
“What If She Was Raped?”

How to Respond in Real-World Interactions

In April 2004, after eight days on the road, five training sessions, and two days in the sun talking with students, I found myself in the middle of a huge crowd of people on a Colorado university campus. One after another, the students complained that the fetus is not fully human and expressed frustration with the Justice For All Exhibit (see www.jfaweb.org - Justice For All and I partner to bring on-campus pro-life training to hundreds of students each year).

After about an hour, a female student spoke up. Exasperated, she said, “I was raped. It’s only because I’ve gone through counseling that I can say that to all of you right now. I was raped and then had an abortion. What do you think about that?”

Although this question strikes fear in many pro-lifers’ hearts, the intellectual response to this argument is rather simple. The real challenge here is the interpersonal element in every new situation. Sure, I didn’t want to waste this opportunity to clarify the logic of the pro-life position as this large crowd of pro-life and pro-choice listened intently. But more importantly, I did not want to fail this test.

Why do I say this is a test? When I teach pro-lifers to respond to the rape challenge, I point out that when people offer this challenge, it is not so much to show the fetus isn’t human; it is a test to see *if the pro-lifer is human*. Too many times have I watched from the sidelines as pro-life people fail to show a real understanding and concern for women who are hurting. Their points are valid but they make no impact.

I said, “I think rape is seriously evil. It’s horrible what was done to you. And I think the rapist should be punished to the fullest extent of the law. I’ll bet the man who raped you was not punished, was he?” She said, “No.” I replied, “I’m so sorry. That shouldn’t happen. We should punish the rapist severely for his crime. But even when we do punish him, if the woman gets pregnant, I think we’ve let the rapist off easy. If the woman gets pregnant, the rapist not only perpetrated an act of violent assault; he also forced her to become a mother, such that if she wants to do what’s right, like everyone does, she *has* to carry to term. It’s wrong to put her in the position where she either has to carry a baby she didn’t consent to create (followed by giving birth and going through the pain of adoption) or she has to do this (I pointed to the pictures of aborted children) to the child. But it’s the rapist who did all of this. We’re too easy on him. He should be punished for all of these things.” My response here was totally centered on the woman and the injustice done to her. There’s one other point I needed to make explicitly, though, in order for the crowd to see the moral logic of our position.

After a few responses from the crowd, I said, “Why should the child pay for the crimes of his father?” I can easily use this sentence at the beginning of my response, but I know it will not be heard or understood. That’s why I always place it in the context of concern for the mother; then the audience can focus on its intuition that those who commit injustice are the ones who should be punished.

Even this careful approach to the rape question isn’t always easily accepted. Women many times protest that it’s very wrong for them to have to carry a child when they didn’t do anything to be placed in the situation– that the pregnancy makes the rape worse. I agree with them, but I point out that all of the unthinkable horrors of rape – including any forced pregnancy that results – are the rapist’s fault, not the child’s. They may struggle with the fact that the rapist isn’t punished and won’t be punished (I struggle with this too!), but because I acknowledge the serious wrong done to the woman, they are more likely to see the sensibility of the pro-life position.

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