

[Note: The following letter is addressed to a parent who strongly objected to my use of visual aids depicting abortion. Not content to exempt his own high school daughter from my presentation at a Christian school, he argued that no one should see the abortion images. Thankfully, he failed. Be warned: Graphic pictures are included in my reply below on pages four and seven because they address two of his points.]

Dear Mr. Briggs,

Thank you for passing along your comments about my work.

On a personal note, I can only imagine the grief you experienced losing a child to miscarriage. I pray that God provides on-going comfort to your family. At the same time, I fully support your decision to exclude Sarah from my presentation. That's precisely why my organization insists that parents be fully informed of my content prior to the presentation. In short, I respect your wishes.

As to the principal point of your note, I cannot yield to your claim that abortion pictures should not be used, or that they have no value for pro-life students, or that they substitute shock value for reason, or that they dishonor Christ, or that they incite anti-Christian behavior or activism. Indeed, did any of these things happen the last time I spoke at your school and showed these pictures? Nor do I agree that my presentation constitutes a "perversion" of bioethics, or that my use of pictures is morally equivalent to the violent tactics used by radical environmentalists or those who kill abortion doctors.

These are indeed serious charges, and while you are free to assert anything you wish—including your bold claim that my presentations may incite anti-Christian activism (something that has never happened in my 20 years of speaking)—I'm puzzled that you present no evidence to sustain any of them. You seem to just assert them. Meanwhile, Christian leaders such as Chuck Colson, Dr. Richard Land, Dr. James Dobson, Randy Alcorn, John Piper, Dr. J.P. Moreland, and Dr. Paul Copan—all of whom have either featured my work and/or endorsed it—have never leveled these charges. Nor have the hundreds of Christian schools that have scheduled me to speak over the last 20 years—including the many who invite me back and eagerly endorse my work (references available upon request).

To be clear, I don't think you mean anything malicious by them. My guess is that you are just unfamiliar with my work and have yet to review my writings, presentations, speaking history, references, or media appearances. That, in turn, led you to make a number of claims I disagree with.

For example:

1) You claim that graphic pictures "shock" and "polarize" rather than persuade and educate. Oh? How do you know this?

Nowhere do you present empirical or even anecdotal evidence to back up this claim. You simply say that you read somewhere that others “feel” it’s true.

It’s not. As Gregg Cunningham points out, educators universally acknowledge the value of graphic visuals when used in educational settings. High school students, for example, are routinely shown grisly pictures of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. Images of mutilated bodies stacked like cordwood communicate the horror of the death camps in a way no lecture can. In fact, the producers of “Schindler’s List” donated a copy of the film to every high school in America, in spite of its graphic content. At the same time, movie theaters provided free screenings (during school hours) to over 2,000,000 students in 40 states.

Faculty acknowledged the disturbing images, but argued that students would not fully understand the holocaust unless they saw it. As noted television critic Howard Rosenberg wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Although almost too horrid to watch, these segments are absolutely essential.” The same can be said about teaching the controversial histories of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. Teaching the abortion holocaust with any less academic rigor is intellectually dishonest. If students are mature enough for “Schindler’s List,” they can certainly view a one-minute abortion film.

Moreover, graphic abortion pictures do indeed educate and persuade. I know this two ways. First, I know it from over 20 years of public speaking. Second, I know it from empirical data. On the first point, Consider this email from 15 year-old Brittany, received after I spoke to an assembly of 1,000 high school students in Baltimore. It sums up perfectly the many comments we receive from students after an assembly:

Dear Scott,

Yesterday you came and talked to my high school, Archbishop Spaulding, about pro-life. It made a big difference on how I thought about abortion. I was totally for abortion and I thought that pro-life was just plain stupid. I have totally changed my mind after I listened to the pro-life point of view. Upon watching the short video clip of aborted fetuses, I felt my stomach turn and I thought, "How could anybody do this? How could anyone be so cruel and self absorbed as to kill an unborn baby who doesn't have a say in that decision?" Then I thought, "Oh my gosh, I think that!" I was totally ashamed at how selfish I had been. Before the assembly, I didn't want to listen to what you had to say. I was going to nap during your speech...until I saw that video. Now, I am totally changed forever. Keep doing what you do!

Empirically, our opponents are well aware that pictures change the way people feel about abortion, while facts change they way they think. Both are vital in changing behavior.

For example, during the graphic debate over partial-birth abortion in 1996, abortion-choice columnist Anne Roiphe wrote: “The anti-abortion forces will again display horrible pictures of the technique, which they call partial-birth abortion. Although few in the abortion rights movement take this approach seriously, it has emotional resonance and

erodes public support for all abortion.” Indeed it does. Every single poll during that time showed a reduction in support for late-term abortion.

Rophie wasn't the only one to express concern. “When someone holds up a model of a six-month-old fetus and a pair of surgical scissors, we say ‘choice’ and we lose,” writes feminist Naomi Wolf.

