

Help from Trusted Preachers
for Tragic Times

THE
HARDEST SERMONS
YOU'LL EVER HAVE TO
PREACH

CONTRIBUTORS:

Tim Keller, John Piper,
Michael Horton, Jerram Barrs,
Dan Doriani, Robert S. Rayburn,
Mike Khandjian, Wilson Benton,
Bob Flayhart, Jack Collins,
George Robertson

BRYAN CHAPELL

 ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN.com/
AUTHORTRACKER
follow your favorite authors

ZONDERVAN

The Hardest Sermons You'll Ever Have to Preach
Copyright © 2011 by Bryan Chapell

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chapell, Bryan.

The hardest sermons you'll ever have to preach : help from trusted preachers for tragic times / [compiled by] Bryan Chapell.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-331216 (softcover)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity—Sermons. 2. Consolation—Sermons. 3. Sermons, American. I. Chapell, Bryan.

BV4909.H364 2011

252'.56—dc22

2011001500

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2000, 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. Copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Jeff Gifford

Interior design: Ben Fetterley & Matthew Van Zomeren

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Editor's Note 9
Introduction: The Message of the Cross for the Mystery of Tragedy. 11

Part One

PREACHING IN RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

Chapter One: ABORTION 19
Bryan Chapell

Chapter Two: CHILD ABUSE 37
Dan Doriani

Chapter Three: COMMUNITY TRAGEDY 57
Tim Keller

Chapter Four: NATIONAL TRAGEDY..... 71
Bryan Chapell

Part Two

PREACHING AFTER THE LOSS OF A CHILD

Chapter Five: SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD..... 89
Bryan Chapell

Chapter Six: MISCARRIAGE OF AN EARLY-TERM INFANT ... 97
Dan Doriani

Chapter Seven: MISCARRIAGE OF A LATE-TERM INFANT ... 109
George Robertson

Chapter Eight: NEWBORN LOSS 119
John Piper

Chapter Nine: CRIB DEATH 127
Wilson Benton

Chapter Ten: YOUNG CHILD 137
Robert S. Rayburn

Chapter Eleven: CONJOINED TWINS 145
Bob Flayhart

Part Three

**PREACHING FUNERALS WITH ESPECIALLY
DIFFICULT CAUSES OR CIRCUMSTANCES**

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Twelve: “LIFESTYLE” CONSEQUENCES..... | 159 |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Thirteen: DRUNKEN DRIVER..... | 167 |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Fourteen: CANCER: LONG-SUFFERING..... | 175 |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Fifteen: MURDER..... | 183 |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Sixteen: ACCIDENTAL DEATH..... | 189 |
| <i>Robert S. Rayburn</i> | |
| Chapter Seventeen: NEW PARENT..... | 197 |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Eighteen: SPECIAL NEEDS ADULT..... | 203 |
| <i>C. John “Jack” Collins</i> | |

Part Four

PREACHING FUNERALS FOR PUBLIC FIGURES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Nineteen: NATIONAL BUSINESS LEADER: CANCER. 211 | |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Twenty: CELEBRITY: UNEXPLAINED CAUSES..... | 219 |
| <i>Mike Khandjian</i> | |

Part Five

PREACHING AFTER SUICIDE

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Twenty-One: SUICIDE OF A PASTOR..... | 227 |
| <i>Bryan Chapell</i> | |
| Chapter Twenty-Two: SUICIDE OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER...241 | |
| <i>Wilson Benton</i> | |
| Chapter Twenty-Three: SUICIDE OF A FRIEND..... | 253 |
| <i>Michael Horton</i> | |

Chapter Twenty-Four: SUICIDE AFTER PASTORAL SCANDAL . . .261
Jerram Barrs
Chapter Twenty-Five: SUICIDE OF A TEEN269
George Robertson

Appendixes

HELPS FOR HANDLING TRAGEDIES

Appendix One: Texts for Tragedies277
Appendix Two: Helps for Conducting Funerals281
Scripture Index.293

EDITOR'S NOTE

NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS and occasional specifics of time or circumstance are changed in some personal accounts appearing in this book to respect the concerns and wishes of those involved. My debt is great to the pastors and people who shared the realities of Christ's love by the testimony of their lives in times of tragedy.

Introduction

THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS FOR THE MYSTERY OF TRAGEDY

WHILE STILL IN MY SEMINARY TRAINING, I had the privilege of being asked to pastor a small rural church. The opportunity to preach weekly, lead a congregation in worship, and “learn the ropes” of being a minister excited me. I thought I was getting a leg up on my seminary peers by being able so readily to apply our theology lessons to real-life situations. But I had no idea how *real* my real-life experiences would soon become.

The Challenges of Tragedy

Within weeks of taking the pastorate, the senior elder of the congregation was suddenly and unexpectedly hospitalized for an aggressive cancer. I had rarely been inside a hospital and had no idea what it meant to visit the sick, counsel the dying, and comfort the family. Yet I was immediately called on to do all of these. Then, within only a few days, I also had the responsibility of conducting this dear man’s funeral.

Two days before the funeral, I phoned my homiletics professor, who also served as president of the seminary, and asked, “Dr. Rayburn, can you tell me what I need to know to do a funeral? We haven’t covered funerals in class yet, and I have to do one the day after tomorrow.” I will be forever thankful that the esteemed Dr. Robert G. Rayburn did not put me off. Instead, he invited me to his home for breakfast the next morning and, across the kitchen table, gave me a funeral-conducting lesson whose outline I still include in my lectures to students a generation later.

