

God's Will and Our Own

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I AM GLAD TO PARTICIPATE in this discussion about being pro-life in a pro-choice academy. Law professors too are overwhelmingly pro-choice. As one manifestation of this pro-choice slant, I remember the 1995 Annual Conference of the Association of American Law Schools. I attended a panel presentation that was totally biased in the pro-choice direction, with no representation of the pro-life view or even any meaningful opportunity for discussion. My emotional response was despair that the professional organization of my chosen profession apparently has no interest in those of the pro-life persuasion. But God calls Christians to follow Him regardless of how the stands we take are received by the world.

I hasten to say that I am very fortunate to be working at Washington and Lee University. There are many law schools where it would be very difficult to survive on the faculty as an open pro-lifer. I have not been ostracized, even though I believe that most of my colleagues are pro-choice. At least if I have been ostracized, I am unaware of it! The school also has supported me in my scholarship and teaching on abortion-related matters. I thank God for these blessings. I'll say a brief word about each of these two categories.

SCHOLARSHIP

My publishing career has been full of frustration. A few years ago, I submitted to the *Michigan Law Review* a reply to a pro-choice piece that it had published. I believe that I did a good job of critiquing the author, but the piece was rejected. This was a real disappointment. I could not imagine God's not wanting *Michigan* to publish my piece. I still do not

understand the unfavorable outcome.¹ After unsuccessfully trying a few other reviews, I decided to abandon the secular law school market. My article was ultimately published by the law review of a Christian law school, a fine institution, but one that in general prestige ranks well below the University of Michigan Law School. I have come to view this entire episode as symbolic of how the pre-born are treated by the legal elites of our society—rejected as valueless by the powerful.

Another frustration has been my failure to find a publisher for the course materials that I have compiled for my Abortion Controversy Seminar. I believe that the materials are unique in the market and do an excellent job of stimulating an in-depth, no-holds-barred discussion of the abortion controversy. A few pro-choice professors have told me the same thing. But no publishers, secular or religious, have been interested in publication. How can this be explained?² How could my lack of success possibly be God's will?

In grappling with such questions, I have been helped greatly by what has become one of my favorite verses, *Proverbs* 21:31 (NIV): "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord." Among other things, this passage speaks to Christians' partnership with God. We are called upon to act: "The horse is made ready for the day of battle." We have duties that God has given us to perform. God equips us to perform these partnership duties, but we still must carry them out. But "victory rests with the Lord": the ultimate result of our actions depends upon God. He is in control. We therefore should not be prideful when events turn out to our liking. Favorable outcomes should instead lead us to thank God and to acknowledge our dependence upon Him.

The knowledge that God is in control should also be a bulwark against despair when results are not what we would want. Concerning my

¹ The reader may wonder whether my work was actually good enough to warrant publication. Any response I make would inevitably be self-promoting. All I can do is direct the reader to the piece itself: *Valuing Intrauterine Life*, 8 *Regent University Law Review* 69 (1997).

² Even though it is self-promoting, I will point out that my materials have enabled me successfully to teach the Abortion Controversy Seminar for ten years. The course continues to attract students on all sides of the abortion issue. My most recent teaching experience, in Spring 2006, was one of the best.

repeated failures to achieve my publishing goals, did my situation somehow slip God's mind? Certainly not! *Matthew* 10:29-31 states that no sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's will. Is getting my work accepted beyond God's power? Obviously not! *Proverbs* 21:1 (NIV) tells us, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases." If God directs a king's heart, He also directs the hearts of editors as they make publication decisions. But maybe God is confused about what outcome is best. Maybe He fails to realize that by not blessing my efforts with success, He is squandering a great opportunity to advance His kingdom. Ridiculous! As *Isaiah* 40: 13-14 (NIV) asks, "Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as a counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?" But maybe God does not love me. Absurd! *Romans* 5:8 (NIV) teaches: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

How then can I explain my publication failures? I cannot. Maybe I should not expect to do so. *Isaiah* 55:8-9 teaches that God's thoughts are not our thoughts. But while I do not know specifically what God is thinking, I do know some general principles. *Ephesians* 1:11-12 (NIV) tells us that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory." God is sovereign. He works out *everything* "in conformity with the purpose of his will." *Nothing* is beyond God's control. But for what purpose? That we "might be for the praise of his glory." Our goal should be to glorify God no matter what our circumstances.

