

Supporting parents: A pro-lifer's critique of Bush

by [Glen H. Stassen](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

When my son David was born in 1967, fathers were not allowed in the delivery room. So I posted myself outside the delivery-room door and prayed. My wife, Dot, had had German measles (rubella) in the early months of her pregnancy. She was a pediatrics nurse, so she and I were aware of the damage that German measles could cause to the developing fetus. When the pediatrician came out, he told me that David had heart problems and solid cataracts in both eyes. Later we learned he had brain damage.

That was six years before *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion and, in turn, triggered the modern pro-life movement. For our part, Dot and I all along had a sense of the value of the child that she was carrying. And we had hope that we could cope.

We got amazing help from so many people! The doctor and nurses who did the surgery when David's heart failed at the age of one month. A church member who located a co-worker at the American Printing House for the Blind to teach us how to raise a blind son. The outstanding teachers at Perkins School for the Blind (where Helen Keller's teacher was trained) who gave David (and us) special schooling for three years while I was at Harvard. The teachers of United Cerebral Palsy School of the Bluegrass who provided two more years of special schooling while Dot and I were teaching at Berea College. David's teachers in elementary school who gave up their break times each day to give him special instruction. The many teachers at Kentucky School for the Blind. The members of Crescent Hill Baptist who gave a handicapped boy a lot of hugs.

David now has a B.A. and M.A. in German and a certificate from the University of Mainz. He translates theological articles and books from German to English for graduate students and professors (he is visually handicapped, but he can read, and he's gifted in language).

Dot went to work as a nurse in a high school for pregnant teenagers. The school offered child care, medical care, training in nutrition and child care, and the help of social workers—all so that the girls' pregnancies would not stand in the way of staying in school and developing careers.

My pro-life commitments are deep. But so is my awareness that parents need help in raising children.

Indeed, abortion rates are influenced by economic and social conditions. Two-thirds of women who abort say they cannot afford a child.

During the 1990s, as unemployment steadily decreased and average real income rose, the annual number of abortions in the U.S. actually decreased by 300,000—from 1,610,000 to 1,310,000 per year. But in 2002, the first full year of the Bush presidency, abortions increased in the 16 states for which I could find data by a total of 5,855. If the data from the rest of the nation fit that pattern, abortions increased nationwide in 2002 by about 24,000 a year, reversing the dramatic decreases of the 1990s.

Surely that increase reflects economic and social conditions. During the past three years, unemployment rates increased half again, average real incomes decreased, and for seven years the minimum wage has not been raised to match inflation.

Over 80 percent of women who abort are unmarried. Increased unemployment means fewer marriages, since men who are jobless usually do not marry; in the 16 states whose data I surveyed, there were 16,392 fewer marriages than the year before.

Women who become pregnant worry about having health care for themselves and their children. There are 5.2 million more people today who have no health insurance than there were in 2000—and women of childbearing age are overrepresented in that group.

Poor and low-income women account for the majority of abortions. Their economic status is a major contributor to the abortion rate. Black and Latina women tend to be poorer and are more often unemployed, and their abortion rates are two to three times higher than those for white women. The 30-year trend shows abortion rates moving roughly in tandem with women's unemployment rates.

The abortion rate reported by the Centers for Disease Control stayed steady at 24 or 23 per 1,000 women of child-bearing age from 1978 through 1992 (the last year of Bush the elder's administration), but then dropped dramatically to 17 per 1,000 by 1998 (the fifth year of the Clinton administration), as the unemployment rate also dropped dramatically. But in 1996 Clinton signed the bill phasing out welfare to families with dependent children. The U.S. Catholic bishops warned that a decrease in support for families would undermine efforts to prevent abortions, and indeed the abortion rate did not decrease again until 2000, when it dropped to 16. (CDC Web-posted data does not go beyond 2001.)

So is the recent increase in the abortion rate Bush's fault? His supporters might point out that the 9/11 attacks hurt the economy; that the recession that hit in March of 2001, his first year, probably really began earlier; and that the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and against terrorism have further weakened the economy.