In no small measure, I and the other contributors to this book have included our sermons delivered during times of tragedy in order to aid pastors who have not had the privilege of such an across-the-kitchen-table lesson

from Dr. Rayburn. Each of us has needed to prepare sermons in the face of tragedies, and we know the anxiety of trying to say appropriate things from God's Word that will comfort and strengthen God's people when emotions and faith are stretched thin. We pray that these messages will provide ideas and approaches to help other pastors on their path of preparation for some of the hardest sermons they will ever preach.

A Theology for Tragedy

In addition to offering suggestions for approaching different kinds of tragedy, these sermons provide insight into how to handle the theological challenges of human suffering. Each of the pastors in this volume has a Reformed theological perspective, believing in the sovereign control of God over all things. We can recite with enthusiasm and conviction the Reformation principle that God watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head apart from his will (Heidelberg Catechism Answer 1). We also believe in God's "most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions" (Westminster Shorter Catechism Answer 11). We believe these declarations of God's sovereign control of all things because Jesus declared the same: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:29–30).

Our Lord created all things (Ephesians 3:9); in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16–17); and he sustains all things by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3). Nothing exists or occurs apart from his will. All of these affirmations of our heavenly Father's control of all things comfort us until tragedy comes. Then the tragedy becomes the reason behind inescapable questions and—for some—faith-altering accusations: "If God is in control, then why did this happen? How could a loving God allow such things, much less include them in his will for us?" A young pastor who had just welcomed a second severely disabled child into this world wept in my arms while objecting, "I would not do such cruel things to my child; so why does my heavenly Father do them to me?"

Theologians will try to answer such questions with distinctions between God's decretive and permissive will. Still, the spiritual complexities and human consternation that accompany any explanation of God's sovereignty in *all* things ultimately outstrip our theology. Our logic reaches a dead end beyond which our hearts cannot go, if the pain and suffering of this world are God's doing. Yes, we can (and should) quickly retreat to the explanation that

the tragedies we face are a product of the fallen world our human predecessors twisted into our present reality. But such an explanation does not easily withstand the blast of human objection from God's own declaration: "I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7).

Whether God actively creates disasters or allows the forces of evil that he *could* stop, we expect something different from One who calls himself our Father. If God creates disasters, then his love is at best a mystery and at worst a charade. If he allows the evil he could stop, then he remains accountable for the damage in its wake. We might, of course, suggest that the only disasters that God creates or allows are those that befall his enemies. If this were true, we could excuse earth's calamities as being a dimension of divine justice. Indeed, the Bible contends that God punishes his enemies with catastrophe (Isaiah 47:11). But the Bible also reminds us that bad things happen to good people (Ecclesiastes 9:1–3).

The Mystery of Tragedy

In order for the human heart to maintain love for a sovereign God, faith must affirm what it cannot prove: "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). We must believe that God has a good purpose for the awful things that occur to us. Just as a straight line can be drawn with a crooked stick, biblical faith requires the confidence that wicked and tragic circumstances can be turned to loving purposes by God for his people. Such conclusions are drawn in the earliest pages of Scripture. Joseph says to his brothers about their sale of him into slavery (when they could not know that his presence in Egypt would ultimately result in their family's rescue from famine), "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20; see 45:5, 8).

But why should we believe in good "ultimate" purposes when the daily news about others and the regular experience of our own lives include so much inexplicable tragedy? How do we believe in the good purposes hidden behind bad experiences; and, how do we believe in a good God when bad things happen? Must our faith rest on an unproven heap of speculations, each ending with the surmise "there must be a reason"?

When my senior elder died within weeks of this inexperienced minister assuming the pastorate, there was no clear good purpose. I needed his wisdom; the church needed his stabilizing presence; his wife needed his help in her challenges of age. Perhaps the Lord, knowing that I would have greater

leadership responsibilities in the future, cast me into the deep end of the ecclesiastical pool so that I would have to learn how to swim the trust stroke early. Perhaps the elder would have resented my encroachment on his leadership and would have taken action to discourage me from continuing in ministry. Perhaps the Lord needed me to sit across the kitchen table to hear the lesson from Dr. Rayburn that I would teach to a generation of students and the readers of this book. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps . . . Though all of these reasons are possible, none of them seems sufficient for taking a man's life, grieving his family, and crippling his church. If I were to base my trust in God on my speculations about what good may have resulted from this tragedy, then my faith would quickly crumble.

The Message of the Cross

So if faith in the ultimate goodness of God does not come from guessing what his good purposes may be, from where does it come? The answer from believers through the ages, and from the authors of the messages in this book, is the *cross*. We trust our sovereign God because he has shown us his heart at the cross. There, where any one of us would have stood and cried out, "This is wrong; God, you must stop this," our Savior made heaven's greatest good come out of earth's worst tragedy. At the cross we learn that God is good and can be trusted, even when everything seems wrong to human sight.

As I was pastoring the rural church attended by farmers and coal miners—people accustomed to hard lives—I heard a story that taught me more about the nature and foundation of true faith than I had gained in much of my seminary education. The story tells of a miner who, though a stalwart believer, was injured at a young age. He became an invalid. Over the years he watched through a window near his bed as life passed him by. He watched fellow workers marry, raise families, and have grandchildren. He watched the company he had served thrive without attempting to make adequate provision for his loss. He watched as his body withered, his house crumbled, and hope for better things in this life died.

Then, one day when the bedridden miner was quite old, a younger man came to visit him. "I hear that you believe in God and claim that he loves you," said the young man. "How can you believe such things after all that has happened to you?"

