

Protests and Demonstrations

Are these legitimate Christian activities?

by André Schutten

Should Christians picket and protest? I have been asked this question many times, but only a couple of times by people who were looking for an answer. Most often the question has been asked by people who, it was clear, had their own view firmly established, and thought that answer had to be "no."

But is it really wrong to protest? Shouldn't Christians demonstrate against injustice?

It will be helpful to give some context to the discussion and to limit the scope as well. Christian protesting in Canada usually relates to one big issue: abortion. There have been demonstrations regarding same-sex marriage and euthanasia in the past, but the topic that makes the most noise, so to speak, is abortion. So, let's stay with that one issue - can Christians protest against abortion? Are there any objections that hold water?

I'm going to start by making a case for protesting, and then follow that up by answering some of the more common objections I've heard.

Define our terms

Let's begin by defining our terms, just to make sure we are all on the same page. Many people who have objections against Christians protesting do so because when they think of protests they are thinking of hooded hooligans kicking in windows at Starbucks, burning police cars, blockading

roadways illegally, occupying Wall Street (or Bay Street or whatever other street), etc. Those against protesting think of G20 summits, Stanley Cup finals, or First Nations land disputes.

But these activities are either riots (which are completely different from protests) or demonstrations fueled by greed, self-interest, or wrong-headed ideology. Riots are completely illegal, banned by the Criminal Code. Protests which are fueled by self-interest or secular ideology are legal; however, from a Christian perspective, these, too, are activities we should avoid.

Limiting this discussion then to protests against abortion in Canada, we can note that these protests are:

1. legal
2. peaceful
3. organized
4. political action
5. a Christian obligation

Protests are...

Protests are legal

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* includes in Section 2 a list of four Fundamental Freedoms, freedoms that are fundamental to a proper functioning of a free and democratic society. Number two and number three on that list are the "freedom of expression"

and the "freedom of assembly." It is these freedoms enshrined in the *Charter* that make activities such as the March for Life legal.

Municipalities also allow for protests. A permit can be obtained which grants the right to temporarily block a roadway for the purposes of a march or demonstration in support of something. The annual National March for Life, for example, involves a march through the downtown core of Ottawa, and includes a police escort.

Protests are peaceful

The March for Life and LifeChain are both peaceful protests. LifeChain is a silent protest with posters and pictures that encourage people to give serious consideration to the problems with abortion. The March for Life is also a peaceful protest.

Anecdotal evidence is always helpful: in May 2011 the March for Life had approximately 15,000 protesters on Parliament Hill; the number of police monitoring the protest was approximately a dozen officers.

Contrast that with the environmentalist "Day of Civil Disobedience" that took place on September 26, 2011, on Parliament Hill. For that event metal barriers were erected the night before, and some 300 police were on hand the day of. The number of protesters was



FOUR WARNING SIGNS YOUR PROTEST MIGHT BE A RIOT:

1. Crowd is made up primarily of young men...
2. with covered faces...
3. and clenched fists...
4. and the dress code largely excludes "cheery" colors

Picture is of a demonstration/riot in London, England, March 26, 2011 (Photo by 1000 Words/Shutterstock)

approximately 300. Pro-life protest: 1 officer for every 1,000 protesters. Environmentalist protest: 1 officer for every 1 protester.

Protests are organized

Unlike many riots or even spontaneous protests, the March for Life and LifeChain are well-organized events. They have mission statements, timelines with start and end times, goals and purposes, and (most importantly) each person in attendance knows why they are there. Too often unorganized protests draw rabble-rousers who can easily create havoc or actually violate municipal bylaws without proper permits or authorization. With the March for Life, there is no question for the participant what the message is, who is participating, and what the end goal of the protest is.

Protests are political action

In a free and democratic society, organized rallies and protests are part of the political process. In a nation where every citizen has a voice in electing their representative, where every citizen can contribute to the public policy debate, and where every citizen can independently lobby for change, protests play a legitimate role. Protests are not inherently anarchist or anti-government (although some can become that). When done legally, in a peaceful and organized fashion, protests are a means of engaging with the elected leadership on an issue, demonstrating to them that many citizens care deeply about this particular issue and that they expect

change.

Also, a distinction could be made between protesting for others, over protesting for our own individual interests. There is definitely a Christian obligation for the former over the latter. This is borne out in the command to love one's neighbor as oneself, and to be our brother's keeper. Turning the other cheek applies to personal insult and persecution, and not to persecution of others. We need to stand up for our neighbors, including the unborn ones.

Protests are a Christian obligation

Eberhard Bethge, a very close friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once said, "We were resisting by way of confession, but we were not confessing by way of resistance." His remark was made in relation to the German Church's response to Nazism generally and its treatment of the Jews specifically. Many members of the German Church would confess in the safety of their church, or in their home, that the way Jews were being rounded up and sent away was bad, or awful, or wrong and immoral. But not enough lived out that confession by way of actual resistance.

Now I am not saying that Christians in our circles are silent on the issue of abortion. Far from it. I would guess that, per capita, the Reformed denominations are more outspoken on this issue than any other group. *But we can do more!* If we truly believe and understand that an unborn child is already a unique, living human being, made in the image of God, then how can we *not* protest when they are being killed at a rate of 100,000 a year? We

must speak out! If we believe that abortion is just one more way to commit murder, then why wouldn't we all be taking part in LifeChain, sacrificing that one measly hour out of 8,760 hours in the year to say, "No, this is wrong!"?

