

FASTING FOR THE LITTLE ONES

Abortion and the Sovereignty of God Over False Worldviews

Our hunger for God is too small. This is true not only because our capacities to desire are atrophied—like a muscle that lifts only feathers—but also because our capacity to see the Desirable is untrained on the telescope of God’s Word.

On What Do We Exercise the Muscle of Desire?

We are meant to desire the Great with great desire.

Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

—Psalm 73:25-26

As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

—Psalm 42:1-2

O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

—*Psalm 63:1*

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

—*Philippians 3:8*

But we flex our desires for small things rather than for God. And so the very potential for desire diminishes.

How Large Are the Tiny Stars?

And we do not put our eye often to the telescope of God's Word where the tiny twinklings of God in our cluttered night sky are revealed as unspeakably great wonders. How often do we pray with the psalmist, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law" (Psalm 119:18)? And if we do not see him in his greatness, we will not desire him in his fullness.

Beholding the glory of God is not only a private experience on a mountain as he passes by. It is also a public experience as he multiplies plagues in the land of Egypt, and divides the Red Sea, and swallows the family of Korah into the earth, and turns water into wine, and raises the dead, and causes selfish men to lay down their lives for the sake of love, and turns the hearts of kings toward the cause of Truth. There is a hunger for God that goes beyond the desire for private experience. It longs for the public display of his glory in the world. It longs for the great dishonors against our God to be set right. It is not content to hope for private revelations of his saving help, as precious as they are. It yearns for the open triumph of his hand in the establishment of God-exalting

truth and righteousness—in universities and courts of law and advertising agencies and political debates and all the media of television and radio and newspapers and magazines and movies and the Internet. It is driven by a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

Fasting for the Public Glory of God

If fasting is an exclamation point after the sentence of the heart, “O God, show us your glory!” then fasting is not merely a private matter either. It has to do with the public, historical, cultural, global demonstrations of the glory of God that our hearts desire. That is what this chapter is about. Taking abortion as one manifestation of a great godlessness in our culture, how shall we then live and pray and fast?

Francis Schaeffer’s Vindication

Francis Schaeffer died on May 5, 1984. Thirteen years later *Christianity Today* featured his picture on the front of the magazine over the caption, “Our Saint Francis.” In Michael Hamilton’s lead essay we read the tribute that in the last twenty years of his life

perhaps no intellectual save C.S. Lewis affected the thinking of evangelicals more profoundly; perhaps no leader of the period save Billy Graham left a deeper stamp on the movement [of American evangelicalism] as a whole. Together the Schaeffers gave currency to the idea of intentional Christian community, prodded evangelicals out of their cultural ghetto, inspired an army of evangelicals to become serious scholars, encouraged women who chose roles as mothers and homemakers, mentored the leaders of the New

Christian Right, and solidified popular evangelical opposition to abortion.²

Almost twenty years have passed since Schaeffer, together with C. Everett Koop, launched his missile against abortion, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979)—a book, a film series, and a speaking tour. The amazing thing today at the end of the twentieth century is how up-to-date it still sounds, and how prophetic it has proved to be. Michael Hamilton acknowledges in his 1997 article that “some critics have recently allowed that [Schaeffer’s] big picture has proven durable. . . . In particular, he appears to have been prescient on the issue of human life.”³

When I turn back to Schaeffer’s two-decades-old words, they have that prophetic ring of durability and truth.

In the flood of the loss of humanness in our age—including the flow from abortion-on-demand to infanticide and on to euthanasia—the only thing that can stem this tide is the certainty of the absolute uniqueness and value of people. And the only thing which gives us that is the knowledge that people are made in the image of God. We have no other final protection. And the only way we know that people are made in the image of God is through the Bible and the incarnation of Christ, which we know from the Bible.

If people are not made in the image of God, the pessimistic, realistic humanist is right: the human race is an abnormal wart on the smooth face of a silent and meaningless universe. In this setting, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia (including the killing of mentally deranged criminals, the severely handicapped, or the elderly who are an economic burden) are completely logical. . . . Without the Bible and without the revelation in Christ (which is only told to us in the Bible) there is nothing to stand between us and our children and the eventual acceptance of the monstrous inhumanities of the age.⁴

Michael Hamilton comments that “Schaeffer’s bleak vision is now daily news.”

