

Hard Truths about Fighting Abortion

Heartbeat Pregnancy Center

By Marvin Olasky

My wife and I have four sons, with the oldest now 27, so we've been picking up parenting tips for a long time. I'd like to pass along three of the best ones for preparing to take care of babies.

1. Hollow out a melon. Make a small hole in the side. Suspend it from the ceiling and swing it from side to side. Now get a bottle of baby food. Attempt to spoon it into the swaying melon by pretending to be an airplane. Continue until half the bottle is gone. Tip the rest into your lap, making sure that a lot of it falls on the floor. You are now ready to feed an eight-month-old baby.

2. Dressing small children is not as easy as it seems. First, buy an octopus and a string bag. Attempt to put the octopus into the string bag so that none of the arms hang out. Time allowed for this—all morning.

3. Forget the sports car. Buy a family car. And don't think that it will be spotless and shining. Family cars don't look like that. Buy a chocolate ice cream bar and put it in the glove compartment. Leave it there. Get a quarter. Stick it in the cassette player. Take a family-size packet of chocolate cookies. Mash them down the back seats. Run a garden rake along both sides of the car. There. Perfect.

Well, we all know that it's not perfect—but it's good. With all the aggravation, still you'll agree that it's worthwhile—I would not have missed a moment of it. (Well, maybe some moments.) Raising children is hard, but it's worth doing.

That's what working at the Heartbeat Pregnancy Center is like. It's hard, even harder than raising children in some ways, because children grow and progress. Sometimes the counselors at Heartbeat don't see much progress. Turning down love, help, and reason, a young woman might choose abortion. And yet, Heartbeat perseveres.

The same perseverance is evident among those who show their

commitment to the sanctity of life in other ways. Think of Nellie Gray, who leads the March for Life in Washington on the January 22 anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, and has done so every year since 1973, sometimes on bright cool days but at other times amid snowstorms or single-digit temperatures. That perseverance surprises a lot of people, just as the continued strength of Christianity in this country surprises many. Thomas Jefferson predicted two centuries ago that Unitarianism would soon replace Christianity. Clarence Darrow predicted the same thing in the 1920s following his rhetorical victory in the Scopes monkey trial. But now, in 2004, we have a president of the United State who's not afraid to talk about his reliance on Christ.


In the 1970s many newspapers proclaimed that the Supreme Court had settled the abortion issue and the prolife movement would die. Lots of unborn children have died because of the nationwide legalization of abortion on demand—but it could have been even worse. One prognosticator in 1970 predicted that there would be four million abortions in America by the year 2000. Instead, Heartbeat Pregnancy Center and its counterparts nationwide have helped to reduce the number of abortions from 1.6 million in 1990 to 1.2 million last year. That's still a terrible number, but we're making progress against stiff odds.

The frequent predictions of the prolife movement or Christianity's imminent demise remind me of the story of an elderly man who lay dying in his bed. He suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength. He forced himself down the stairs. He gazed into the kitchen. Spread out upon platters on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table. He reached out, but—smack!—a spatula came down on his hand. "Stay out of those," his wife growled, "they're for the funeral."

Well, the funeral for the prolife movement is further off now than it was ten or twenty years ago. Public opinion polls show slow but steady movement toward the prolife position. A new generation of prolife activists has emerged. Why? Because we're telling the truth, and one by one people see it. Young mothers and fathers see it when they look at the screen of an ultrasound machine and see not just any baby, but their baby.

That's also why many college students who insist on hearing the truth are turning to Christianity, a religion that insists on telling the truth. The truth about God's holiness. The truth about our

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sinfulness. The truth about how Christ's sacrifice bridged the gap. And in Nacogdoches, the truth about how those who follow in Christ's steps bridge the gap between a sinner overwhelmed by her circumstances and the action she knows she should take: offering birth to her baby rather than death.

Heartbeat volunteers comfort young women whose lives are a mess, but pro-aborts would not mind it if LifeChoices merely offered comfort. Christianity comforts those who are sad, but atheists would not be upset if Christianity was only comforting. Marxism has faltered around the world, but Marx's depiction of religion as "the opiate of the masses" has sunk deep journalistic roots. An opiate is something people take to reduce physical or psychological pain. The enemies of Christianity don't mind it being considered as an opiate for hurting people or a crutch for weak people.

But listen to what Paul told the Corinthians, if Christianity is not true "we are of all people most to be pitied." And that's what I want to emphasize for you tonight concerning Christianity, and concerning prolife work specifically: We need to offer comfort – but we need to tell the truth. Ultrasound machines proclaim truth. Counselors tell the truth when they tell those terrified by pregnancy and looking for an easy way out: you are already a parent, this is a baby utterly dependent on you, and you have one chance now to get it right.

