing experts likely would also have objected to the methods of Dr. King who, although having streets named after him today, was despised yesterday.

While pro-lifers should certainly make sure they are professional, respectful, and relevant, some of its required messaging just isn't built for marketing. T.A. McMahon echoes that sentiment in his analysis of "seeker sensitive" churches which do evangelization marketing-style. His insights on that can be applied to the pro-life movement. He says, in part, the following:

Fundamentally, marketing has to do with profiling consumers, ascertaining what their 'felt needs' are, and then fashioning one's product (or its image) to appeal to the targeted customer's desires. The hoped-for result is that the consumer buys or 'buys into' the product. George Barna, whom Christianity Today calls 'the church's guru of growth,' claims that such an approach is essential for the church in our market-driven society. Evangelical church-growth leaders are adamant that the marketing approach can be applied—and they have employed it—without compromising the gospel. Really?

First of all, the gospel and, more significantly, the person of Jesus Christ do not fit into any marketing strategy. They are not 'products' to be 'sold.' They cannot be refashioned or image-adjusted to appeal to the felt needs of our consumer-happy culture. Any attempt to do so compromises to some degree the truth of who Christ is and what He has done for us. For example, if the lost are considered consumers and a basic marketing 'commandment' says that the customer must reign supreme, then whatever may be offensive to the lost must be discarded, revamped, or downplayed. Scripture tells us clearly that the message of the Cross is 'foolishness to them that are perishing' and

that Christ himself is a 'rock of offense' (1 Cor 1:18; 1 Pt 2:8). Some seeker-friendly churches, therefore, seek to avoid this 'negative aspect' by making the temporal benefits of becoming a Christian their chief selling point. Although that appeals to our gratification-oriented generation, it is neither the gospel nor the goal of a believer's life in Christ.

McMahon continues with his concerns, writing about how attracting "the lost on the basis of what might interest them will... [appeal to and accommodate] their flesh." He further points out that the majority of weekend attendees of seeker-sensitive churches are not the unchurched. Instead, they are people from smaller churches who are attracted to the "worldly allurements [that their own, smaller churches do not have] that were meant to entice the unbelievers." Concerned that these people are not being properly fed, he concludes, "Certainly a church can grow numerically on that basis, but not spiritually" (Source: [www.thebereancall.org/node/2587](http://www.thebereancall.org/node/2587)).

The same can be said when desire for popularity rules pro-life activity. This is not to say there isn't a place for relationship-building, raising issues strategically, etc., but the core element of the pro-life message (that abortion is an act of violence that kills a baby) nonetheless must be faced along with the discomfort and unpleasant feelings that result. If one applies the aforementioned marketing model to pro-life activism, however, there will inevitably be the avoidance of the difficult, uncomfortable (graphic) message that the "consumer" (abortion supporter or tepid pro-lifer) simply doesn't want. With abortion, the "consumer" is guided by self-interest, ease, and expediency. The pro-life message cannot be packaged to feed that, but instead the very philosophy of the consumer must be challenged at its core.

### Abortion Law

It is worth noting that with historical injustices, there were the pessimists who thought those crimes would never be outlawed, which is Kay's sentiment on abortion. In fact, she herself is "not opposed in principle to legal abortion." She says, "Canada is never going to outlaw abortion," so she calls for "an abortion law with benign, sensible constraints that line up with those of all civilized countries except ours." Her view is appalling when one considers that these so-called "civilized" countries almost always, if not entirely, limit abortion *after* 12 weeks, a time at which a majority—almost 90%—of unborn human beings to be aborted have already been slaughtered (and when 70% of Canadians support abortion!).

Kay wants the pro-life movement to change how it acts, which isn't surprising when she hasn't changed how she thinks. It would be reactive, and damaging, for the pro-life movement to change its behavior to accommodate a person who is not fully on side, rather than to continue its behavior to convince that person to *be* fully on side (acknowledging that person may resist before accepting).

After all, how *could* the pro-life movement heed the advice of someone who says, as Kay did, that "Abortion should be a serious moral decision, and undertaken with a heavy heart, with all options carefully weighed beforehand, rather than the rushed, banalized service of convenience it has become"? Would she be satisfied with a law that permitted rape as long as rape weren't "rushed" but instead was "undertaken with a heavy heart, with all options carefully weighed beforehand"?

### Concluding Thought

When we are surrounded by darkness, we close our eyes at exposure to light. But eventually the pain subsides, our eyes adjust, and we realize we are better off for being in light than in darkness. So it is with visually sharing the "inconvenient truth" about abortion: initial resistance will give way to acceptance. And we who are the messengers must stay the course, accepting short-term persecution in order to achieve long-term cultural transformation.

As Gandhi once said, "First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win."

*Written by Stephanie Gray, February 2009. Stephanie is co-founder and executive director of the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform, the Canadian affiliate of the organization that created the Genocide Awareness Project. She recommends all pro-life activists read the essay "Why Prophets Get Stoned," <http://catholicexchange.com/2007/01/29/79726/>*