Later, in a 1998 article in *George Magazine*, Wolf states: “The brutal imagery, along with the admission by pro-choice leaders that they had not been candid about how routinely the procedure was performed, instigated pro-choice audiences' reevaluation of where they stood.” As a result, “the ground has shifted in the abortion wars.”

Cynthia Gorney, author of *Articles of Faith*, a book about the abortion wars, says that serious damage has been done to the pro-abortion side. “One of the dirty secrets of abortion is it's really gruesome, but nobody would look at the pictures. With partial-birth, the right-to-life movement succeeded for the first time in forcing the country to really look at one awful abortion procedure.”

The quotes from Wolf, Rophie, and Gorney are critically important. The abortion-choice people are conceding their weakest point and we should listen. True, many people dislike abortion pictures and find them offensive. That's to be expected, given the discomfort of admitting one's own moral culpability in the face of injustice. The more pressing question is whether the number of people put-off by the graphic images exceeds those compelled into modifying their beliefs. If the debate over partial-birth abortion is any indication, we should bet on the pictures.

2) You object to these pictures on grounds that they substitute emotion for reason, that they constitute a “shock approach” and have little else to offer. Your objection misses my point in using them.

The question is not, Are the pictures shocking? They are. The real question is, Are the pictures true? If so, they ought to be admitted as evidence. We ought to avoid empty appeals to emotion, those offered in place of good reasons. If, however, the pictures substantiate the reasons I am offering and do not obscure them, they serve a vital purpose. Truth is the issue.

This is precisely the point feminist (and abortion-choice advocate) Naomi Wolf makes in a *New Republic* article:

“The pro-choice movement often treats with contempt the pro-lifers' practice of holding up to our faces their disturbing graphics....[But] how can we charge that it is vile and repulsive for pro-lifers to brandish vile and repulsive images if the images are real? To insist that truth is in poor taste is the very height of hypocrisy. Besides, if these images are often the facts of the matter, and if we then claim that it is offensive for pro-choice women to be confronted with them, then we are making the judgment

that women are too inherently weak to face a truth about which they have to make a grave decision. This view is unworthy of feminism.”

You assert that “we certainly wouldn’t show images of a dead teen ejected from a vehicle crash to prove you shouldn’t drink and drive, or display a hanging person to teach against suicide; so then why show this?”



Well, we actually *do* show images like that, especially in the first case you mention. Consider this poster from the state of Texas, aimed specifically at students who might be tempted to drink and drive. Is this poster nothing but a “shock approach” or does it save lives?

True, graphic abortion images must be used properly, meaning we should not spring them on unsuspecting audiences. When I use the one-minute film “This is Abortion,” I tell students exactly what is in the clip and invite them to look away if they so desire. Nearly everyone watches and almost no one complains. I have found this to be true in diverse settings such as debates, banquets, schools, churches, etc. With Christian audiences, I introduce my remarks

by stating Christ is eager to forgive the sin of abortion and that my purpose is not to condemn, but to clarify and equip. I use the sin of abortion to set the stage for a gospel presentation, one that offers sinners hope.

3) You further claim that abortion pictures are unnecessary, that showing students an image of a premature infant is sufficient. Well, yes and no. For some students, you are right: prenatal pictures will do the trick. But how do you know that’s sufficient for other students, even ones at Christian schools? The fact is that many people pay lip service to the humanity of the unborn and may even squeal with delight each time they see a wanted fetus on a sonogram, yet they tolerate abortion. There’s an important lesson here for pro-life advocates: When it comes to moral persuasion, many times images of death work better than images of life.

To cite a parallel example, the modern environmental movement got its start with graphic pictures in the late 1960's. As activist Jerry Mander points out in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, initial attempts to mobilize public support for preservation of the giant redwoods produced a giant public yawn. Breathtaking photographs of majestic trees, though inspiring, did little to incite public anger at the timber industry. So, activists took a lesson from the Vietnam War. Instead of showing pictures of pre-cut trees in all their glory, environmentalists began circulating before and after photos. “We started carrying around photos of acres of stumps where hundreds of redwoods had been cut down. I don't know if you have ever seen a field of tree stumps, but it is a horrific sight, not unlike a battlefield.”

The public outcry was immediate. “At that moment,” Mander concludes, “I realized that death is a much better subject for television than life. Images of life—whether of trees themselves or the finely-tuned Vietnamese culture--accomplished nothing. They only put people to sleep.”

The same can be said of abortion. The use of graphic pictures is not manipulative, but consistent with other mainstream campaigns of social reform. Shocking pictures have traditionally been used by social reformers to dramatize the injustices of child labor, racial violence against African Americans, U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, etc. What has changed is that for the first time in recent history, political conservatives are using this tactic in an effort to reform an abortion-tolerating public.

This tactic is appropriate, given we live in a culture that thinks and learns visually. As Neil Postman points out in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, with the advent of television, America shifted from a word-based culture—with an emphasis on coherent linear thought—to an image-based one where thinking is dominated by feeling, intuition, and images.