It's a hard, hard task to insist on truth when people are looking only for comfort, but tonight I'd like to give you four examples of why it's important to tell the truth, not only to others but to ourselves — and what happens when we don't.

First, after 31 years of Roe v. Wade, we need to be truthful about the limitations of legislation.

It's been easy to demand some law that would stop abortion, although hard to achieve one that even slows it down. Laws do have an impact, and even bills that don't make it into law can be tremendously educational. But at the same time we've learned a hard truth during the past three decades: given the makeup of American society, politics, and law, we can't expect legislation to accomplish much.

I can't resist telling this Texas story about a young farm girl out milking the family cow when a stranger approached and asked to see her mother. "Momma," the young lady called out, "there's a man here to see you." The mother looked out the kitchen window and replied, "Haven't I always told you not to talk to strangers? You come in this house right now." The girl protested: "But momma, this man says he is a United States senator." The wise mother replied, "In that case, bring the cow in with you."

We can't trust Congress these days to produce much good legislation, but even legal restrictions on abortion do little without enforcement — and enforcement generally depends on community consensus. Law certainly influences culture, but for the most part law follows culture. That's the way it's been over the 170-year history of abortion since it emerged as a major social problem in the 1830s.

That's right, the 1830s. One book I've written showed how, in the years before the Civil War, we had an enormous expansion of abortion. It shows how, during the fifty years after that war, the number of abortions was hugely reduced. Law had something to

do with that, but the major factor was the growth of the abstinence movement, the growth of crisis pregnancy shelters, and the growth of adoption.

History is now repeating itself. But we need to remember that even with strong anti-abortion laws, abortion was not eradicated a century ago. It's always there in some quantity, just as sin is always crouching at our door. But abortion, like sin itself can be contained, and over time chained up, one day to be cast into a pit of flaming fire.

I admire the Heartbeat counselors, and I admire their counterparts in the 19th century. While researching the history of abortion I read the monthly newsletters of Helen Mercy Woods, who from 1881 to 1903 ran a shelter in Chicago for pregnant and unmarried women. I fell in love with her. Month after month she gave personal attention to each newcomer and rejoiced as their babies were born. She helped some of her charges to get married, others to place their children for adoption, others to get jobs.

I also fell in love with Annie Richardson Kennedy. She ran a home for unwed moms in New York City between 1900 and 1920. Her goal was first to bring the girls in touch with their Savior, and then build character. She provided love and opportunity for thousands, and then disappeared into the fog of history.

My wife doesn't mind my falling in love with Helen Mercy Woods or Annie Richardson Kennedy, because they've all been dead for a long time. But what's wonderful is that there are heroines in this room whom some historian may fall in love with a century from now. The truth is that no law can wipe out abortion, because the willingness to do whatever it takes for our own comfort is within us all. Sin is always crouching at our door.

Let's talk about a second truth: what we need to do in our churches to show a real commitment to abstinence and sexual fidelity.

Heartbeat teaches about abstinence, and that's a hard sell. You've heard about bait and switch in selling, when you're promised one thing and then moved into something that's either more expensive or of lesser quality. The same process occurs with ideas and worldviews, including the worldview that could perhaps be called Playboyism. The bait: physical pleasure and a sense of psychological conquest. The switch becomes evident over time when young bodies become old and loneliness swamps lust. The abc's of alienation, brokenness, and confusion take their toll. Yet, by the time reality sinks in at 40 or 50, decades are gone and cannot be replaced.

When I was in college I wasn't a Christian. I bought what James Bond movies and a host of others were teaching even then: the good life is sleeping with lots of different women. I should mention that since I became a Christian 28 years ago I've often thanked God that He did not make me handsome. As it was I had to work very hard for opportunities.

And what if instead of getting married I had bought the lie and decided to build up my stats concerning one-night or one-week stands? What if at my age of 54 I had hundreds of sexual conquests and did not have a wife with whom I've been married for almost three decades, and four sons of whom I am very proud? Assuming I had not died of or been debilitated by some disease, I would still be among the saddest of men. I would not know how sad, because I would never really know what I had missed, but there would be an emptiness within me.

We need to convey this to kids. But we can do that authentically only if we ourselves aren't taking the bait – and often, in our churches, we are. Even in this audience of prolife folks in Nacogdoches, a statistician would say that there's someone in this audience, right now, involved in or contemplating adultery. Don't be alarmed: I'm not a private investigator with knowledge of such. I'm just going by the statistics – and they are miserable. When we have adultery and unbiblical divorce in our churches and we don't try to use church discipline to stop such abuses, how effectively can we lecture our teens about chastity?

