

The Use of Graphic Photos of Aborted Children in the Public Forum

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Many well-intentioned people have questioned the public use of large graphic aborted baby photos by some pro-life groups on the streets of America. This paper will attempt to list the Biblical and historical precedent for such public displays and the observable effects produced on individuals and society. It will also deal with commonly expressed objections regarding the use of the signs in the public forum.

Biblical and Historical Precedent

The first Biblical example regarding the use of graphic public displays is found in Judges 19-20. Here we read the story of a Levite who had traveled with his concubine to Gibeah in the land of Benjamin. Some of the lewd Benjamites besieged the residence where they sought refuge and demanded the Levite come out so they could sexually abuse him. Instead, the concubine, a harlot, was sent. She was brutally and repeatedly raped throughout the night and died from her injuries even as she struggled back to the very threshold of the home where her master was staying. The Levite took her body home where he cut her into twelve pieces and sent her dismembered remains throughout Israel as a testimony to the outrageous crime committed by the Benjamites. Once the assembled people heard the Levite's story they "rose as one man" (Judges 20:8) in unity of purpose against the Benjamites where the Lord justly gave them victory over their wicked and corrupt enemy.

There were four noteworthy elements in this Biblical account.

- There was a perceived injustice (in this case, a brutal murder).
- A graphic display was sent throughout the public, which exposed the injustice.
- The graphic display acted as a catalyst uniting the people in purpose.
- The united people were spurred to action bringing about social justice or change.

This tactic has been used successfully throughout history to bring about a variety of changes in society. One such example is the story of William Wilburforce who labored with little fruit against slavery in England until he began taking his friends to visit the actual slave ships and view first-hand the public mistreatment suffered by the slaves. His friends rose up "as one man" and began to act on that knowledge, eventually bringing an end to slavery in England.

More recently, graphic images from the Viet Nam War flooded into the living rooms of Americans during the nightly broadcasts of the evening news. These images sparked the anti-war movement and forever changed the way Americans view warfare.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often staged events for the benefit of the media, which inevitably ended in violence by whites against his peaceful protesters. Because of this tactic, for which he was often criticized, all of America witnessed for the first time in public what had been happening in private for decades. King used the media to force America to confront racism. These images on the evening news lead to a change in the hearts of the people and advanced the cause of civil rights.

The animal rights movement has also been successful in furthering their cause through the use of graphic displays. Today, people do not buy seal fur because of the images of baby seals being beaten bloody by hunters. Film of whalers stripping the flesh off harpooned whales helped lead to a moratorium on harvesting the animals. Many consumers check the labels of shampoos and other products to make sure they were not tested on animals after viewing the pathetic pictures of test rabbits with their fur falling out. (Could it be that the preborn children of America are of less value than a seal, a whale, or even a rabbit?)

History is replete with such examples; the ultimate of which was employed by Jesus Christ Himself. He could have shed his blood in a dungeon, out of sight and out of mind, so as not to offend anyone's sensibilities. But He chose instead to allow Himself to be brutally beaten beyond recognition, paraded bloody and bruised through the streets of a crowded Jerusalem, then hung naked on a cross for all the world to see, including whatever children may have passed by.

This graphic picture of Christ's suffering for our sins has been the catalyst which has inspired innumerable people to come to the salvation which His public sufferings purchased for us. Few Christians complain of the graphic depiction of Christ on the cross, which is publicly displayed in so many of our churches. Those who contend that Christ would never publicly display graphic material, especially in view of children conveniently forget this image of our crucified Savior.

One would be hard put to find one successful social movement that did not contain the four elements of Judges 19-20.

Biblical Mandate

Ephesians 5:11 states "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."

The large graphic photos expose the heinous truth about abortion in an unsurpassed way. Unlike other modern social movements, the media has been unwilling to take images of injustice against the unborn to the public. Pro-life activists have struggled one city, one neighborhood, one person at a time to expose the grim truth about the plight of the unborn.

The large graphic photos are a crucial tool, which has successfully allowed Christians to fulfill the Biblical mandate to expose evil.

Positive Effects

A variety of things occur once the light has been shown on the evil deed of abortion. For many people, their hearts are broken. Abortion supporters have been converted to the pro-life position. Countless laborers have been brought into the pro-life movement spurred to action after seeing the tiny broken bodies of abortion's innocent victims. Hundreds of abortion-minded women have changed their minds about killing their unborn children and have turned away from the abortion mills after viewing the pictures.

These trends are documentable. Numbers of abortions are down according to statistics obtained from the Center for Disease Control and the Alan Guttmacher Institute. The national abortion ratio (number of abortions per 1000 live births) decreased from 314 in 1996, the first year the large graphic photos began appearing across America, to 305 in 1997, the lowest of any year since 1975. Also in 1997, (the last year for which official statistics are available), the number of abortions fell to 1,184,758, a decrease of 3% from 1996 and nearly 15 % from the 1990 figures.