Postman's point (and mine) is that visual learners have short attention spans. They make decisions based on intuition, feeling, and images. That doesn't rule out the presentation of facts and arguments, but it does change how they are communicated. It means we must change how people feel as a predicate to changing how they think. Disturbing images change feelings in ways that words cannot.

4) You further claim that people who already believe life begins at conception don't need to see abortion pictures and that only those who think the unborn human is a blob of tissue benefit from seeing them.

Again, how do you know this? You assume, without argument, that the pictures serve only one purpose—convert those who disagree with us on the humanity of the unborn. But what about those who say they agree but do nothing about the issue? Indeed, my own testimony is a case in point. I've always been pro-life and never questioned that life began at conception. But until I saw abortion pictures for the first time in 1990, my behavior did not match my alleged beliefs. I said that I was pro-life but nothing in my behavior suggested that I truly believed children were dying. That all changed in November of 1990 when a skilled pro-life apologist combined persuasive logic with

graphic depictions of abortion. The pictures changed how I felt and ultimately changed how I behaved. Six months later, I resigned my position as an associate pastor (with the blessing of my church) to pursue a full-time career speaking on abortion. In short, people who are not heartbroken over abortion will almost never make the lifestyle concessions necessary to support pro-life efforts at a sacrificial level. I am not alone in this. Today I received an email from a high school student who viewed my presentation (which includes images) as part of the Summit Ministries worldview curriculum. This student, already a Christian and already pro-life, writes: “Never have I been so enthralled with a sermon.” Despite his dad’s objections, he now wants to pursue a career defending the Christian worldview full-time.

5) You conclude by claiming that my use of pictures constitutes a “perversion of bioethics” that is “no different than then the Sea-Sheppard attempting to sink a boat to save a whale, or Earth-First driving spikes in a redwood tree to stop a logger, or the ‘Christian’ activist killing the abortion doctor to save lives.”

Do you really believe that my selected use of graphic images is morally equivalent to the tactics of radical environmentalist who sink ships and criminals who kill abortion doctors? I’m hopeful you don’t, as such a claim is not remotely defensible. Was Dr. King guilty of a “perversion” of racial justice when he displayed gruesome images of Black men lynched by white racists? Indeed, Mayor Daley of Chicago made the same unfounded claim that you did—namely, that if Dr. King showed these images, it would incite civil unrest among the Negroes! Dr. King rightly replied that Christians had a duty to expose evil deeds rather than cover them up (Eph. 5:11). Was William Wilberforce guilty of “perversion” when he dramatized the issue of slavery by displaying slave ships and slave chains, or when he exposed the scar-ridden back of an African bondsman?

Gregg Cunningham writes: “Abortion represents an evil so inexplicable there are no words to describe it.” Although the pictures are difficult to look at, they convey truth in a way that words never can. Consider a final historical example. In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14 year-old Black youth, traveled from Chicago to visit his cousin in the town of Money, Mississippi. Upon arrival, he bragged about his White girl friends back in Chicago. Now this was surprising to his cousin and the cousin’s friends because Blacks in Mississippi during the 50s didn’t make eye contact with White’s, let alone date them! Both actions were considered disrespectful. Later that day, Emmett, his cousin, and a small group of black males entered Bryant’s Store where, egged-on by the other males, 14-year old Emmett flirted with a 21 year-old white, married woman behind the counter. After purchasing candy, he either whistled at her or said something mildly flirtatious. (Reports vary) The cousin and the others warned him he was in for trouble. A few days later, at 2:00 a.m., Emmett was taken at gun-point from his uncle’s home by the clerk’s husband and another man. After savagely beating him, they killed him with a single bullet to the head.

Emmett’s bloated corpse was found three days later in the Tallahatchie River. A barbed wire fan had been shoved over his head. His face was partially crushed and beaten



almost beyond recognition. The local Sheriff placed Emmett's body in a sealed coffin and shipped it back to his mother in Chicago. When Mamie Till got the body, she made a stunning announcement: There would be an open-casket funeral for her son Emmett. People protested and reminded her how much this would upset everyone. Mamie agreed, but countered, "I want the whole world to see what they did to my boy." The photo of Emmett's mangled body in that open casket was published in *Jet* magazine and it helped launch the Civil Rights Movement in America. Three

months later in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus when ordered to do so. She said the image of Emmett Till in that casket gave her the courage to stand her ground. No doubt, she already knew blacks were valuable human beings, but seeing that graphic picture is what moved her to change her behavior and take a stand. Why should it be any different with abortion?

With all due respect Mr. Briggs, it's time for pro-life Christians to open the casket on abortion. We should do it lovingly, but truthfully. We should do it in our churches during the primary worship services, comforting those who grieve with the gospel of forgiveness. We should do it in our Christian high schools and colleges, combining visuals with a persuasive defense of the pro-life view that's translatable to non-Christians.

But open the casket we must. Until we do, Americans will continue tolerating an injustice they never have to look at.

With best regards,

Scott Klusendorf,
President, Life Training Institute