The old man hesitated and then smiled. He said, "Yes, there are days of doubt. Sometimes Satan comes calling on me in this fallen-down old house of mine. He sits right there by my bed, where you are sitting now. He points out

my window to the men I once worked with whose bodies are still strong, and Satan asks, ‘Does Jesus love you?’ Then, Satan makes me look at my tattered room as he points to the fine homes of my friends and asks again, ‘Does Jesus love you?’ Finally, Satan points to the grandchild of a friend of mine—a man who has everything I do not—and Satan waits for the tear in my eye before he whispers in my ear, ‘Does Jesus really love you?’”

Startled by the candor of the old man’s responses, the younger man asked, “And what do you say when Satan speaks to you that way?”

Said the old miner, “I take Satan by the hand, and I lead him to a hill far away called Calvary. There I point to the nail-pierced hands, the thorn-torn brow, and the spear-pierced side. Then I say to Satan, ‘Doesn’t Jesus love me!’”

The cross of Christ is the warrant for confidence in God’s promises of ultimate good, despite great heartache. Jesus’ agony did not indicate that God failed, or that the faith of the one who died was weak. The suffering caused and inflicted by evil (Psalm 22:16) still was within God’s will (Acts 2:23) and served a purpose so loving, so powerful, and so good that our eternity changed as a result (Isaiah 53:4, 10; Matthew 26:31; Revelation 13:8). Through Jesus’ resurrection, we learn that our God has power over evil, but through the cross he gains power over our hearts. Though the human mind will reach its frayed end trying to reconcile earth’s tragedies with God’s goodness, the heart remains bound to God, knowing that the provider of the cross can mean no ill. Making much of the blood is neither maudlin nor manipulative; rather, the sacrifice of Christ is the heart’s ultimate solace in times of greatest pain.

When we remember the cross, our faith in God’s sovereign purposes strengthens and comforts our hearts, though tragedy comes and human answers fail. No less a faith stalwart than John Stott acknowledges the import: “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross.”¹ The pastors who have written the messages in this book embrace these truths, acknowledging often the mysteries of the sovereignty of God in the face of tragedy, but affirming with greater frequency the necessity of confidence that his eye does not blink and his hand does not fail.

If our God has lost control or never possessed it, then we are at the mercy of the cosmic dice of fate. The Bible tells a different story, insisting that the Lord rides on the storms to deliver his people from this present evil world and

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 326.

to secure us for the next (Psalm 68:4, 33). We trust him, not because we can explain our circumstances, but because our God has revealed his character at the cross. The One who shed his blood for us can be trusted to love us; the One who gave his life for us can be trusted to provide what is best for us; and the One who purposed all this before the foundations of the earth were laid can be trusted to direct our paths to glory.

Sheep trust the shepherd whom they have learned is good, and we trust our Good Shepherd because he has laid down his life for us. The skillful shepherds of this volume further this trust by taking us often to the place where the Good Shepherd saved us, so that we will trust him to carry us when the darkness is too great to see our way or discern his.

Part One

PREACHING
IN RESPONSE TO
TRAGEDY

Chapter One

ABORTION

SITUATION

The following message was originally delivered to a coalition of religious, volunteer, and political organizations in a regional gathering on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that allowed abortion on demand in the United States.

CONCERNS

My church is one of many evangelical bodies that have sought to inform its members and our community of the Bible's defense of the sanctity of human life at all its stages. The gathering for which this message was prepared included people of various religious backgrounds, political affiliations, and volunteer organizations who identified themselves with the pro-life movement. I wanted to say clearly what my biblical convictions were, but at the same time to differentiate those convictions from political agendas or secular priorities. For almost a generation the voice of the political right has often coalesced with evangelical priorities, making it difficult for many to separate religious conviction from political agendas—and difficult for some to stand for the sanctity of life without the sense of having to align with political entities. To encourage all to take a fresh stand for life on the basis of transcendent principles, I wanted to demonstrate that my convictions are biblical and more reflect obligations to God than to any political party or person.

Since the gathering included those who were very active in pro-life religious and political causes—persons weary from lack of success after more than three decades of endeavor—I felt the dual obligation of reinspiring them in the cause of defending the unborn and tempering the frustration that often led to demonizing opponents or others who are less zealous. In particular, I

wanted to make sure that anti-abortion zeal did not obscure the grace of the gospel for those guilty of promoting or participating in abortion. This was not simply to honor the old maxim about hating a sin but loving the sinner, but also to maintain the credibility of the pro-life cause. When voices become so shrill in a righteous cause that they are indistinguishable from the sounds of hatred, then the righteousness advocated gets lost in the din of rhetoric. The gospel has the power to persuade when our message and manner proclaim its truth. My concerns were to make the Bible's objection to abortion clear and to make the gospel of Jesus Christ equally clear.

APPROACH

To emphasize that my intention was to be a representative of the gospel, I chose to base my words on a biblical text and to state that I was doing so because I was speaking primarily as a Christian and as a representative of the church. In this approach I was reflecting lessons learned by watching Billy Graham as he often addressed secular gatherings by introducing himself as a Christian who needed to speak to the Christians present while hoping that others would not mind listening in. By identifying both his position and his audience, Graham was able to speak with great freedom and without offense to very diverse audiences.

I chose to speak on a passage of Scripture that specifies the value of life in the womb. I sought to be honest about the frustrations and disagreements experienced by those in the pro-life movement and to use the authority of Scripture to say what the church must nonetheless teach about the value of all life. By underscoring the value of "all" life, I created a bridge to the responsibility that those in the pro-life movement have to value those who are guilty of abortion. Just as "not fully formed" life is valuable to God, so also are the hearts of those not fully righteous before him. My hope was to reinspire concern for the unborn with hearts that were committed to the full scope of gospel priorities.