When I recently had to discipline my youngest son for goofing off in school, his response was, *Leave me alone*. I had to say, *No, I won't leave you alone. My job, my calling as a dad, is not to leave you alone*. That's what church leaders should tell prospective members: If you get involved in adultery, if you want an unbiblical divorce, we won't leave you alone. Our calling is to help you return to trusting in God, and enjoying the rightful pleasures he gives us.

Some of you may be familiar with the Westminster Confession of Faith from the 1640s, and its shorter catechism that begins with this famous question: "What is the chief end of man? – (*End* means *purpose*.) The answer goes, "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Forever begins right now, and God has given us numerous ways to enjoy Him, including being in bed with the person to whom you're married. When we stray, we're not only being unfaithful to a spouse but to God.

Our churches should say, "We won't leave you alone." If we're not willing to push hard for sexual fidelity among people in their 30s and 40s and 50s, we shouldn't be pushing for it among teens with raging hormones.

Third, we need to tell the truth about where the prolife movement has fallen down. We've been successful in helping Americans to see abortion as the killing of human life. Many, though, view abortion as justifiable homicide, self-defense against tiny intruders who will ruin the lives of young women unless they are (with regrets) snuffed out.

Right now, unmarried pregnant women often see themselves as having, in essence, the choice of committing homicide or suffering the life imprisonment of single parenthood. That's because pregnant women who are unmarried and unlikely to get married have had two main choices in recent years. Choice A, abortion, has received special protection from a variety of federal laws and court rulings. Choice B, single-parenting, grew among the poor as a variety of federal programs gave those who chose it special funding, and as it became fashionable among some affluent trend-setters.

Choice A, abortion, also seemed to convey an immediate benefit: Make the problem disappear. (And ignore the possible physical and likely psychological effects, particularly post-abortion regrets that grow more severe as time goes by.) Choice B, single-parenting, also conveyed benefits: the love of a child, plus supposed autonomy for the affluent, and for the poor, money from the only rich uncle (Sam) they have.

Single-parenting is infinitely superior to killing a child, but a better yet is choice C, adoption into a family with both a mom and a dad. One problem, though, is that while adoption is altruistic — life for a child and a gift to an often-childless couple — teenagers are often self-absorbed. Because of that and other cultural and legal uncertainties, it's not surprising that over the past two decades

roughly 49% of unmarried pregnant women have grabbed hold of choice A (abortion), 49% have skipped into B (single-parenting), and only 2% have chosen C (adoption).

That has to change. One way it can is by making our churches adoption-friendly, and by conveying the joy of adoption. Since my wife and I adopted our youngest son, I've been asked many times whether it's hard to love a child who's not your own flesh and blood the way you can a child born to you. In my experience, the answer is unmistakably Yes. It would take me too long to go into all the pleasures of adoption, but I do want to mention that the joy in bringing forth life is great, but so is the joy of being God's instrument in transforming a life.

Moving on to a fourth truth: The truth about God, how he acts, and how we react. God changes people at unpredictable times. I began graduate school in 1973 as an atheist and Communist but came to believe in God, helped along by strange things God put in my path: A Russian copy of the New Testament. A book of Puritan writings that I was assigned to use in teaching. I tripped over those and was a Christian by 1976, so I'm not surprised when God trips others as well.

We sometimes hear about religious searchers: I was not one. I was a runner, fleeing from Christ, busying myself with other things. But Victorian poet Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* tells the story of many conversions, including mine: "I fled him, down the nights and down the days. I fled him, down the arches of the years..." And yet, Christ pursued "with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace."

So how should we pursue? We should also act with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace. "I have stilled and quieted my soul," the poet-king David tells us in Psalm 131, "like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me." That's good advice for Christian conservatives in America today: lots of things can anger us, but few apparitions are uglier and less useful than a red-faced, veins-popping, clamor-voiced defender of a religion that emphasizes loving our neighbors. Christ sometimes was angry but always showed the self-control of one who knew the Father is in control.

Staying sane is hard in a society filled with delusions. How did the apostle Paul keep his blood from boiling as he walked around Athens, seeing idols on every corner and shrine prostitutes at many temples? How did Daniel react when King Belshazzar of Babylonia put on a flowing feast for 1,000 of his closest friends and desecrated golden goblets taken from the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem? As the king with his nobles, wives, and concubines got drunk "and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone," Daniel calmly praised the God of the Bible and interpreted for the mocking crowd the writing on the wall: "God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end." Daniel stilled and quieted his soul.

