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### Operation Rescue: Case Study on Civil Disobedience

Operation Rescue protests the practice of abortion by a number of methods, but it is best known for placing demonstrators in the entrances of abortion clinics to block the entrances or at least to make it difficult and embarrassing for women to enter the clinic to obtain their abortions. In doing so, they violate at least the letter of the law: trespassing laws, court orders of various kinds. They argue that these laws must be broken for the greater good of saving the lives of unborn children.

I believe that Operation Rescue is correct in its argument that we have an obligation to protect the innocent from unjust destruction (Prov. 24:11). I also agree that the unborn are proper objects of such concern. Sometimes, however, the OR presentation of this argument goes beyond Scripture. I have heard representatives of that organization argue that @UN(every) Christian must be involved in rescues, since otherwise they would be condoning evil and violating the biblical command to rescue the innocent. But of course we also have obligations to rescue drowning swimmers at the beach. Does that mean that every Christian must spend his time at the beach rescuing swimmers? I think not. The command to rescue is given (1) to individuals as the opportunity naturally arises in their lives (cf. the Good Samaritan); (2) to the whole church, that each member might make *some* contribution to defeat the evil of abortion. Those contributions depend upon gifts and opportunities, and therefore they vary a great deal from one Christian to another. To maintain that every Christian must participate in a particular project is to maintain that every Christian must participate in *all* worthy projects, an impossible burden for every individual. No, God recognizes our finitude. Our obligations before him take our finitude into account.

Further, OR rhetoric often ignores the fact that there are other ways to join the battle for the unborn. There is still much room for educational, political and religious approaches which do not break the law. There are many legal ways of making life difficult for abortionists, especially if a community can be persuaded that it does not want abortion to be practiced in its midst. Prov. 24:11 can be fulfilled by other means than by rescues. Indeed it is arguable that in the long run (which is the most important perspective) these other methods will be more effective than the methods of OR. Rescues, certainly, arouse public resentment. People who don't understand the ethical issue easily sympathize with the clinics, the doctors and the women who are being "harassed." Rescuers become identified with the general lawlessness in our country, or with the disruptiveness of many "rights" organizations. The result is special legal protections for abortionists and more "pro-choice" politicians being elected and appointed to high office. Less dramatic activity may be more effective in the long run.

But is it sinful to participate in a rescue? I believe not. Some would argue that we should never break the law as long as there are *some* legal means of accomplishing our purposes. But that principle is of doubtful scripturality, and it has the result of enfeebling Christian witness. When the Sanhedrin told Peter and John to stop preaching Christ, they might have come up with a "creative alternative," such as preaching Christ in some other place. But they answered that they would have to obey God and continue preaching (Acts. 4:19f, cf. 5:29).

But even if we accept the principle of disobeying the law only when legal remedies are absent, I would have to say that even that principle comes short of ruling out all rescues. Granted, as I said above, there are other methods of dealing with the problem, ways which could have great effect upon the future of abortion. But we must focus on the short run as well as the long run. When woman A makes a decision to have an abortion today, the "long range" approach will not have much effect upon *her*, however much it may affect other women later on. Those practicing "long range" solutions have done their best to change the mind of woman A, and they have not succeeded. Now they have no more time. Her baby will die unless something more drastic happens. For that baby, there are *no* legal remedies. The mother, the

doctor and the law are all united to deprive that baby of life. The only answer is "rescue." And when rescuers are taken to prison to facilitate abortion, the rescuers are in the right and the law enforcers are in the wrong.

I believe it is right, therefore, to support Operation Rescue with our money and prayers, and I do not believe it is wrong to participate in rescues if one does count the cost. But I do not think this method is required of all Christians, and I do not myself participate in the movement. I believe that other, legal methods are more effective in the long run, and I believe I am free to pursue those rather than participating in rescues.