THE MESSAGE
GOD'S KNITTING

An Address to the Missouri Pro-Life Community
in Behalf of the Pregnancy Resource Center

Bryan Chapell

- ¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
¹²even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
- ¹³For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
- ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

— *Psalm 139:11–16*

Preliminary Remarks

I want to thank our local Pregnancy Resource Center for the opportunity to speak to you in behalf of the pro-life concerns that motivate so many of us to be here. When we unite around the cause of the unborn, we come from many different churches, organizations, and perspectives—and with varying contributions to make toward this vital cause. Tonight I want to come to you as

what I am, a representative of the church, and to talk to you about the role of the church in this cause. In doing so, I do not want to minimize or diminish the importance of the roles that others have, but rather to acknowledge my inadequacy in telling you what should happen in your organizations or political structures or individual efforts to combat abortion. I am concerned to say what the church should say and do, because that is the arena in which I serve and for which I am responsible to determine if my actions are as diligent, responsible, and caring as my God requires. For those of you whose pro-life concerns even partially involve church ministry, and I would guess that is most of us, I would invite you to listen to see if what I believe God requires is being reflected in me, in your church, and in you.

In the church our pro-life concern must be based on a higher authority than personal preference or even principled concern for others. For this reason we look to Scripture such as Psalm 139:11–16, and ask God to give us understanding by praying together. Please pray with me now. *[After a brief prayer, the message began as indicated below.]*

Introduction

“Knit one, purl two. Knit one, purl two . . .” This is the traditional chant of expectant motherhood. In our culture it is yet a caricature that when a mother is preparing for a new baby, she takes up knitting. There is a picture in this psalm that is wonderfully related. For while the mother may be knitting *for* the child in the womb, the Bible says that God is actually knitting *the child* in the womb. The image of such tender—dare I say, maternal—care being expressed by God for the child in the womb says much about our understanding of the innate value and personhood of the unborn child. But as beautiful as this image is, the subject that I must address today remains difficult.

There are a number of reasons for the difficulty. First is the apparent complexity of the issue of abortion as it has been argued for the last several decades. I have been preaching for more than thirty years, and as I reviewed the right-to-life sermons I have preached over this period, I was astounded at the range of issues we have had to consider in the abortion wars of this nation. Battles have raged over such things as:

- what Medicare will or will not provide; what the military will or will not provide; what foreign aid should or should not provide.
- what schools can or cannot say; what counseling clinics can or cannot say; what parents can or cannot know.

- at what term an abortion can be performed; what techniques can be used; what research can be allowed; what tissue can be used.
- what notification may be allowed; what information may be required; what delay may be required; what pictures can be shown.
- what degree of danger to a mother's health warrants abortion; what degree of damage to an infant's wholeness justifies abortion.
- what protest strategy to use; what picket distance to keep; what signs to hold; what language to use; what marches to join.
- whether to allow civil disobedience; whether to go to prison for our convictions; whether to kill others for our convictions.
- what legislation to support; what agencies to aid; what co-belligerents to join; what amendments to advocate; what candidates to elect; what commercials to air.
- which mothers to shelter; how, in an ethical way, to invite them to such shelter or to counsel.
- what infants to adopt; where to get them; how to "advertise" their availability.
- whether to lobby for what is winnable with a long-term plan for incremental progress; whether never to compromise and accept only a total ban on abortion.
- whether to secede from the political process or a particular party; how to vote or whether to revolt.

Some of these battles have been fought between Christians and the secular world; some have been fought between Christians and other Christians of varying perspectives. Yet, despite all the battles, abortion continues, and I fear our concern regarding it is flagging. I may be wrong, but my sense is that the pro-life forces in the church are nearly spent. Maybe you sense some of the reason for this exhaustion as you examine your own reaction to the list I just read. My guess is that while you were initially attentive, you eventually got bored with the list of all the issues—and it only took about two minutes to read, not thirty-five years to slog through.

Beyond the simple limit of our attention spans there is a certain lack of reward in being concerned about this issue. The lines of dispute are well entrenched. The society is deeply divided. The warriors of both sides are battle hardened. The average person is tired of it all, and there doesn't seem to be much probability of change on the horizon. To wade into the battle is only to open yourself up to pain. Pastors and other church leaders know that when it comes to addressing abortion, you will inevitably be attacked, either for saying

too much or for not saying enough, for talking to certain people or not attending certain meetings deemed important for you. You will be called an “insensitive fascist” by pro-choice advocates in the church, who believe that any message against abortion shows insensitivity to women and disadvantaged children. At the same time, you will be labeled a “liberal coward” by right-to-life proponents in the church, who will say that your latest words and efforts were not strong enough, frequent enough, or public enough. The result is that pastors and sessions are simply tired of being pressured, yelled at, guilt-tripped, and outmaneuvered by parishioners with an abortion agenda, whatever it may be.

We just get tired of it all. The seminary I serve may be a case in point. For while remarkable efforts have been made by our professors—who have written books and articles, led marches, joined pickets, helped write legal briefs, and even crossed historic faith tradition boundaries to join with faculty and students of sister institutions to mark the travesty of *Roe v. Wade*—my sense is that we do not speak or pray or think or labor about the issue as much as we once did. Too many years of trying can wear down the best intentions, especially at an institution that tries to reflect the character of Christ and senses that to speak consistently against abortion is to cause us to be identified with other voices with which we are uncomfortable—voices often shrill, hateful, and contemptuous, even of fellow believers.

It is just not very pleasant to speak about abortion. So why bother? The most compelling reason struck me vividly as I prepared a sermon to address another anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. In reviewing many years’ worth of my own sermons on the abortion topic, what caught my eye and again captured my heart was not the debatable issues but the growing numbers that I have used in those sermons over the years: 6 million, 8 million, 9 million, 16 million, 22 million, 27 million, 32 million, 35 million, 37 million and counting—the number of unborn children whose lives have been ended by abortion.

