

EXCLUSIVE

'We Stand at a Crossroads'

The religious right must give ground—or risk irrelevance. BY RALPH REED

THE MOST DANGEROUS THING THAT could happen to the pro-family movement would be to gain political power without first learning how to turn the levers of government slowly, deliberately, and cautiously. No lobbying or arm-twisting can take the place of a change in public attitudes through moral persuasion. If religious conservatives are wise, they will resist the temptation to replace the social engineering of the left with the social engineering of the right by forcing compliance with the moral principles that motivate us so deeply.

As a community of faith, we stand at a crossroads. Down one path lies the fate of many other great religiously-inspired political movements of the past: irrelevance and obscurity. It is a path defined by its spiritual arrogance and by its faulty assumption that the most efficacious way to change hearts is through the coercive power of the state. This is the path taken by the prohibitionists, the Social Gospel advocates, the New Dealers, and the architects of the Great Society. It is not the right path for our movement. Fortunately, there is another way to go, and at the end of it lies not simply wider influence and greater political impact, but a changed society and a thoroughly Judeo-Christian culture. To get there, religious conservatives must shun harsh language on critical issues—chiefly abortion, Clinton-bashing, and homosexuality—and learn to speak of our opponents with charity.

Currently there is a fractious and, I believe, healthy debate within the pro-life community about whether to pursue cultural remedies and persuasion that will lead to fewer abortions, or whether to seek a legal ban on abortion. Even Americans describing themselves as “pro-choice” would not deny that 1.6 million abortions a year is a national tragedy.

Some, like Bill Bennett and scholar Marvin Olasky, argue that adoption and abstinence offer the greatest hope of reducing the number of abortions. The problem with this “moral suasion” argument is that it is a little like arguing in 1963 that a Civil Rights Act would be unnecessary because people could read “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Do we need moral arguments and changes in public opinion before we end the tragedy of

abortion? Of course we do. But the law is also an effective teacher—it is part of a cultural solution, not a substitute for it.

True, we have already made enormous progress. Pro-life political action has undeniably helped stigmatize abortion. What else would provoke President Clinton to promise to make abortion “rare,” or abor-

tion-rights lobbyist Kate Michelman to admit that it was “a bad thing”?

Yet, undeniably, the votes cannot currently be found in Congress for the ultimate goal of the pro-life movement, a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. This presents a political dilemma. Until public opinion shifts on a political solution to abor-



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Disarmingly boyish, Reed is a clever pol

n, outlawing all abortions by constitutional fiat would create the same dilemma for pro-lifers that the prohibitionist movement faced. What is the answer? The right to life is inalienable, and this is a matter of principle for us upon which we cannot compromise. But as a purely tactical matter, it is one that amending the Constitution may be the most remote weapon at our disposal at this time. Still, we must never retreat from our ultimate goal of protecting the sanctity of life in our laws and in the Constitution.

In the short term, though, the most effective strategy for us is to seek to overturn Roe through the appointment of pro-life judges, to pass pro-life laws in every state possible, to eliminate tax subsidies for abortion and the organizations that perform them, and to reduce the incidence of abortion through cultural and moral suasion. To change public attitudes, we must also repudiate the demonization of women who are pregnant out of wedlock, condemn violence at abortion clinics in unequivocal terms, and pour our greatest efforts into education, persuasion, and prayer—politics alone.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY'S pro-life position is a winning one that has given the party landslide victories in three of the last four presidential elections. It has served the party well and could not be retreated from, not only as a moral principle, but as a purely political matter. A cause standing down would cost the party the support of millions of pro-family citizens. The pro-life community's hopes, however, do not hinge on the existing wording of the GOP platform, but on the principle behind it. I have supported the existing plank since 1980, and I will do so again. The current platform calls for a Human Life Amendment that would ban abortion. To me in the pro-life community, any change in the wording is anathema, but pro-lifers could draft language that would be as morally compelling. Here is my effort at a pro-life plank:

"We are a party that respects the sanctity of innocent human life as the basis of all civil rights. We will seek by all legal and constitutional means to protect the right to life for the elderly, the infirm, the unborn, and the disabled. We oppose physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, and the rationing of health care because they threaten the

lives of the elderly. We deplore abortion on demand as a grave evil and a national tragedy. We oppose the taxpayer subsidies for abortion and those organizations that promote and perform them, a practice that millions of our citizens believe is the taking of an innocent human life. We agree with Mother Teresa's statement: "Abortion is the greatest destroyer of peace in the world today." We seek compassionate and humane alternatives to abortion, such as adoption services, and favor reforms of our foster-care and adoption system, such as greater facilitation of transracial adoptions, to provide loving homes for children who need them. We urge all Americans to work together to create what Pope John Paul II has called a 'culture of life'."



Reed: 'Amending the Constitution [to ban abortion] may be the most remote weapon at our disposal at this time'

A favorite of Pat Robertson's, Reed is trying to mainstream the right

Let me be clear: these words are my own. They do not reflect the policy of the Christian Coalition.

Beyond abortion, an important principle in a theology of political activism is grace and humility. There are two contradictory qualities that faith should bring to politics. The first is an uncompromising sense of right and wrong. The second is mercy. Our political witness should reflect not only God's judgment but also His forgiveness. For He loves everyone—including our political foes.

Every word we say should reflect God's grace. This is easy when dealing with allies, but the Bible tells us to love our enemies. Nowhere is this principle more important

than in our opposition to Bill Clinton. Some of the opposition has been deeply personal, attacking his character rather than his policies, and in so doing it risks permanent damage to the office he occupies. I oppose President Clinton's policies, but I do not despise him. If Bill Clinton is a sinner, he is no worse than you or me.

We will be judged by history and by our God not according to the political victories we achieve, but by whether our words and our deeds reflect His love. When one of the nation's leading evangelical preachers suggests that the president may be a murderer, when a pro-life leader says that to vote for Clinton is to sin against God, and when conservative talk-show hosts lampoon the sexual behavior of the leader of the free world, their speech reflects poorly on the gospel and on our faith.

True Christianity loves the sinner, but hates the sin. But how we criticize is important, as are our motives. Do we chasten in love, seeking repentance and reconciliation? Or do we seek the political destruction of our foes? The answer to that question makes all the difference.

This is especially important in our approach to the issue of homosexuality. Calling gays "perverts" or announcing that AIDS is "God's judgment" on the gay community is not consistent with our Christian call to mercy. A Liberty Alliance fundraising letter in 1995 claimed that "the radical homosexual onslaught of America is raging!" The evidence? Al and Tipper Gore had opened the vice-presidential residence to a "horde of homosexual leaders." The letter went on to assert that "if we do not act now, homosexuals will 'own' America." We

have all been guilty of excessive hyperbole in fund-raising letters (the harangues against conservative Christians by groups on the left are notorious), but I would hope both sides will resist attacking individuals and stick to policy differences. We must never retreat from our principled defense of the traditional, marriage-based family as the foundation of our society. We oppose the granting of minority status based on one's sexual preference. But we must always speak and move in love, seeking redemption rather than condemnation.

Especially in this election year, we should resist the temptation to identify our religious convictions with the platform of a party or the platitudes of favored politicians. At heart, what America needs is not political revolution but spiritual renewal. ■