

# Abortion & Health Care Reform: Knowing Right from Wrong

## VIEWPOINT

**Should pro-life Christians set aside their convictions about the unborn to help those without medical insurance? The answer comes down to just one question.**

For the moment—and perhaps only for the moment—health care reform legislation in at least one chamber of Congress does not allow funding for elective abortion. Thanks to pressure from a small number of pro-life Democrats and all House Republicans, the Stupak Amendment was attached to HR 3962 before initial passage on November 7. The Amendment states that the government-administered health plan (i.e., “the public option”) will not cover abortion unless it’s needed to save a woman’s life or she is a victim of rape or incest.

But that could change any day now. The Senate version of the bill does not contain the Stupak provision and if a majority of House Democrats get their way, the final House version won’t either. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), the Democrats’ chief deputy whip in the House, is “confident” that when the bill comes back from conference committee, the Stupak language won’t be there.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, despite his protestations to the contrary, there’s no denying that President Obama campaigned on a promise to put “reproductive health care” that includes abortion coverage at the center of his reform plan.<sup>2</sup> In short, defenders of human life have good reason to be concerned.

Nevertheless, some critics of the pro-life view contend that those of us opposed to abortion should set aside our scruples in favor of the overall good that state-run healthcare brings. (That it will bring “good” is debatable, but I digress.)

For example, Richard, an agnostic blogger and friend from my high school days, posted the following on my Facebook page during our discussion of the bill:

*If you don't like aspects of the plan, offer some comprehensive alternatives. All you are doing is promoting the status quo. If your plan is to reject the whole plan because it has something you don't like, then no plan will ever get implemented. We will continue until the current plan collapses. There are far more indirect ways to kill people within the current situation than abortion. The unborn may be your priority, but the practical results of a stalemate will be a choice for others to die. And even if the state doesn't pay for abortion, abortion will continue. I don't think abortion is a good idea, but I also don't believe legislation against it is the best way to prevent it. I think your energies would be far more effective elsewhere. To me the anti-abortion issue and the gay rights issue is [sic] simply two ways to raise outrage among Christians to raise money.*

There’s no denying that biblical Christianity places a strong emphasis on caring for the poor, working for justice, and helping the oppressed. Anyone who thinks differently may want to consider how important these actions are to God. (See, e.g., Jer. 5:26–28; 9:24; Isa. 1:16–17, 21, 23; 58:6–7; 61:8; Ps. 94:1–23; Prov. 24:1–12; Matt. 25:41–46.) However, is a legitimate concern for justice enough for pro-life Christians to set aside their scruples and throw their support behind health care legislation that funds abortion?

Perhaps, if...if what?

If the unborn are *not* human. Yet it’s precisely this question—Are the unborn human?—that Richard and those like him either ignore or dismiss when pitching a national health care plan that allows abortion. For this reason, their appeal to pro-lifers suffers from a number of glaring flaws.

First, notice that Richard confuses moral claims with preference ones. He writes: “If your plan is to reject the whole plan because it has something you don’t like, then no plan will ever get implemented.” The problem is, pro-life advocates like me oppose this plan *not* because we *dislike* abortion (indeed, one could like abortion and still argue it’s immoral), but because we think abortion is morally *wrong*. Now, if he wants to argue that we’re mistaken about that, so be it. Let him make that case. But notice he does no such thing. He simply changes the *kind* of claim the pro-lifer makes—“abortion is wrong”—to one he likes better (paraphrase): “Hey, pro-lifer, abortion is something you just don’t like.” In short, Richard hasn’t refuted the pro-life view; he’s merely changed the terms of engagement, as if we were talking about our favorite baseball teams instead of who lives and who dies.

Second, Richard’s objection to pro-life concerns over health care legislation is question-begging. More than once, he simply assumes the unborn are not human. For example, suppose the bill in question was near perfect, but funded the destruction of two-year-olds to provide comprehensive health care for the rest of us. Can you imagine, even for a moment, Richard saying, “Well, let’s not reject the whole just because of something we don’t like.” The only reason he argues this way about a health plan that funds the destruction of the unborn is because he’s assuming, without argument, that they are not human like the rest of us. That’s precisely the point he must argue, however, for his case to succeed logically.