“Cadaver Jack” Kevorkian has already killed more people than Ted Bundy, but the state of Michigan cannot muster the political will to stop him. A federal court has forbidden the state of Washington to pass laws preventing doctors from killing their patients, while the University of Washington is permitted to scavenge and sell the body parts of thousands of aborted children every year.⁵

The Most Permissive Abortion Democracy in the World

It would not surprise Francis Schaeffer that America has become the most permissive of all democratic societies in the modern world when it comes to abortion.

Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard Law School is *the* authority on abortion law in the Western world. She notes that, of all democratic societies, the U.S. is far and away the most permissive on abortion. . . . She observes, the now-united Germany adopted a new abortion law providing significant protections for the unborn. As is the case in every democracy except the U.S., the law was adopted through legislative politics. But the Supreme Court has in effect declared that the American people, once thought to be the teachers of the world in the ways of democracy, are peculiarly unfitted for self-governance.⁶

This strange power of the Supreme Court symbolizes how intractable the American position seems to be. Its logic is that 1.6 million lives a year are

the price that must be paid in order not to interfere with lifestyles that presuppose abortion on demand. That is the

judgment imposed by judicial fiat on a society in which 75 percent of the people say that abortions should not be allowed for the reasons that 95 percent of abortions are in fact performed.⁷

There is a kind of desperation that begins to grip a people ruled not by legislators, but by judges who declare the Constitution to mean what they say it means. This desperation leads to talk of desperate measures. We have already had killings. This too would not have surprised Francis Schaeffer, who “defined abortion as the hinge issue for American society, called Christians to civil disobedience, and even broached the idea of resisting the government by force.”⁸ He concluded one of his last books, *A Christian Manifesto*, in 1981, with the words, “If there is no final place for civil disobedience, then the government has been made autonomous, and as such, it has been put in the place of the Living God.”⁹

The Legitimacy of the American Regime?

Again in fulfillment of Schaeffer’s warnings there have been stunning recent public discussions of the possible illegitimacy of the present American regime. In 1996 and 1997, a symposium including, among others, William Bennett, Robert Bork, Charles Colson, James Dobson, and Richard John Neuhaus addressed this issue. “The question here explored, in full awareness of its far-reaching consequences, is whether we have reached or are reaching the point where conscientious citizens can no longer give moral assent to the existing regime.”¹⁰

There is no endorsement here of killing abortionists. But there is the sober judgment that “A civilization cannot tolerate private executions, as a civilization cannot long survive the license to kill unwanted human beings.”¹¹ How long, is the ques-

tion. Richard Neuhaus observes that “the destructive effects of anomie and anger are already evident as a result of law divorced from constitutional text, moral argument, and democratic process. The ever-fragile bonds of civility are unraveled as politics becomes, to paraphrase Clausewitz, war pursued by other means. Lawless law is an invitation to lawlessness.”¹²

What Abortion Teaches a Nation

Meanwhile, the abortion license eats away at one precious thing after another. The children are the first to go. The women next, with the guilt and the heartbreak and the physical harm and the manifold effects of post-abortion syndrome.¹³ Then come the fathers with some remorse and anger and huge amounts of “irresponsibility and predatory male sexual behavior” encouraged by the assumption that there is a simple solution to any unwanted pregnancy. Then comes the erosion of the moral landscape that depends so much on virtues and values and commitments that go beyond mere autonomous individual liberties.

In February 1995, before the President of the United States at the National Prayer Breakfast, Mother Teresa spoke with courage and directness concerning this erosive effect of abortion.

I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child—a direct killing of the innocent child—murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? . . .

By abortion, the mother does not learn to love, but kills even her own child to solve her problems. And by abortion, the father is told that he does not have to take any responsibility at all for the child he has brought into the world. That father is likely to put other women into the same trou-

ble. So abortion just leads to more abortion. Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching the people to love, but to use any violence to get what they want. That is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion.¹⁴

This is what Francis Schaeffer meant when he said, “Compassion . . . is being undermined. And it is not only the babies who are being killed; it is humanness which the humanist worldview is beating to death.”¹⁵

On Not Seeing Things in Bits and Pieces

Here is where Francis Schaeffer is at his best—at the level of worldviews. And this is surely the level at which the great battles of the universe are fought. Schaeffer said that “the basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so . . . is that they have seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals.”¹⁶ He means that the worldviews behind the bits and pieces—like abortion—have not been understood and resisted. The name he gives the worldview that sustains, while it can, the modern West, including abortion, is “the material-energy, chance view of final reality.”