Notice the significant drop in abortion statistics in 1997. This is not coincidental. Several noteworthy things began happening around 1996.

1. The large graphic photos of aborted babies began to be used on the public streets of hundreds of cities across America through Operation Rescue's "Show the Truth" campaigns.
2. Operation Rescue began displaying the large photos at high school and college campuses, targeting the age group of women most likely to seek an abortion.
3. The partial birth abortion debate erupted in the United States Congress. Graphic drawings of the partial birth abortion procedure began to be widely publicized.

Then, in October of 1997, the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, led by Gregg Cunningham, began its Genocide Awareness Project displaying large graphic displays of aborted babies interspersed with Jewish Holocaust and racial discrimination victims on college campuses all over the country with stunningly positive results.

He reports babies saved and opinions changed in favor of the pro-life position. **The correlation between the advent of several graphic display campaigns and the drop in the abortion rate appears to be not coincidental, but causal!**

Sidewalk counselors who display the graphic aborted baby photos have observed this national trend in the San Diego area. Tracking changes over the past ten years they report decreases in the amount of traffic entering abortion clinics as well as increases in the number of women who change their minds about having an abortion whenever the graphic signs are used.

At a Family Planning Associates abortion mill in La Mesa, California, approximately 50 babies are scheduled for termination on a typical Saturday. Without the signs sidewalk counselors often find it hard to keep up with the volume and sometimes must speak with two to three women simultaneously.

They report typically observing 25-30 women entering the building over a three-hour period. When several of the signs are displayed, the traffic into the parking lot slows to a trickle and sidewalk counselors may, under those circumstances, observe under ten women entering for abortions during that same three-hour period.

Planned Parenthood has stated the fact that the signs adversely affect their abortion business in sworn court documents in a case that centers on the use of graphic materials in front of their San Diego facility. (Wilkinson v. Scott case number 728883)

The San Diego sidewalk counselors have tracked the number of babies saved from abortion through their efforts over the past ten consecutive years. In 1995, the year before the large graphic photo signs first appeared in San Diego they recorded eight children saved through their sidewalk counseling ministry. The number of Christians regularly ministering at the clinic on a monthly basis was between 5-10 individuals. Only one clinic had a regular pro-life presence. The following year, 1996, eleven babies were reported as saved from abortion, the majority in the second half of the year, after the signs were introduced. In 1997, there were about 20 babies saved and in 1998, about 30. At this same time there began to be a marked increase in the numbers of pro-life participants in picketing and sidewalk counseling efforts. In 1999, over 40 babies were confirmed saved and sidewalk counselors were beginning to cover more clinics over more days.

In 2000, the number of Christians ministering at clinics in the San Diego area on a monthly basis has grown to approximately 100. At least three clinics are covered on a weekly or twice weekly basis. Over 50 babies were documented as being saved from abortion at clinics where graphic signs were used. The elements of Judges 19-20 are evident:

1. Christians have identified the injustice of abortion.
2. Graphic displays of the injustice have been publicly introduced.
3. Christians, pricked in their hearts over the plight of the unborn have united in purpose against abortion.
4. In increasing numbers Christians are taking to the streets, multiplying the effect, and bringing about changes which include fewer abortions.

Negative Effects?

It is sometimes suggested that because some people react to the graphic displays with anger and hostility, this negative reaction may indeed negate any good done by the signs and may in fact drive women to obtain abortions. Some have suggested that the negative response of the public to the signs actually will cause the pro-life cause to loose the war against abortion because it is a poor Christian testimony to the world. As always, it is important to look at the answer to these assumptions from both a factual and scriptural viewpoint.

Factually, we can see that the statistics do not support the premise that the pictures are causing people to abandon the pro-life cause and/or obtain more abortions. In fact, evidence already stated herein shows the opposite actually happening—more lives are being saved and more people are being converted to the pro-life position. There is an increase, at least in one community where the signs are employed, in the numbers of Christian activists working to stop abortion. These are the facts.

Scripturally, John 3:19-20 is revealing:

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen that they have been done in God.

When Christians obey the scriptural mandate of Ephesians 5:11 and expose the unfruitful deeds of darkness, those who do those deeds will hate it. It is a natural and expected response that the Bible prepares us for. The duty of Christians is to expose and to warn. They do this out in the open where their “deeds may be clearly seen.” However, Christians who expose sin can expect to be hated and persecuted by the world. Jesus explains why this is so in John 15:18-19:

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet, because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Christians who seek the approval and accolades of the world or wish to avoid its persecution are in danger of conforming to and compromising with a system God has called them out of. According to 2 Timothy 3:12, “Yes, and all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

The fact that the vast majority of Americans today are “of the world” and not “of Christ” insures that Christians, especially those who expose evil, will be unpopular with the majority of people. Being hated by the world is a natural and expected consequence of a godly person living in obedience to scripture. It is therefore unfair and unbiblical to accuse Christians with graphic signs of being a poor Christian testimony because they evoke the anger and hatred that the Bible says they must.