So: no red-faced, popping-veins yelling. Follow in Christ's steps: "unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace." And that's what the Heartbeat counselors do: They calmly tell the truth. That truth changes lives and can also change the world.

Some of you who are my age or older may remember the words President John F. Kennedy offered four decades ago, at a time when the focus of the Cold War was on a divided German

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city. Kennedy declared, “There are many people in the world who really don’t understand, or say they don’t, what is the great issue between the Free World and the communist world. Let them come to Berlin. There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin.”

I think about those Cold War days in connection with our new war against terrorism. The Islamo-fascists hate America regardless of what we do because they hate freedom. But their propaganda sways others who think of America only as a land of moral anarchy ruled by selfishness. That image is fostered by some journalists and moviemakers who see America that way themselves.

What they don’t understand is that there are two Americas, as John Edwards says, but the division is by belief, not by economic class. The America of moral anarchy does exist. But alongside it exists an America of incredible compassion, an America with people willing to sacrifice so as to provide for widows, orphans, and those made like widows when the men they depended on abandon them.

Do Islamo-fascists and mediocrats think that abortion is the wave of the future? Let them come to Nacogdoches. Let them come to the Heartbeat Pregnancy Center.

Do some think that all Americans are concerned only with our own pleasure? Let them come to Heartbeat.

Because I’ve been talking about some of these hard truths, you might think I’m pessimistic. Not at all.

Think of all the children who are aborted – and then think of how many we can save, through God’s grace on our efforts, no matter what happens with legislators and judges and constitutional amendments.

What if 50% of those children could be saved? Would we keep on doing the same old same old and forget about that 50%? What if 40% could be saved? Should we continue down the path of destruction and forget about that 40%? What if 30%... or 20%... or 10%? What if actions we take could help to transform the lives of even 5%? Should we say, “let Sodom be Sodom,” and then build our own walls higher to keep out the sight?

We often tend to be overwhelmed by the “big picture.” theologically and socially. We can be paralyzed by concern about what’s happening in this presidential election — or we can work on what’s happening next door. I mentioned Psalm 131 before; let me give you another couple of verses from it: “My heart is not proud, O Lord.... I do not concern myself with great matters, with things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul.”

Let’s not get overly worried about the big picture. Let’s help at least one person close to us. And, as the psalm concludes, let us “put our hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore.”

Here’s a reference that would go over the heads of most of my students, but not most of you: “the evil empire.” Remember, that’s how Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union. All of us need to remember that the abortionists’ evil empire can fall as the Soviet Union did — yet that evil empire did last for seventy years.

We’re patiently fighting the evil empire of abortion, but God is not silent. One of my heroes, Whittaker Chambers, dated his initial break with Communism to the time his young daughter smeared porridge on her face. Chambers found himself looking at her “intricate, perfect ears.” He saw immense design, not a chance coming together of atoms — and “at that moment, the finger of God was first laid upon my forehead.”

God’s finger, we pray, is touching the foreheads of women and men as they see their child’s image on an ultrasound machine. It’s touching the young women who receive counseling, and those who will stay at maternity homes. And it has even touched some writers.

Linda Bird Franke, who used the pseudonym Jane Doe to write in the *New York Times* about her abortion experience, produced in 1976 probably the best short article ever written about abortion. She wrote of how “there just wasn’t room” in her life for the child growing within her, so she found herself at a clinic awaiting an abortion: “I began to panic. Suddenly the rhetoric, the abortion marches I’d walked in... peeled away, and I was all alone with my microscopic baby.”

But Jane Doe went through with the abortion, because she thought there was no room in her life for a dot that would grow and emerge with tenderness but also tears. Later, she realized that of course she could have made room. She wrote, “I have this ghost now. A very little ghost that only appears when I’m seeing something beautiful, like the full moon on the ocean last weekend. And the baby waves at me. And I wave at the baby.”

That was in 1976. Since then millions of other women, and men, have seen millions of other very little ghosts. The finger of God has been near the forehead of many. Some, worshipping the god called choice, have brushed it away. And some, during the three years since Sept. 11, have rethought many things. When we’re concerned with terrorism, do we want to commit terror in what should be the safest room of all, the womb?

The question for all of us is: Do I have room? Room to help a frightened mom, an unborn child? What should any of us say, when asked if there is room in America for unborn children, and room in our lives to support the efforts of those who would save them? Do you have room to help the Heartbeat Pregnancy Center? I hope your answer is, Of course we have room. Of course we do.

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