We must try to roll back the results of the total worldview which considers material-energy, shaped by chance, as the final reality. We must realize that this view will with inevitable certainty always bring forth results which are not only relativistic, and not only wrong, but which will be inhuman, not only for other people, but for our children and grandchildren, and our spiritual children. It will always bring forth what is inhuman, for with its false view of total reality it not only does not have a basis for the uniqueness and dignity of the individual person, but it is totally ignorant as to what, and who Man is.¹⁷

God, not material-energy is the final reality. And he, not chance, shapes all things. The restoration of this foundation—the supremacy of God in all things—is the great challenge of the western world. A worldview built on matter and chance “leaves no room for meaning, purpose, or values in the universe and gives no base for law. . . . Its control of the consensus has become overwhelmingly dominant in about the last forty years.”¹⁸

A Worldview War on Abortion

This is the context for our opposition to abortion. So Schaeffer recommends not just that we resist the “bits and pieces” but the whole worldview in the way we pray and struggle and work. “Certainly every Christian ought to be praying and working to nullify the abominable abortion law. But as we work and pray, we should have in mind not only this important issue as though it stood alone. Rather, we should be struggling and praying that this whole other total entity—the material-energy, chance worldview—can be rolled back with all its results across all of life.”¹⁹

The most compelling pro-life efforts today grasp this goal. David Reardon’s vision is one example that connects even explicitly with Schaeffer’s worldview approach. Reardon, a biomedical ethicist, echoes Schaeffer’s concern in his specific strategy:

The political goal of making abortion illegal has always been a truncate vision. Our real desire has always been to create a culture where abortion is not just illegal, but is *unthinkable*. In such a culture, the physical, psychological, and spiritual dangers of abortion will be common knowledge. In such a culture, commitment, compassion, and a

sense of duty to aid and protect both mother and the child will be universal.²⁰

The key word is “unthinkable.” And it was Schaeffer, seventeen years earlier, who said, “There is a ‘thinkable’ and an ‘unthinkable’ in every era.”²¹ And it is the underlying worldview that governs what is thinkable and unthinkable. Therefore, Reardon and Schaeffer, and most thoughtful people today, realize that the battle over abortion is a much deeper battle for the soul of the culture and its worldview.²²

The Place of Prayer and Fasting

How then shall we resist and reform? In the last years of his life Schaeffer was increasingly oriented on the political arena and increasingly disenchanted with the narrow piety of evangelicalism—the “majority of the Silent Majority” who had “two bankrupt values—personal peace and affluence.”²³ His emphasis was a prophetic and timely call.

But I wonder if many of the young scholars and activists (now in their forties and fifties!) whom he inspired need to hear a balancing word about the power of prayer and fasting, not as an alternative to thinking and acting, but as a radical foundation that says, “The victory belongs to the Lord, even if the horse (of scholarship and politics) is made ready for the day of battle” (see Proverbs 21:31). Listen to the books crying out for evangelical renewal and reformation in the life of the mind, the restoration of Truth in the place of technique, the recovery of church social compassion from government powerlessness, the taking of moral high ground in the environmental cause, and many other causes. Is there a sense in each of these that the root issues are so intractable to human suasion that the call for fasting and prayer

would not only be fitting but desperately needed? I am commending such a call.

Fasting and Praying for Worldview Breakthroughs

This was not Schaeffer's main call at the end of his life, and for some today it is not part of their horizon—that fasting and prayer might bring the breakthroughs they write about and work for so passionately. Schaeffer did say, “Every Christian ought to be praying and working to nullify the abominable abortion law. . . . We should be struggling and praying that this whole other total entity—the material-energy, chance worldview—can be rolled back.”²⁴ I wonder if the scholars and activists take even that to heart. I confess that my own praying for worldview breakthroughs is not what it should be. Oh, how easily I settle into a resigned and fatalistic frame of mind when it comes to secular mindsets, and defective theologies, and institutional corruption, and philosophical falsehood, and pervasive cultural biases.

