

# Abolition, Abortion, and the Case for Personhood

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## Abstract

This research explores the similarities between the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolition movement and the 21<sup>st</sup> century pro-life movement. In both situations, activists fought against legal decisions and public sentiment that modified discrimination based on bigotry, be it that of the racism of skin-color or the dependency of physical development.

Scott Klusendorf (2009), a pro-life advocate and author, said, "In the past, we used to discriminate on the basis of skin color...., but now with elective abortion, we discriminate on the basis of size, level of development, location, and degree of dependency. We've simply swapped one form of bigotry for another. (pg. 66)"

In court cases animating each movement, the U.S Supreme Court ruled that the slave and the fetus, respectively, were not people guaranteed rights.

Generally, the public believed either

- Slavery/abortion was wrong
- Slavery/abortion was not wrong
- Slavery/abortion was wrong, but individuals can choose for themselves.

However, Christian morality motivated both groups of social activists, and attempted to change public opinion to reflect their moral perspective.

Activists in both movements used similar tactics to argue for their causes, including use of popular media, rebellion, and, in some instances, violence.

## Legality



### Abolition

### Pro-Life

#### Supreme Court Decisions

##### Dred Scott v Sanford – 1857

- It is the court's duty "to decide whether... the plaintiff is not entitled to sue as a citizen in the court of the United States." Chief Justice Taney in the Majority Opinion

##### Roe v Wade – 1973

- The court was to decide on whether patients have a right to privacy, and where, if at all, that right stops and fetal rights begin.

The denial of personhood was critical in both cases, because had they been people, they would have had undeniable rights.

#### Limiting States' Rights

- "The class of person who had been imported as slaves... were [not] then acknowledged as part of the people," were "of an inferior order... all together unfit to associate with the white race," and were therefore able to be slaves.
- Chief Justice Taney, Dred Scott v Sanford majority opinion
- "The Constitution does not define 'person' in so many words... it has an application only post-natally... [which] per-suades us that the word 'person,' as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn."
- Justice Blackmun, Roe v Wade majority opinion

The Supreme Court made decisions it had no authority to make. Slavery and abortion are not rights for the federal government to decide on based on the constitution and are therefore the rights of states, and both decisions undermined the states' authority.

## Confronting Public Sentiment

Public sentiment on these issues takes on three different forms. Generally, people either believe that the issue is morally wrong, that it is not wrong, or that it is wrong, but individuals can choose for themselves. Abolitionists and pro-life activists used many different tactics to attempt to change public sentiment and, through doing so, change the law.

### Songs

Abolitionists and pro-life activists both use songs as media tactics. Abolition songs were mostly sung by slaves, but some were also sung by abolitionists, mainly in the north. Pro-life songs are sung by a variety of bands ranging in genre from contemporary Christian to death metal. These songs tended to have two messages; they either tell of the horrors of the slave trade and abortion process, or attempt to show the slave and the fetus as people. These songs included:

#### Abolition:

- Am I Not a Man and Brother
- "Am I not a man and brother? / Ought I not ... to be free? / Sell me not to one another, / Take not thus my liberty, / ... Christ our Saviour / Died for me as well as thee"
- 1848
- Song of the Coffle Gang
- "Wives and husbands sold apart, / The children's screams!- it breaks my heart; / O, gracious Lord! when shall it be, / That we should poor souls shall all be free?"
- 1848

#### Pro-life:

- While You were Sleeping
- "United States of America / Looks like another silent night; / As we are sung to sleep by philosophies / That save the trees and kill the children"
- Casting Crowns, 2006
- Silent Screams
- "Beaten and torn / Sacrifice the unborn. / ... Pain, suffrage toyed, / Life's little fragments destroyed"
- Slayer, 1988

### Media

Another similar tactic between these movements is the use of popular media. The most popular form of media that almost all of middle-class America would have seen in the 1820s to 1860s was books. Today, of course, it is social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.



Books such as Uncle Tom's Cabin were revolutionary because they showed a piece of the horrors of slavery. Previously, typical middle-class Northern whites did not know how bad slavery really was.

Undercover interviews entitled "Human Capital" conducted and posted on YouTube and social media sites by the Center for Medical Progress, a pro-life organization, have done the same thing in showing Planned Parenthood executives talk about their selling of fetal parts.

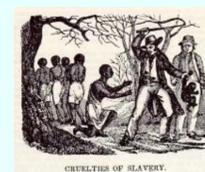


### Images



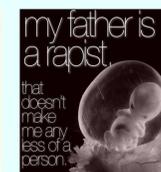
Activists also attempted to get people to see the slave and the fetus as people.

- The sketch on the left (n.d.) attempts to show the humanity of Negroes by showing a bound man with scars saying, "am I not a man and brother?"
- The image on the right (n.d.) attempts to say that size does not matter, but that life begins at conception.



Activists confronted the devaluing of humans based on parentage. In each situation, the circumstances around which the human is born determines their validity as people in society's view.

- In the first image (n.d.), the sketch artist revealed that slave owners often took the children of slaves to sell them, and that the children's parents mourned for them.
- In the last image (2013), the creator brings to light that children conceived in unplanned ways are no less deserving of the status of "human" or "person" than others.



Activists used graphic and shocking images

- The photo on the left (n.d.) portrays a Negro woman being flogged by her master, and at the time it would have been shocking to its audience.
- The photo on the right (2013) portrays a gruesome image of an aborted late-term fetus and the tools used to perform the abortion. It comes as a shock to viewers who believe that life begins at birth.



## Christian Morality

Both movements argue:

- The immorality of slavery/abortion
- The hypocrisy in slavery/abortion
  - Slaves/fetuses are protected in some instances but not in others.
- Both slaves and fetuses feel pain
- Both slaves and fetuses are people, not property and are part of family units

Christian morality grounded the actions of both abolitionists and pro-life activists.

## Conclusion

In almost every aspect of the abolitionist and pro-life movements, similarities can be found. The same basic legal foundations were laid for the two issues, abolitionists and pro-life advocates use the same arguments, the same tactics are used to convince people, and the same general opinions about the issues are held. Others have also faintly drawn these connecting lines. Jeanne Moynihan Mancini, President of the March for Life Education and Defense fund, said, "[abortion is the greatest human rights issue of today, and young people know that." These have both been highly-debated, emotional issues for those on either side of the issues because of their high level of importance and the fact that they have the ability to resonate with everyone.