Third, there’s this unsupported claim: “The unborn may be your priority, but the practical results of a stalemate will be a choice for others to die.” Really? How so? Richard makes no attempt to defend what he says here. I guess we’re to take it on faith. Notice again the question-begging nature of his claim: he assumes the unborn are not human, though he has yet to offer



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any argument for that. For example, suppose he rejects health care legislation that cuts costs by starving disabled toddlers to death, with parental consent, of course. Suppose further I reply, “Well, toddlers may be your priority, but the practical results of a stalemate will be a choice for others to die.” I doubt that would satisfy him. He would insist that toddlers were humans with rights we can’t trample on to benefit others. I agree. So why doesn’t he argue that same way about the unborn? It’s easy: he assumes they are not human like toddlers. But again, he offers no real argument for that.

Fourth, we get this odd claim: “And even if the state doesn’t pay for abortion, abortion will continue.” Of course it will, just like alcoholism continues even though the state doesn’t provide free beer. The more precise question is: will abortion rates remain unchanged when the state pays instead of the individual? It’s logical to assume that when something desirable is free, more people will get it. Yet Richard advances no argument showing why we should doubt this.

Fifth, Richard says he “doesn’t think abortion is a good idea,” but legislation is not the best way to prevent it. He contends that pro-lifers would be far more effective spending their energies “elsewhere.” Oh? Where might that be? We’re not told. But there are bigger problems with his argument. For starters, he never says *why* he thinks abortion is not a good idea. That is, if abortion doesn’t take the life of a defenseless human, why be opposed at all? But if it does take the life of a human without justification, why is legislating against it a bad idea? Again, we’re given no answer. Moreover, pro-lifers are not out to merely “prevent” elective abortion. We want to make it unthinkable the way that killing toddlers is unthinkable to anyone with a functioning conscience. In other words, merely reducing abortion isn’t necessarily pro-life.<sup>3</sup> A society that has fewer abortions, but protects the legal killing of unborn humans would still be deeply immoral. Imagine a nineteenth-century lawmaker who said that slavery was a bad idea, but owning slaves should remain legal. If those in power adopted his thinking, would this be a good society? A 1982 editorial in *The Detroit News* sums the problem up nicely: “President Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Abraham Lincoln in the White House, opposed slavery more than 100 years ago for what we today might consider morally oblique reasons. It wasn’t that he minded the wrong done to blacks. He was concerned that slavery bred unwholesome class distinctions among whites by creating privileges for the rich. Mr. Johnson once ‘wish[ed] to God [that] every head of a family in the United States had one slave to take the drudgery and menial service off his family.’”<sup>4</sup>

Again, it seems Richard can only argue that abortion is not a good idea, but that legislating against it is mistaken,

because he assumes the unborn are not human, like slaves are. But that’s the question that must be resolved before trumpeting the virtues of this particular health care bill.

Richard concludes by telling us what really bugs him. “To me the anti-abortion issue and the gay rights issue is [sic] simply two ways to raise outrage among Christians to raise money.” Forget for the moment that he offers no evidence for his claim. I can reply to his charge with one word: So? Maybe we do and maybe we don’t use these issues to raise money. Either way, how does this refute pro-life claims that the unborn are human, and it’s wrong to kill them with state cash?<sup>5</sup> What we have here is a classic case of the genetic fallacy—that is, faulting an idea for its origins rather than its substance. Instead of telling us why pro-lifers are wrong about the humanity of the unborn, Richard jumps right to our alleged motivation for opposing abortion. As Greg Koukl points out, this just won’t work. “Psychological motivations give you information about the one who believes, but they tell you nothing about the truth of his beliefs.”<sup>6</sup>

Pro-lifers should care about justice. Our Lord demands that we do. As a result, I’m willing to consider the virtues of any health care plan. But there’s one question Richard and those like him must answer before I’ll sign up. —*Scott Klusendorf*

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1 Michael O’Brien, “Senior Democrat Is ‘Confident’ That Stupak Amendment Will Be Stripped,” *The Hill’s Blog Briefing Room*, November 9, 2009. <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/66969-senior-dem-confident-stupak-amendment-will-be-stripped>

2 Planned Parenthood says president Obama promised to “put reproductive health care at the center” of health reform, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/nov/10/planned-parenthood/planned-parenthood-says-obama-promised-put-reprodu>.

3 See Frank Beckwith, “Why ‘Reducing the Number of Abortions’ not Necessarily Pro-Life,” *Moral Accountability*, February 12, 2009. <http://www.moralaccountability.com/abortion-reduction-debate/why-reducing-the-number-of-abortions-not-necessarily-prolife>.

4 “Tax Funding for Slavery? Then Why for Abortion?” *Detroit News*, February 9, 1982. Reprinted at: <http://www.l4l.org/library/tax-slav.html>.

5 For more on defending pro-life views, see Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

6 Gregory Koukl, “Is God Just an Idea?” <http://www.ste.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6067>.