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PREACHING AND TEACHING THE TRUTH ABOUT ABORTION

By Rev. Ben E. Sheldon

As a pastor, I often hear my colleagues in the ministry tell me that they really **are** pro-life, but that they just cannot get up the nerve to preach about the issue.

"It's like buying a one-way ticket out of here, if I talk about abortion from the pulpit," they tell me. Let me share some of my experience with the readers of the **NRL News** to illustrate that this foreboding is unwarranted.

As early as 1969, a woman in my Presbyterian congregation in Washington, D.C., challenged me on the issue, asking why I never mentioned abortion. This was almost four years before *Roe v. Wade*.

She told me that she had been reading the *New York Times* and clipping every item that pertained to the efforts by the (then) National Abortion Rights Action League to reverse the (then) almost total prohibition of abortion (except in cases of endangerment to the mother's life) by the vast majority of states in the country. She brought me a thick file folder full of these news items from the previous six or seven years. I was absolutely amazed to see what was happening, most of which was never reported in most other daily papers.

This revelation of enormous magnitude to me really opened my eyes. Now alert to what was taking place around me, I realized that I would have to warn my congregation about the subtle efforts taking place to undermine all of the statutes protecting unborn babies.

My people also were surprised. Many told me that I was the first one to alert them, and they appreciated what I was doing. Not everyone was pleased with my remarks. A few let me know that they were in favor of these efforts and

definitely sided with those who were trying to overturn anti-abortion statutes. But the overwhelming response was positive.

As a result, four years later, on January 22, 1973, we were not taken by surprise by the historic Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision. I had laid the groundwork for preaching in earnest against the dreadful (but now legal) idea of killing unborn children.

I drew not only from Scripture, which clearly affirms the sacred value and precious worth of every human creature, including the unborn, but I also looked to the great traditions of the church going back to the Apostolic period when Christians were noted especially for the fact that they did not kill their newborns nor did they permit any means that would abort the unborn.

I also was able to show how in the history of the major Protestant churches in the early years of our country, virtually every denomination - - my own Presbyterian as well as Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopal - - all strongly opposed abortion. In the middle of the 19th century, when abortion was sadly all too common in this country, the churches spoke out vigorously and courageously against this practice.

The vast majority of people in my congregations, in Kentucky and Pennsylvania as well as in Washington, D.C., supported me in this. Each church I have served has declared itself a "pro-life" church, and informed their respective regional governing bodies of their commitment to life.

Many, many of my new members have told me, "It was your courageous stand on abortion that attracted me to this church." So, far from guaranteeing me "a one-way ticket out," my pro-life stand and the brave support I received from my elders and deacons have been sources of blessing and encouragement to many others.

So I have no qualms about encouraging my fellow pastors not to be timid or reluctant to uphold the truth about the sanctity of human life. You have the Bible, church history, and the historic traditions of your church on your side.

But, it is, of course, true that not everyone supported me. There were always a few people opposed to my preaching and teaching on this subject, but I have never been intimidated by this opposition.

Yes, a few left the church, or stopped attending, or cut their contributions to the church in protest for my stand on life. Occasionally I have been "advised" that

it would be better to leave these "controversial" or "political" topics unmentioned. To these well-intentioned advisors, I have always pointed out that Jesus did not avoid controversial issues for the sake of "harmony" or popular acceptance. He addressed all of them. If I was to be true to the example of my Lord Jesus, I would have to deal with these issues, too.

The most telling argument of all, I believe, is the theological foundation for the sacred value of all human life (especially the doctrines of Creation and Redemption), the clear teaching of the Bible regarding the personhood of the unborn (e.g., Jeremiah 1:5, Psalm 139:13-16, and Luke 1:39-45), and the sheer logic of respecting the right to life of every creature of God. And it has never hurt the case for life to point out that the Declaration of Independence certainly affirms that life is one of the inalienable rights with which our Creator has endowed us. I have found that my critics have no answer to these arguments.

Ultimately, what matters most is I know that I must answer to my Lord for my stewardship and faithfulness to Him in my preaching. Being a "people-pleaser" has to be less important than being a "God- pleaser."

If every true minister of Christ followed that rule, how marvelously potent the Church of Jesus Christ would be in today's world!