And if our worship service happens to fall on that same hour, why wouldn't we work to have either our own LifeChain event an hour earlier or later, or organize one ourselves the day before and attend en masse? (I would even go so far as to argue that the service time could be changed that day for such an important task, but many may be uncomfortable with that.) Brothers, sisters, protest is in our very name; it's in our Reformed DNA. Our name, *Protestant*, testifies to the fact that we can, that we do, that we must speak out against injustice. We need to be more actively protesting such horrors, not less.

Answering objections

There are a number of different objections that I have heard regarding protesting. Some are made simply because of a misunderstanding of what protesting is. I think I've made it clear that there is a difference between the March for Life in Ottawa and the G20 "protests" (read: riots) in Toronto.

However, there are a few other objections that are often raised, and I hope that I can properly address them.

Objection #1: Protesting abortion involves working with Catholics – we cannot support this.

Ironically, on the issue of abortion, I would hazard a guess that the Reformed and the orthodox Catholics are the two Christian denominations in closest agreement. Despite our theological/

doctrinal differences, we can certainly work together on this issue.

Oddly, most people who put this objection to me would have no problem working with all sorts of people – we work with Catholics side by side in the workplace every day, selling products, buying equipment, stocking shelves, etc. Why then would we not be able to do something even more important with them?

It is worth noting that at the March for Life, there is a separate Reformed prayer service before the gathering on the Hill; while we do not join with the Catholics in their prayers, we do join with them and many others in their protest!

Objection #2: The “Right to Life” slogan is wrong. We have no rights; it is all a gift from God.

As with many phrases and slogans, we must understand the context and scope of the statement and its intent. Both the person who says, “I have a right to life,” and the person who says, “We have no rights,” are correct. We just need to qualify their statements.

When someone objects to the slogan, “Right to Life,” there is a common misunderstanding of what sort of right is being claimed. As Christians, we confess

and believe that we don’t have a right, *before God*, to anything. We deserve death! Life is but a free gift of God.

But because He has said, “You shall not kill,” that means no one person has a right to deprive me of my life. Therefore I can speak of a right to life, *given by God*, which I have, and which every other human life has as well, no matter how small. (For more on this point, see “The foundation of human rights” by Stephen Pidgeon, currently on the front page of ReformedPerspective.ca.)

Objection #3: Protesting goes against Paul’s command in Romans 13 to honor, respect, and be subject to the authority of the government.

Paul’s words are forcefully stated and leave little ambiguity. Peter echos Paul by stating,

Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good (1 Peter 2:13-14).

However, the assumption made in the objection listed

above is this: protesting is disrespectful or is an act of sedition or is some other anti-authority type of act.

But is that the case? In a democratic state, which Canada is, protests are part of the governing process. The governance of Canada by Members of Parliament necessarily includes the voice of the people. Therefore, protesting should be seen as assisting the government, shining the light of God’s Truth on our leaders. It should not be seen as an act of anarchy.

Even if one has trouble with this explanation, Paul’s words in Romans 13 should be read in the context of the words of Jesus’ other disciples. In Acts 4 and 5, Peter and John are hauled before the Sanhedrin and ordered not to speak about Jesus any longer. Their response? “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Later, Peter proclaims, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This is a clear affirmation of the principle that God requires his people to disobey the civil government when obedience would mean to directly disobey God.

SPOTTING A PROPER PROTEST:

1. Organizers know what a permit is
2. Children & elderly are a core component
3. Police are present - their helmets are not

(Photo of 2007 March for Life is by Ewout DeGelder, www.openphotography.ca)



Perhaps you would object here and say, "God never commands us to preach against abortion, does he? He says don't kill, so we can't have abortions, but does this mean we have to get out there and preach it to the government and the world?" Short answer: absolutely. We must. In fact, there are enough commands in the Bible that show that we ought to.

One passage in particular sticks out, actually screams out, in my mind, ordering us to protest. It states:

Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done? (Proverbs 24:11-12).

It really cannot get any more clear than this. We know exactly what abortion is and what it does. God does not merely suggest we get involved in holding back those

staggering toward death; we are *ordered* to rescue them! It's an imperative! *Do it*, or God will repay each of us according to what we have done (or not done!).

Get involved

Every year, on the second Thursday of May, thousands of Canadians (Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed, non-Christian, but all *Protestants*) gather on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to call our government to action on the issue of life, to insist that our government stand up and pass a law to protect those most vulnerable, and to decry the totally legal death sentence of thousands of Canadian unborn children for the sake of convenience. Add your voice to the chorus. Make the trip to Ottawa – it's worth the effort, and the crowd grows every year. Last year it was 15,000 strong. We need it to be 100,000 strong.

The other annual event is called LifeChain. This event is easier for everyone to attend because it happens in just about every urban centre across North

America. Every year, typically on the first Sunday of October, Christians gather on a prominent street or intersection in their community for just one hour to silently witness to the harm of abortion. This witness, too, is incredibly effective, and one in which entire congregations should be involved.

The question we ask regarding this issue is not, "Could a Christian engage in such activity?" The question is, "Should a Christian engage in such activity?" The answer is a resounding yes! I pray you, too, will be convicted to add your voice to the chorus and so be a salt and a light to your community, to your countrymen, and to your leaders.

André Schutten is Ontario Director and Legal Counsel for ARPA Canada. For more information about the March for Life, LifeChain, or any other means of getting politically active, please contact him: Andre@ARPACanada.ca or 613-297-5172



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