

# Slavery

## and a Woman's "Right" to Choose

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Four score and seven years after the establishment of the United States, our nation was torn in Civil War over an issue that was left unresolved with the ratification of the Constitution - the issue of slavery. For many, the issue had to do with the fundamental right to private property. To abolish slavery would be to violate the property rights of the slave owner. For others it was an issue over the very meaning of human freedom, in which slavery violated a slave's fundamental right to be free. At one point, the Supreme Court issued the landmark *Dred Scott Decision* in which it determined that a black slave had no rights that a white person was bound to respect. In the end, it took the unrelenting dedication of the abolitionist movement, and ultimately the President of the United States to finally bring about the abolition of slavery in America.

This January 22, 2016 marks the forty-third anniversary of another monumental decision of the United States Supreme Court over an issue just as nationally divisive as was the issue of slavery. In 1973 the Supreme Court in the case of *Roe vs. Wade* determined that a woman had a right to freely choose to terminate a pregnancy, killing her unborn child.

For some, the Supreme Court

heralded a great breakthrough in the progression of Women's Rights; for others it sounded the death-knell for countless millions and became the key issue in the development of what many refer to as a "culture of death." Those in favor of abortion on demand state that a woman's rights over her body, even (perhaps especially) regarding pregnancy is fundamental to her freedom as a woman, while those opposed maintain that such an allowance violates one of the most basic rights we have as human beings. It has pitted against each other two ideologies that many see as fundamental to us as Americans - the right to privacy, and the right to life.

This issue once again came to prominence when, on Tuesday, October 22, 2003, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to ban a form of the procedure known notoriously as "partial-birth" abortion. The President signed the bill into law, while pro-abortion advocates decried the vote, promising the push the issue again to the Supreme Court of the United States.

There are many aspects of the issue of slavery that we are seeing re-played within the debate over abortion. Slavery was seen as essential to the economy of the South, just as abortion is seen as essential to



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the fundamental rights of women. While the opponents of abortion believe in the unborn child's basic right to live, so too did abolitionists believe in the slave's fundamental right to freedom. Just as many argue that abortion is an issue of *women's rights*, so the advocates of slavery believed that theirs was an issue of the slave owner's *property rights*.

Just as those who advocate abortion resent the "imposition" of religious values by those insisting that abortion is a sin, denying the humanity of the unborn child, so too did many in the pro-slavery South resent the religious insistence that slavery was morally wrong, and denied that those of African descent are human beings of equal dignity before God.

Our nation has a grand history of making strong distinctions regarding the rights of its citizens and how they relate to the rights of others. In the resolution to such conflicts, our society has always resolved that we as human beings have rights, but not to violate the rights of another. For example, a person has the right to swing one's arm or throw one's fist. However, that right ends where another person's nose begins. We have the right to free speech, but that right does not include putting people in danger by shouting "fire" in a crowded theater as a hoax. Parents have the right to discipline their children, but not to the point of physical harm and abuse. We have freedom, but not to hinder the freedom of another.

The issue of slavery was resolved in the same spirit. Our society does not deny the property rights of any American, until

those property rights violate the rights of another human being to basic human freedom.

Then came *Roe vs. Wade*. The basic difference between the issues of slavery and abortion is not in the issue, nor in the nature of the debate, but rather in the outcome. While our nation resolved the issue of



slavery clearly against the socially dominant slave-owner, *Roe vs. Wade* resolved the abortion issue, not in favor of the underdog, the unborn child, but in favor of the absolute rights of

the socially dominant woman who wishes to kill that unborn child.

The decision of *Roe vs. Wade*, therefore, can be considered to be historically inconsistent with our nation's history of protecting the rights of those whose rights might otherwise be violated by another. While slavery is an issue that is very different from abortion, the conflict and debate over rights is very similar. Like the struggle against slavery the abortion issue has grown into a debate over the very nature of rights, and their relation to the rights of others. Like the *Dred Scott Decision*, the *Roe vs. Wade* decision pulled our country in the wrong direction. Perhaps it will take the ongoing dedication of the pro-life movement, and perhaps even another president to set our nation on the proper course once again, as it did when the struggle against slavery was at its height.

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