My fifteen-year-old son, when I told him that figure, simply said, “Dad, that is fifteen cities the size of St. Louis!” Think of that as you look around you and as you drive home. The loss of life to abortion is the equivalent of everyone around you being exterminated, and fifteen times more. The magnitude of this tragedy, the immensity of this evil, the loss of 37 million children knit by God *and* shredded by men, demands that we speak, renew our zeal, refresh our compassion, and reignite our commitment to speak for “the least of these” that are so precious to God, regardless of the discomfort to us.

In the face of such great evil, we *must* continue to ask: What should the church say and do?

What Must the Church Say about Abortion?

The Unborn Child Is a Work of God

The child in the womb is made by God. The psalmist says that God “knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). But there is more going on in this process than the merely anonymous workings of chemical and mechanical forces.

The child in the womb is seen by God. The psalmist says, “My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together . . . Your eyes saw my unformed body” (Psalm 139:15–16). Neither the darkness of the womb nor its inaccessibility to human sight hides the child from God. God sees in the darkness (the darkness is as light to him, the psalmist says in verses 11–12), and he sees the child, whose mature body is yet unformed (verse 13).

As I prepared this message, I was on an airplane. The man next to me was playing peekaboo with a child in the seat ahead of him. When the child hid his face with his own hands, the man would pretend not to see, but when the child put his hands down, the man said, “I see you.” This simple game has special significance for our subject, as we recognize that this Scripture tells us that God says of a child still hidden in the womb, “I see you.” The phrase says something about God’s awareness of and care for the “person” who is in the womb—and this is the point that the psalmist will now drive home.

The unborn child is known by God. The psalmist says that God does not merely see the child’s forming body, but foresees his life: “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:16). The words deny the raw science that tells us that the forming child is simply “a conglomerate of protoplasm” or “the by-product of conception.” God records the days of the child before one of them comes to be.

How many young mothers keep a book of the first year of life of their babies—books of hospital pictures, coming home pictures, birth weights, growth measurements, and locks of hair. Each entry is a statement of how precious that little person is to the mother. And God, with a degree of tenderness that is hard to take in, says, “Before you were born, I started keeping a book on you of all that I knew that you would be.” What more powerful statement could there be of the personhood of the child in the womb than that God already counts him or her so precious as to put that child in his book.

The fact that God is not limited to our timing is a powerful argument for the personhood of the unborn. Human minds try to assess when life begins

biologically, but the Bible tells us that God gives his children his care and purpose even before they are created. God says to Jeremiah, for example, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:5). Paul reminds us that we were actually loved before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

The unborn child is *a work of God*—made by God, seen by God, known by God. But all of these aspects of the child’s relationship to God signal more than the workmanship of the baby in the womb. They also signal that the unborn child is *a wonder of God*.

The Unborn Child Is a Wonder of God

The best statement of this wonder is in the psalmist’s reflection on the process by which the child is made. The psalmist says to God, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). The human body brought out of microscopic dimensions with all of its intricate processes, mechanics, abilities, and beauties simply causes the psalmist to pause and marvel in praise to God. But then the wonder takes on one more dimension. The psalmist recognizes that the human body in the womb is wonderful, not merely because of the marvelous process of its creation, but because of its connection to the Creator. He says, “Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” Ultimately the child is a wonder because of the Craftsman who fashioned that child.

What if you were to come across a painting in your grandmother’s attic that was signed by Rembrandt or da Vinci or van Gogh? Even if you could not recognize all the artistry in the painting, the name of the one who created it would convince you of its value. You could say, “I know that a Rembrandt is worth something, even if I know nothing else.” And the fact that the child in the womb is made by the hand of *God* says that this child is a wonder. This masterpiece is not a Rembrandt or a da Vinci or a van Gogh. No, this work is far, far better: it’s a Yahweh, a God-work of art, and thus it is a precious wonder.

These two thoughts—that the unborn child is both a work of God and a wonder of God—should, at least, form a foundation for what the church *says* about abortion. And what the church *does* should be built on that foundation.

What Must the Church *Do* about Abortion?

To answer this question I am not going to focus on political strategies or picketing life-chains or the debates of the public square. I do not mean to minimize the importance of such measures or to say that the church has no

role in them. Rather, my intention when answering what *the church* should do about abortion is to *call the church to what the church does best*. I want to challenge you to consider the unique contribution that the church can make, to recognize that some of our tensions and frustrations with each other may result from trying to force the church into patterns and practices that are outside her divine design. As a result, in our churchly attempts to influence secular culture, we may have been too quick to seek alternatives to the spiritual forces that are the true and greater powers influencing the direction of any society. And it is these spiritual forces that must be the chief preoccupation of the church.

If, as Scripture declares, it is true that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities, the rulers of darkness and *spiritual* wickedness in high places (see Ephesians 6:12), then what should the church do? The answer is that the church must engage in spiritual warfare with the spiritual weapons of God's truth, grace, and love.

Teach the Truth (about Each Child)

The fact that the child in the womb is a work and a wonder of God gives the church the right and *responsibility* to insist that, though unseen by the world, the babe is a *child*, not a choice, a *person*, not a lump of protoplasm. This is the most critical truth that the church must say. We must not believe that such statements are useless or will always fall on deaf ears.

The reason that pro-abortion advocates are so zealous that expectant mothers not be shown pictures or models of pre-born children is that when mothers see what is being destroyed by abortion, their hearts resonate with the biblical perspective that the unborn child is precious. The prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* reports that when mothers see an ultrasound image of the child, an emotional bonding takes place even before the child's movement is felt. When technology lets us see what the psalmist says that God already sees in the womb, then the divine imprint on the human heart whispers in the most powerful and deep chords, "This child is precious, and destroying this little one is wrong."