True, perhaps. But throughout his election campaign of 2000 Bush proposed policies that would give permanent tax breaks mostly to the wealthy, leading the nation into a deeper deficit than in the Reagan-Bush years. (The 12 years of Reagan-Bush quadrupled the national debt of \$1 trillion to \$4 trillion. Now after just four years of the second Bush, Congress has had to increase the debt ceiling to \$8 trillion.) This threat of exploding deficits was unsettling for the value of the dollar, and for investors, months before the recession in March 2001.

Again and again the Bible teaches that God's judgment falls on nations that do injustice to the poor. Speaking judgment is not always welcomed, as the prophets experienced, but we need to face the truth. When the national income is shifted from the broad consumer base to the very wealthy, the broad consumer base has less to spend, so the economy lags.

During the Reagan presidency, taxes were cut drastically on the very wealthy, the minimum wage was not raised to keep up with inflation, job-training programs and supports for the working poor were cut, and real wages for all people decreased. The economy slowed to an average of only 3.1 percent growth during the Reagan presidency and 1.4 percent during the first Bush presidency. During the Clinton presidency the minimum wage was finally raised and the tax rate for high incomes was raised a little so the national debt could start being paid back. The economy grew an average of 4.3 percent per year. A scripturally shaped economics should

celebrate that the poor had a little more to spend on necessities.

But during the first four George W. Bush years the economy grew only by about 1 percent. The lag was not caused by 9/11. The recession preceded 9/11, and after 9/11 we had a recovery for six months, but then the economy sank back again to almost recession levels (0.6 percent). Economic policy in the slow-growth years of Reagan, Bush 1 and Bush 2 was trickle-down: income was shifted dramatically to the very wealthy, while the real wages of the broad consumer base dropped. Consumers are two-thirds of the economy: they had less to spend, poverty increased dramatically—and abortions increased.

Ron Sider wrote of George W. Bush's second tax cut: "The overall impact is so obviously slanted toward the rich that the House had to abandon the bipartisan approach . . . and use the tiny Republican majority . . . to pass the bill by a mere two votes. Democrats, rightly, were furious. One would think that the huge Bush tax cut passed this spring and strongly skewed to helping the richest would have been enough unfairness for one year. But apparently not." This is not just an economic issue; it is an issue of moral fairness.

The National Institutes of Health recently reported the shocking news that the infant mortality rate increased in 2002. Never in the past 60 years has the infant mortality rate increased. This is another sign of the eroding support for prospective mothers and their babies.

Belgium and Holland have the lowest abortion rates in the world (6.8 and 6.5 per 1,000 women of childbearing age in 1996, compared with 22.9 in the U.S). This is because, though abortion is legal, those countries provide strong support for mothers and babies. By contrast, countries in Latin America, where abortion is illegal but mothers are not well supported, have among the highest abortion rates. (These Guttmacher Institute data for the U.S. are three points higher than the CDC data because of different methods of collection.)

During the campaign I sought to persuade John Kerry to adopt a more pro-life position on abortion. I still want to persuade Democrats to advocate policies that make abortions as rare as possible. I have also sought and am still seeking to persuade President Bush to shift his policies to support mothers and thereby reverse the increase in abortions.

There is much common ground that both camps can occupy on abortion. Surely both parties want to decrease the number of abortions dramatically—if they care about justice, about parents, about babies, about life.

The pro-life position needs to be accompanied by a “motherhood mandate”: economic support for mothers, parents and babies; help with better schools, including schools for pregnant teenagers like the one where Dot taught; health insurance for all mothers and babies; a minimum wage indexed for inflation and tax credits for the working poor so that those who work full time are not still living in poverty; and partially paid leave from work for one parent during a baby’s first year, when healthy attachment to a parent is so important for lifelong psychological health. Every European nation that I know of gives new mothers paid leave, and their abortion rates are far lower than ours. We are so much richer. We can afford it—if we know what biblical justice really means.