But this is not the time for resignation or fatalism. It is the time for radical prayer and fasting to the end that all our thinking and all our preaching and all our writing and all our social action and missions will have the aroma of God on it and will carry a transforming thrust far beyond anything mere man could do. Then might it be said, beyond all expectation and human possibility, “Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you” (Leviticus 26:8).

Avoiding a Siege Mentality in Babylon

Where shall we get the confidence and the encouragement to fast and pray for such sweeping worldview concerns?

I suggest that we consider the biblical story of Ezra, espe-

cially Ezra 8:21-23. Let me give you some faith-building background to this text so you hear it with all the force Ezra gives it, and with all its relevance for our worldview concerns.

Israel had been taken into Babylonian exile. They had been there for decades. Now the time had come, in God's reckoning, for their restoration. But how could this happen? They were a tiny, obscure ethnic minority in the massive Persian empire. The answer is that God rules empires. And when it is his time for his people to move, he moves empires. That's the point of the first eight chapters of this book of Ezra. And it is massively hope-giving for the people of God every time we slip back into a mentality of siege.

Consider, first, Ezra 1:1-2.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.'"

Do not miss the sovereign rule of God over the mind and will of Cyrus, the most powerful king in the world. God had prophesied by Jeremiah that the people would come back to their own land. "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place'" (Jeremiah 29:10). God never leaves his prophecies dangling uncertainly in the will of man. He does not merely predict; he acts to fulfill the predictions he makes. This is why his predictions are as sure as he is powerful.

So it says in Ezra 1:1, "He stirred up the spirit of Cyrus."

Cyrus did not merely experience inexplicably the fulfillment of a prophecy; he experienced God himself working sovereignly to fulfill that prophecy. There's the answer. When God is ready to do a great thing in the world, he can do it—whether it is through a Persian king, or a prophet, or a scholarly book, or a Christian pro-life worker. The key is God's absolute sovereignty over the empires of the world and over the minds and wills of kings and scholars and politicians and university presidents.

Even the Setbacks Are Meant for Greater Benefit

Here is what happens. A first wave of refugees return to Israel from Babylon—over 42,000 of them. They start building the temple. But their enemies in Judah oppose them and write to the new emperor, Artaxerxes, telling him that a rebellious city is being rebuilt (4:12). So Artaxerxes halts the work on the temple, and it looks like God's plans are frustrated. This is often the way things go—a great movement in the right direction in the church or in a city or in the culture as a whole, and then a setback. This often sets to moaning pessimists who have small views of God. But this story is meant to keep us hoping.

God had a different and better plan that was not just in spite of the opposition and setback, but that included it. O, let us learn that the lean years of trouble are preparations for God's blessing! Sooner or later he turns it all for good. He is God. In this case here is how he does it. According to Ezra 5:1, God sends two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who inspire the people to begin building again.

“But now take courage, Zerubbabel” declares the LORD, “take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land, take courage,” declares the LORD, “and work; for I am with you,” says the LORD of

hosts. . . . “The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,” declares the LORD of hosts. “The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,” says the LORD of hosts.

—Haggai 2:4, 8-9

But, as is often the case, a new resurgence of energy and progress unleashes new opposition. So it is here: the enemies try the same tactic as before. This time they write a letter to Darius, the new emperor, in the hopes of bringing the work in Jerusalem to a halt. But this time it backfires, and we get to see why God had allowed the building to cease temporarily in the first place.

Darius does some research before responding to the enemies of Israel. He searches the archives and finds the original decree from Cyrus authorizing the building of the temple. So in Ezra 6:7-8 he writes back the stunning news—beyond anything the bedraggled Israelites could ask or think. Darius says to the enemies in Judah,

Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.

What a remarkable reversal! What a great God! The Jews thought the enemies had triumphed. But God was simply working history so that the enemies would not only *permit* the building of the temple but *pay* for it too! Ezra 6:22 states the great fact plainly: “*The Lord had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them* to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.” God rules the hearts of kings and emperors

and presidents and scientists and scholars and judges and governors and mayors. This is the great foundation for fasting and prayer for worldview concerns—God can convert people, and God can shape their thinking even if they are not converted. O, the lessons here for us in our struggle to bring truth to bear on the church and the culture.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace,
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.²⁵*

O, the lessons here for us! Name your discouraging setback—personal, political, scholarly, ecclesiastical, cultural, global. Dare any Christian say that God is not in this for the good of his people and the glory of his name? Not if our God is the God of Ezra! Do you think these setbacks are not without some great purpose of righteousness bigger and more stunning than any of us can imagine?