Actually, most people believe this already. Survey after survey will tell us that most people believe abortion is wrong. They *also* believe that it is wrong for the government to be involved in abortion decisions because they fear "Big Brother" involvement in forcing the birth of damaged children or the children of rape and incest victims (these subjects must be addressed at greater length

another time, though I will speak of my own family's related experience in a few moments). Still, most believe that abortions of healthy children for the sake of convenience are immoral and wrong. We should not lose sight of the moral ground that has been won, lest we give up or retreat, thinking that our efforts have not had any results. The church must keep saying over and over again, "The child in the womb is precious." Such statements are making an impact.

But it is not enough to say that the child *in the womb* is precious. I took care to say earlier that the church must assert the value of *each* child of God. The psalmist's words do not refer merely to his own pre-born state when he marvels, "I *am* fearfully and wonderfully made," or speaks to God at the beginning of the psalm: "You know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts . . . you are familiar with all my ways . . . you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Psalm 139:1–6). Key in the abortion battle is not simply to affirm how precious the baby is to God, but to declare how precious is the mother (another child of God) whom God made and knows and touches.

In an insightful article in *Christianity Today*, Frederica Mathewes-Green explains the importance of placing value on the mother:

The "It's a baby!" message alone strikes the muddled middle [by this she means people who are not strongly allied with either pro- or anti-abortion advocates] as failing to take seriously the woman's plight. Our apparent willingness to dismiss those difficulties as "inconveniences" strikes many as either callous or wildly naive.

Additionally, our opponents interpret this appeal as personal attacks on them. When we say, "Abortion is an immoral act because it kills a baby," they hear, "People who favor abortion are immoral people." I had long wondered why, at debates, I would attack abortion, and my opponent would not defend abortion but attack me.

I came to realize that the "It's a baby!" message, important as it is, does not offer all the solutions we'd hoped it would, and in some instances creates more misunderstanding. It is a baby, and that ought to be the first point in presenting the pro-life position persuasively. But the conversation needs to move beyond that point.¹

Mathewes-Green says the point to which the conversation must move is insistence that abortion damages the mother physically, emotionally, and

1. Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Wanted: A New Pro-Life Strategy," *Christianity Today* (January 12, 1998), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/january12/8t1026.html.

spiritually. I am not going to document what you already know about the truths of these arguments as much as remind us of the importance of saying that *both* mother and child are precious to God. Yes, “It’s a baby.” Yes, “It’s a child, not a choice.” But because both mother and child are precious we also say, “Mothers hurt when their babies die.” The Feminists for Life organization captures something of this truth with its motto: “Abortion hurts women, kills children, and destroys families.”

Somehow we must keep in tandem our concern and God’s concern for the mother as well as the child when we speak, because both are works and wonders of God. Keeping this in mind does two things: it modifies what we should be willing to say in the abortion debate, and it gives us a powerful spiritual weapon in persuading women not to have abortions.

If the mother is precious to God (and not only a mother *considering* an abortion but even those mothers *providing* abortions as nurses and doctors), then we must deal with each mother as a fellow image bearer of God. Hateful, disrespectful, and demeaning speech and actions must be challenged in the light of what God says about each of his children. Whatever we say, we must say it in the light of the truth that each child of God—unborn and born—is a work and wonder of God, precious to him. Although I want to be cautious in what I say here so as to avoid creating misunderstanding, when I have picketed, I have refused to carry signs that identify pro-abortionists as “murderers.” I *do* believe that abortion kills. However, murder, by strict biblical definition, implies a destructive motive, and I recognize that some abortionists believe—truly believe—that they are doing something courageous and noble, and it is not always the best approach (as much as I believe that what they are doing is immoral) to accuse them of doing what *they* think is wrong and, therefore, murderous.

Our moral cause will not be advanced by speech that others view as unfair in its characterizations. We have to learn the lessons of our times. Why, after all, is it possible for a president’s approval rating to stay high in the face of undeniable scandal or misconduct? I know the standard explanations are because no one really cares about anything but the economy, or because we have been calloused by the moral decline of our society. These reasons may explain why a president can survive scandals, but they do not explain the stunning rebuke of the Republican congress and the religious right in previous elections. The American people were not merely calloused to moral failing; they were incensed by what they perceived as hateful speech and tactics in dealing with moral failures. In the mind of many Americans, the moral critics lost the moral high ground.

There should be hope for us in these indications of regard for fair and just expression, for they indicate that there remains a moral dimension to public opinion. People do act on what they perceive as good, and they will act in behalf of mother and child if we do not surrender the moral high ground by rhetoric that is biblically prohibited by the mandates to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute—even those who persecute their own babies.

Not only does saying that both mother and child are precious to God modify our speech; it can also be a powerful spiritual weapon in modifying a mother's behavior. These are remarkable words from Frederica Matthewes-Green:

I spent a year [in researching a book] . . . seeking to discover the reasons most women choose abortion. I expected to find practical problems heading the list: financial needs, child care woes, pressures to drop out of school. Yet after reviewing several studies and conducting my own, no clear pattern emerged.