Knowing that glorifying God should be my first priority does not keep me from struggling. My publication frustrations have been deeply disappointing. I sometimes find myself questioning God. Even though I know that He does not make mistakes, sometimes my emotions take over. I have even accused God of mishandling my life. I have at times pouted and sulked. But I know that these are sinful attitudes, and, with His help, I battle against them.

TEACHING

I previously mentioned my Abortion Controversy Seminar. One major goal has been to help students to have opinions on abortion that are more informed and thoughtful. I do this by challenging students with the very best arguments on both sides of the debate. Another goal has been to model how a very controversial subject can be discussed in an atmosphere of reason and respect.

The Seminar has its challenges. Many times I have squelched my instincts as a pro-life advocate in order to be true to my teaching goals. For example, occasionally pro-life students in the class will be unaware of an existing response to a powerful pro-choice point that is persuasive. I often will let the pro-life students struggle trying to come up with an answer. If they cannot, sometimes I still will remain silent, so that the pro-lifers will be really challenged in their thinking. Is this the proper resolution? Should I instead make sure that pro-life students are given all the information that would be useful to them (and that pro-choice students are vigorously challenged in their thinking)?³

I once had a pro-life student in the class who was a very knowledgeable and articulate advocate, but who seemed to go out of his way to insult the pro-choice students on a personal level. They understandably became very annoyed. In a private communication, I gave this student two reasons to avoid this behavior. First, showing restraint is more effective advocacy. Personal attacks trigger emotions that distract one's hearers from the substance of the argument being presented. Second, since this pro-lifer was a Christian, I pointed out 2 *Timothy* 2:24-25 (NIV): "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

I believe that counseling restraint was correct, but at times I wonder. Since I consider abortion to be such an abomination, is there something

³ For a discussion of my thoughts about how best to teach such a controversial subject, see "Impartiality in the Classroom: A Personal Account of a Struggle to Be Evenhanded in Teaching About Abortion," 45 *Journal of Legal Education* 99 (1995).

odd about emphasizing a calm, rational discussion of the issue? Are there occasions when God wants more than a low-key response? While the Holocaust was occurring, should an anti-Holocaust professor merely have led a scholarly discussion about whether the Jews really were human beings or whether the extermination camps should meet sanitary and personnel standards?⁴

My concern about my lack of boldness carries over into my personal interactions. Sometimes, for example, I want to shake those pro-choice colleagues who support the nightmarish partial-birth abortion. But I go in and out among them for months on end, saying nothing whatever. Some years ago, I gave a presentation to the Washington and Lee Law School Faculty about the use of visual imagery in the abortion debate. I argued that such imagery was perfectly appropriate, including fetal development pictures and pictures of aborted babies. But I did not hand out any aborted baby pictures to my colleagues. I thought that doing so would not have been well-received. Did God approve this as the prudent course, enhancing my long-term effectiveness as a pro-life advocate? Or did I let my desire to be agreeable make me a coward, unwilling to do the right thing?

⁴ Pro-life advocates have long argued for the humanity of the pre-born. In recent years, they also have sought state statutes regulating abortion clinics. For an interesting account of the experience of regulation proponents in one state, see Peter Nyikos, "The Saga of the South Carolina Abortion Clinic Regulation Act," *Life and Learning XV: Proceedings of the Fifteenth University for Life Conference* (Washington, D.C.: UFL, 2006), pp. 363-77.