The King's Heart Is a Stream of Water in the Hand of God

Then Ezra comes into the picture with a flashback to the reign of Artaxerxes. The king sends Ezra with a company of people back to Jerusalem. According to Ezra 7:6 the king gives him everything he wants for the journey. Now why would the very king who stopped the building of the temple do that? Ezra gives the answer in his prayer in 7:27. “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, *who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart.*” God did it. God put it in his heart.

He did it to Cyrus (1:1); he did it to Darius (6:22); and he did it to Artaxerxes (7:27). “The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes”

(Proverbs 21:1). God is ruling the world. He is ruling history. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33). We cannot understand the infinite wisdom of his ways. Ours is to trust and obey and pray—and as we shall see, to fast.

Fasting Before a World-sovereign God

Which brings us to what Ezra did as he left captivity on his way to Jerusalem. He refused an army escort so that he could testify to Artaxerxes about the power and faithfulness of God in protecting his company of people. Instead of the king’s help he sought God’s help, and he sought it *with fasting*. Ezra 8:21-23 records:

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones [here is the connection with saving little ones from abortion] and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.” So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.

In verse 21, fasting is an expression of humility—that is, our sense of desperate, utter dependence on God for what we need. “I proclaimed *a fast* there at the river of Ahava, that we might *humble ourselves*.” And if anything is plain from Francis Schaeffer’s analysis of the foundations of abortion, it is that the humanist worldview pervading American culture is so intractable

that we are utterly dependent on God to resist and reform. Faithful reasoning, persuasive writing, social activism and political engagement all have their place. But unless the sovereign God moves on darkened minds (like he did on Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes), the very best reasoning and action will be taken captive and turned upside down.

But fasting, for Ezra, was not only an expression of humility and desperation; it was an expression of desiring God with life-and-death seriousness. “So we fasted and sought our God.” Fasting comes in alongside prayer with all its hunger for God and says, “We are not able in ourselves to win this battle. We are not able to change hearts or minds. We are not able to change world-views and transform culture and save 1.6 million children. We are not able to reform the judiciary or embolden the legislature or mobilize the slumbering population. We are not able to heal the endless wounds of godless ideologies and their bloody deeds. But, O God, you are able! And we turn from reliance on ourselves to you. And we cry out to you and plead that for the sake of your name, and for the sake of your glory, and for the advancement of your saving purpose in the world, and for the demonstration of your wisdom and your power and your authority over all things, and for the sway of your Truth and the relief of the poor and the helpless, act, O God. This much we hunger for the revelation of your power. With all our thinking and all our writing and all our doing, we pray and we fast. Come. Manifest your glory.”

The merciful result of fasting and prayer is mentioned at the end of Ezra 8:23: “He listened to our entreaty.” The children were spared. The heart of the king was swayed. The enemies were turned away. This is an astonishing thing—that a God who sways the minds of kings should ordain that he be swayed by the weak to send his sovereign power on their behalf.

“Doing Business” Until He Comes

I appeal to you to seek the Lord with me concerning the place of fasting and prayer in breaking through the darkened mind that engulfs the modern world, in regard to abortion and a hundred other ills. This is not a call for a collective tantrum that screams at the bad people, “Give me back my country.” It is a call to aliens and exiles in the earth, whose citizenship is in heaven and who await the appearance of their King, to “do business” until he comes (Luke 19:13). And the great business of the Christian is to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31), and to pray that God’s name be hallowed and his kingdom come and his will be done in the earth (Matthew 6:9-10). And to yearn and work and pray and fast not only for the final revelation of the Son of Man, but in the meantime, for the demonstration of his Spirit and power in the reaching of every people, and the rescuing of the perishing, and the purifying of the church, and the putting right of as many wrongs as God will grant.

It is true that the biblical balance of labor among such great tasks is not an easy discovery. But that too may be a fruit of faithful fasting. May the Lord grant that the greatness of our calling not paralyze our desires. But may our hunger for private and public displays of the glory of our great God find release in fasting and prayer and every good work.