But when I spoke with groups of post-abortion women, a nearly unanimous consensus appeared. Women had abortions, in nearly every case, because of relationships. Most often it was to please the father of the child, who was pressuring for abortion. (In a couple of cases, the woman spoke of lying on the abortion table, praying that a husband would burst in and say, "Stop, I've changed my mind.") The second most common reason was pressure from a parent, most often the girl's mother.²

Convincing a woman of her inherent value to God, regardless of what other people may think or threaten, is a powerful tool in the battle against abortion. It is not a political tool, but it is powerful leverage on the soul to say that the reason that you need not act against the instincts and desires of your own heart in order to placate another or secure their acceptance is that your Father God calls you precious. He looks at you in your darkness, despair, and shame and says, "You are mine." We can tell these women, "You don't have to do this to be loved or valued because you are a work and a wonder of God. You *are* somebody apart from the approval and acceptance of the person who is pressuring you to abort your child, because *you are precious to God.*"

Teaching the value of each child of God is what the church should do. That message is made more credible and powerful when we also preach the gospel of grace.

2. Mathewes-Green, "Wanted: A New Pro-Life Strategy," *Christianity Today* (January 12, 1998).

Preach Grace

The same psalmist who says that he is fearfully and wonderfully made also asks God to “see if there is any offensive way in me” (Psalm 139:24). The writer does not fear that his flaws will remove him from God’s esteem. In fact, in God’s love for what is flawed there is cause for special praise. We can be flawed and still be precious to God. You and I know the spiritual comfort of this grace, but we need to translate it to all the areas of our thought. For mothers fearing the birth of a flawed child, we should never minimize the horrors of living in a fallen world and the heartache of bearing children who are not healthy in mind and body, but neither should we allow the notion that what is not perfect is not precious.

I have a younger brother who has had mental disabilities since birth. I have wished for many things for him, but I have never wished that he were dead. I have discovered that part of the divine imprint on my own heart is to love as a precious gift one who is imperfect. If we really lose this capacity to care for the flawed, if all that we finally value are those who are whole, lovely, and well formed, then we will ultimately find we are incapable of loving any. For we are all fallen creatures in a fallen world, and if we must discard or kill what does not please us, then we will find there is no value in the old, the infirm, the incapable, or in our own imperfect lives.

Grace teaches us something different: that the unlovely are loved by God. This message may not only preserve the life of the unborn child who is in some way flawed or suspected of being flawed; it can also dissuade the mother who is seeking abortion. The shame that may be driving her to seek an abortion does not mean that she is unloved; a past mistake does not mean that she is unforgivable; even a past abortion does not mean that she faces eternal rejection. And the man who may be urging an abortion because of his own fear of shame or disadvantage or retribution may also find new incentive to protect the unborn when he discovers the embrace of grace.

That embrace will mean nothing, of course, if it is not accompanied by meaningful love. Thus, the church that would preach grace, must also demonstrate love.

Demonstrate Love

The grace of God is the magnet that draws persons away from sin. But if those who say they represent grace are unloving, that grace has no apparent power.

What does love require? It requires that we honestly identify sin and warn of judgment. The psalmist does that here. He speaks of the Lord slaying the bloodthirsty and promises to consider as enemies those who work against the purposes of God (Psalm 139:19–22). Love does not mean silence in the face of evil. We must speak against what is abhorrent to God and warn of divine consequences. But we do so out of concern, dare I say “love,” for those who oppose us. Yes, abortionists are our spiritual enemies, but God says we are to love our enemies, and in this psalm he seeks the good of one who confesses offense.

I believe, and I think you believe, that an understanding of who God is and what he has done is what is ultimately needed to turn people away from abortion. But if those who supposedly represent this God present themselves as angry, hateful, and mean-spirited, then it is foolish to believe that their God will be perceived as anything different. To warn of sin’s consequences and still to love is our calling, and it is the power of the gospel against the greatest of evils.

Most of you know now of the story of Norma McCorvey, the plaintiff in the infamous *Roe v. Wade* case that legalized abortion in this country. In her book *Won by Love*, she writes of one of the Christians who combined love with warning until she, who is in many ways responsible for the deaths of 37 million, turned to God.

The key person in the battle for Norma McCorvey’s soul was a seven-year-old girl named Emily Mackey. Emily’s mother worked in the Operation Rescue offices next door to the abortion clinic in Dallas at which Norma McCorvey worked. Biographer Gary Thomas writes:

Emily’s blatant affection, frequent hugs, and direct pursuit disarmed Norma [who was skilled at cursing and spitting on abortion protesters]. The little girl’s interest was all the more surprising considering Emily made it very clear that her acceptance of Norma wasn’t an acceptance of Norma’s lifestyle. Early on in their relationship, Norma explained to Emily, “I like kids and I wouldn’t let anyone hurt little kids,” to which Emily responded, “Then why do you let them kill babies at the clinic?” [Hear the clear identification of evil, even in the child’s innocent candor.]

This childlike innocence cut open Norma’s heart. Norma wasn’t won over by compelling intellectual arguments . . . Over time, Emily began to personify the issue of abortion—especially when [Emily’s mother] Ronda broke down and told Norma that Emily had almost been aborted . . .

“Miss Norma,” Emily cooed one afternoon, “it would be sooo cool if you would come to church with us.” [After many refusals, Norma finally said yes because she was tired of telling Emily “no.”]³

Many of you know the story of Norma McCorvey’s conversion that took place when she did go to church. She claimed the love of Christ because she had known the love of one of his children. With that claim came a new conviction born of love and grace. Emily’s mother recalls Norma saying over and over at a church service, “I just want to undo all the evil I’ve done in this world. I’m so sorry, God. I’m so, so sorry. As far as abortion is concerned, I just want to undo it. I want it all to go away.” The power of love had triumphed, as it must through us as well when we face the evil of abortion.

