A Pastoral Perspective
by H.B. London Jr. and Neil B.

It started out as any ordinary Sunday morning — maybe even better than ordinary. The music was especially inspiring, the Scriptures were read with power and were focused on the theme of the service, and I thought my sermon was outstanding — maybe even dynamite (just kidding). I knew it was acceptable when so many parishioners stroked my ego at the door with comments like, “God used you today. Thanks for your courageous stand against abortion.”

That's what many said, and I enjoyed their affirmation. I admired their courage because they supported me so completely. I felt very good about myself that day because I had been an enthusiastic spokesman for God on a controversial subject. The reactions were so positive that I made a mental note to preach on the abortion theme more often.

All this happened a long time ago, before I knew much about abortion or the tragic lifelong consequences it causes.

In my impassioned message, I reminded my congregation how terrible abortion is. I gave them figures about how many millions of unborn children die each year. I went on and on, even repeating several of my points. I felt smug and satisfied.

After receiving what Dr. E.V. Hill calls “all the hugs and kisses” at the door, I went to my study as I did following every service. It was my practice to take a few minutes to unwind, to greet people at the door, to make a few notes about parishioners I needed to follow up on and to get ready to join my family for Sunday lunch.

Then came a knock. I opened the office door to find a young woman in her late 20s. I could tell she was troubled as she quietly said, “Pastor, I know you're tired, and I don't want to keep you. But could you spare a few minutes?” And I said, “Sure.”

To be perfectly candid, I expected more affirmation. I thought she might say that the sermon on abortion was helpful or say, “I'm so glad you're my pastor.”

But she greatly surprised me with her question: “Pastor, do you know how many women like me were sitting in the congregation today?” I thought she was talking about the number of women who came to church alone. I was clueless as to her real message.

She said, “Sorry, I am not expressing myself very well. What I really want to know is do you know how many women in the congregation are like me?”

I had to answer, “No, I really don't. I don't think I know what you mean.”

Then like a broken dam at flood tide, she told me about the pain she felt from her own abortion. She graphically shared her sense of loss. She explained the agony she felt every anniversary that recalled the death of her unborn child. She told me how old her son would be by this time.

She described how far from God she felt. Then she shocked me even more by saying that perhaps 1 in 10 women in her age group had had an abortion and that probably some of them were sitting in the pews of the church during my sermon that very morning.

She continued with indescribable emotion, “Today you didn't seem to show any mercy for women like me. Is there any hope? You seemed so determined to communicate your pro-life message that you forgot about women

like me who have lived through an abortion.

“You failed to realize that many men also feel guilty because they insisted or at least consented to an abortion by their girlfriends or wives. For me, I felt I was dying by inches each time you uttered the word ‘abortion.'”

That woman changed my life. She opened my eyes. She brought me back to the reality in which all pastors work — learning to hate sin more and learning to love sinners with a forgiveness only Christ provides. But sinners can't feel our love until we lower our voices to speak a word of compassion and offer pastoral support for those who have taken the wrong turn.

Let me say it again, I am pro-life. I am against abortion with every fiber of my being. But I am a pastor. And being a pastor places unique demands on my attitudes and actions.

To you pastors and church leaders who stand on the corners with pro-life signs as I have, who pray in front of abortion clinics as I have, who have pro-life organizations in your churches as I have — I commend you for your opposition to abortion. I respect your bravery and your courage. I laud you for taking a strong stand against this evil.

But I plead with you to also think about all the women who are spiritually traumatized when we preach about life issues because they have firsthand experience of this pain and loss. If you could feel my heart and hear my prayer just now, it would be, “God forgive me for taking advantage of my pulpit when I was insensitive to hurting men and women whom You love. Forgive me when I hurt those who are already dying inside because of the sin of their past.”

And pastors, I beg you, the next time you preach and teach on the subject of abortion — or any sin, for that matter — tell your congregation that sin is wrong, but don't forget to tell them that God offers forgiveness for those who live under the dark shadow of guilt. There is hope.

When you raise your voice to speak with such tenacious authority about the evils of abortion, be sure to lower that same voice to speak with quiet compassion to those who have been damaged by sin, assuring them there is healing, forgiveness and mercy.

Tell them God loves them and cares for them. Tell them about God's pardon for sin. Tell them that coming to God is the answer to the crushing anguish they carry. Tell them that they do not need to carry this burden any longer.

Let's take seriously those incredible words of Scripture from Jesus' conversation with the woman taken in adultery: “Neither do I condemn you…Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11).

Here are five simple ways to cultivate a deeper sensitivity to those who are dealing with the consequences of their sins and who question whether the Church is willing to accept them:

Add gentleness to preaching.
Never preach against abortion without a tear in your eye. A veteran minister who had been a pastor for nearly a lifetime said, “I never deal with any sin without getting a tear in my eye. A tear of sadness for the consequences I see in the sinner's life. A tear of joy that no sin is too great for the Savior to forgive. And a tear that God, by grace, kept me from the same sin.”

Show sinners love as you warn against sin.
Carefully find your way between being a prophet who denounces sin and a pastor who loves sinners. Most sinners know they have sinned; they need salvation and solutions rather than more condemnation. A balance is

needed and is not always easy to find. An authentic pastor is never easy on sin, but always offers God's loving forgiveness to a sinner.

Keep your preaching authentic.
Caution: Try never to use your pulpit to even a score with anyone. If you disregard this friendly advice, your problems may flourish like weeds. Remember, you may not have the whole story. People you are trying to win may resent a public discussion of their need.

Fair-minded believers may think you less than courageous for not personally approaching the individual whose sins you are denouncing. One old-time Christian told his pastor after a sermon that vehemently opposed the use of alcohol, “That sure was a powerful sermon for a hundred people in our church who have never taken a drink of the devil's brew in their lives.”

Listen to your message through the ears of the neediest in our congregation. Do you offer hope? Do you communicate Christ's boundless love for sinners? I am not advocating that you tone down the gospel. I'm exhorting you to speak in loving language your hearers will understand. Speak so they know you have spent time thinking through things from their perspective.

Explore new ministries to care for unwed mothers and their babies.
Lead your church to take positive action to care for children, to provide adoption as an alternative to abortion or to help a young mother or couple raise a child. There is a growing conviction and healthy concern among many Christians that the Church should be prepared to help raise the child whose parents think an abortion is the only solution.

View yourself as a physician of the soul.
There was a time that pastoral care was given to everyone in need, both inside and outside the Church, because the pastor was seen as a healer of the soul — a physician of the inner person. When someone opens up to you about a sin in their past, offer them whatever attention is needed for them to become whole in Christ. It will make you a first-row participant in the grace of God applied to the pains of human need.

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