Any prophetic message that exposes evil will have two effects on the hearers. They will either express sorrow for their sin, or they will harden and rebel. Because a majority of people may harden at the message that does not mean that the message should be stopped for fear of offending them. On the contrary! Ezekiel 3:16-19 is to the point:

*Now it came to pass at the end of seven days that the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Son of Man, I made you a watchman for the house of Israel; Therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me; When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; But his blood will I require at your hand. **Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.**” (Emphasis added)*

The Scriptures are clear. If a man fails to warn the wicked, he commits sin and shares in the guilt. If a man does warn, he is obedient and therefore held guiltless.

Some have attempted to accuse Christians that use graphic photos of actually causing abortions. This is saying that the warning messenger, fulfilling Ephesians 5:11 and Ezekiel 3:19, is responsible for the sin of abortion. This turns the scriptural teaching of responsibility on its ear!

Women may continue on with an abortion in spite of being warned of the consequences, but not **because** of the warning just as wicked Judah continued her rebellion to God **in spite** of Ezekiel’s warnings. To blame Christians who hold the graphic signs of causing abortions is like holding Ezekiel responsible for the Jews being taken captive by the Babylonians. It is an absurdity!

In fact, there is **not one** documented case of a woman who was going to keep her baby changing her mind and aborting as a result of viewing the graphic aborted baby signs.

Another aspect of the argument against the signs is that they cause people who may have had abortions to experience unpleasant or hurtful feelings after viewing the pictures in an uncontrolled environment. Again, this can hardly be considered a negative aspect. Is it really desirable to have a society of people that can murder their offspring at will, then have positive feelings about it?

Street activists can testify to the fact that most people who stop and respond negatively to the signs have been involved in an abortion decision. They become angered because the light has been shined on their evil deed. People **need** to feel bad about the abortion they were involved in.

Only once they face what they have done and admit it was wrong could they ever find forgiveness and healing. It is not in their best interest to “protect” or shield people from feeling bad about their sin. In fact, this is destructive behavior, which is often exhibited by families of alcoholics and drug abusers, only serves to enable the abuser to continue in his sin. Sorrow is a necessary first step to repentance. Note 2 Corinthians 7:9-11:

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.

Those who have had or encouraged abortions sooner or later must confront their sin and feel sorrow for it or healing and forgiveness cannot occur. Street activists displaying the graphic photos of aborted children perform the unpopular but necessary function of confronting a public in denial about abortion who so desperately need to seek forgiveness at the cross.

Since viewing the photos, many men and women have indeed repented from the sin of abortion and have sought healing. This public ministry has often born eternal fruit as some have even been led to Christ on the street after having hearts broken by the graphic displays. But what of those hurting people that drive on and are not ministered on the spot? When God starts a work in a person’s heart, He is fully capable of finishing it. It is important to trust that God will continue working in their lives and will eventually lead them to where they can find help and healing.

But children view these!

Probably the most often voiced objection to the public display of the graphic photos is that children view them. Often it is assumed that the photos will emotionally traumatize a child. Activists with several years of experience on the street with the signs have noted that the pictures do not adversely affect children as long as the parent remains calm and reasonable.

Many parents use the opportunity to teach their children about life and reinforce their love for their kids. Children only become upset when the parents respond angrily, stop to verbally abuse the sign holders, or even physically attack the signs. When the children see Mom or Dad behaving in ways that frighten them, they also become upset.

Christians who have exposed their own children to the graphic materials, some nearly from birth, report no ill effects in their children. In fact, these children often develop a deeper sense of compassion for women and babies affected by abortion. Several activist families have had the joy of seeing their teen-aged or adult children accept Christ and enthusiastically adopt the pro-life ministry as their own multiplying many times over the work of their parents.

Conclusion

The public display of graphic photos of aborted babies is a proven and effective tool. Scriptural principals support it. The photos save lives, convict the guilty, change hearts, cause the hurting to seek help, inspire activism, and will eventually be a part of transforming society as far as the abortion issue is concerned.

The signs stand as a prophetic warning to America against the sin of child killing and have raised the overall awareness of the general public to the plight of the unborn.

Those who oppose the graphic materials are free to conduct their ministry as they see fit without criticism from those who are supportive of the signs. The opposite should be true as well. However, those who do not support the graphic photos have been publicly expressing their disagreement and disapproval of the signs with increasing frequency and acrimony. What possible benefit is there to showing such public discord? Jesus stated in Matthew 12:25:

But Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself cannot stand."

God forbid that the pro-life movement would allow itself to be a house divided provoking God to wrath! Disapproval of tactics should be expressed privately and in a spirit of humility, lest the Enemy win the day.

In light of the factual benefits and Scriptural support, the graphic signs have earned a place as a valued tool in the pro-life arsenal. Those who display them are due the respect of the rest of the pro-life movement and if not their respect, then (at least) their silence.