The stories could be repeated many times of abortionists or abortion-considering moms who have been won by love—Bernard Nathanson, Joy Davis, others you know. I do not mean to imply that the victories will come easily or swiftly, but we must not abandon what we know to be God’s way of turning the human heart. Spiritual warfare requires spiritual weapons, and these include truth, grace, and love. Love must be demonstrated by words and deeds of mercy that cost time, money, and sacrifice because these are the church’s weapons in any cultural battle. Yes, the church should be at the forefront of encouraging her people to care for desperate mothers and unwanted children whose lives need protection. Love must be evident in us and be expressed by us for God’s power to be present.

Most of you know as well that when Norma’s conversion became public knowledge, not everything was all right with Norma. She spoke openly to reporters about still supporting legalized abortion in the first trimester, and this was used by both secular and Christian commentators to discredit her conversion and her commitments.

What you may not know is that a few weeks after her conversion, Norma was sitting in Operation Rescue’s office and began looking at a fetal development poster. Later she said,

The progression was so obvious, the eyes were so sweet . . . It hurt my heart, just looking at them.

[After running outside the clinic, it dawned on her.] “Norma,” I said to myself, “They’re right.” I had worked with pregnant women for years.

3. Gary Thomas, “Roe v. McCorvey,” *Christianity Today* (January 12, 1998), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/january12/8t1031.html.

I had been through three pregnancies myself. I should have known. Yet something in that poster made me lose my breath. I kept seeing the picture of that tiny, ten-week-old embryo, and I said to myself, “That’s a baby!” It’s as if the blinders fell off my eyes and I suddenly understood the truth—“that’s a baby!”⁴

“It’s as if the blinders fell off,” she said. The words are a cliché in culture, but they have deep spiritual meaning for us. The ultimate battle against abortion is a spiritual battle, as the blind are made to see. This ultimately is a battle not of the ballot box and the judicial bench but of the heart and soul. For this reason, I again say to you and to me that we must make sure the church does not fail to do what it does best, and this means it must exercise spiritual power.

Exercise Spiritual Power

We cannot let apparent success or failure, or cultural boredom with the issue of abortion, keep us from our ordained tasks. We must preach against abortion because the unborn child is precious to God, as Psalm 139 makes clear. We must equip the saints with the truth of God’s Word about the value of life and about the consequences of opposing God’s purposes. Such teaching and preaching must be sufficient to equip believers to stand for life and justice in whatever area of life God may call them to, whether that means defending life in courts and legislatures or engaging in conversations at our own kitchen tables—for our own statistics tell us that the abortion rate is not discernibly different among evangelicals than in the rest of our culture.

Such figures make it clear that the battle against abortion will not be won by a law or a court decision. The factors that led to and continue to fuel abortion are as diverse as the affluence of our culture that promotes selfishness, the entertainments that stimulate promiscuity, the careerism of parents and busyness of children that are dismantling family structures, the success agendas of local churches, the professionalism of the clergy. These matters will not change because we get the right political candidates in office. They are deep, intertwined parasites of the soul that even we have grown to love, and they will not be overcome except by the Spirit of God engaged through the prayers of his people.

We *must* pray. This psalm is a prayer that includes not only an appeal for God’s care but also an appeal for victory over his enemies. We must pray

4. Thomas, “Roe v. McCorvey,” *Christianity Today* (January 12, 1998).

consistently and diligently that God will remove this blight from our land and the spiritual lethargy from our hearts that keeps us tolerant of its presence and even feeding its growth. If prayer does not seem enough, then we have not perceived the true depth of the problem and recognized our helplessness against it apart from the power of God. Prayer is the power God provides, and we must employ it against the evil that is greater than we.

Long ago, Oswald Chambers said, “Prayer does not equip us for greater works—prayer *is* the greater work.”⁵ If we will humble ourselves and pray, then the church is not doing the least that it can do; rather, it is doing the spiritual work that it is ordained to do, and it does so knowing that all other work is vain apart from it. When we pray, iron bars yield.

At St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, East Germany, brochures still tell the account of the prayer movement that culminated in 1989. For most of a decade, the prayer group had met, praying for justice in Eastern Europe. Mass demonstrations, political rallies, and legislative agendas took place in other parts of the country, but all had little effect. The prayer group numbers ebbed and flowed, with sometimes a dozen or fewer praying in the massive church. But in 1989, the Spirit ignited the hearts of his people, and hundreds, then thousands, began to come. East German troops blocked the exits of the autobahn on the days of the prayer meeting to keep people from driving into the town. Systematic arrests of prayer leaders occurred on days prior to the prayer meetings. Communist sympathizers were dispatched by the hundreds to fill up the seats of the church so there would be no place for the pray-ers to sit. But the pray-ers still came and stood both inside and outside to pray while the Communists listened to their prayers, and many of *them* thus became part of the cause. When the numbers of pray-ers reached the thousands, troops were called in to handle the anticipated revolt, but all the people did was pray, holding candles in both hands to show that they had no weapons. The spirit of prayer and hope swept the nation, and though it only lasted a few weeks, the party and Communist ideology lost all public support. The system collapsed.

Later, Horst Sindermann, a member of the Central Committee of Communists ruling the country, wrote, “We had planned for everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers.”⁶

5. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest: An Updated Edition in Today's Language* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1992), October 17.

6. This story is told by a variety of news sources widely available on the Internet. These words are quoted from a brochure provided in the foyer of St. Nicholas church in Leipzig, Germany.

Yes, we must politic and picket and publish, but the arm of man will not save us or these children. We must seek our God, with the church doing what it does best: testify to the truth of the preciousness of life, preach grace, demonstrate love, and pray. He is not deaf to our call, for his own heart chants, “Knit one, purl two; knit one, purl two.” God is knitting children. We have the eyes to see it. May we have the faith to act on what we see in order to call on him in devoted prayer and patient petition to come down with power to change us, so that with renewed words and works we shall be divine instruments used by God to save these little ones.