

OKLAHOMA

*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.
— Isaiah 1:16–17*

T. Russell Hunter was studying for a degree in the history of science at the University of Oklahoma when his research led him to encounter the abolitionists of slavery. Yet that research revealed obvious differences between the modern pro-life movement, which was the most prevalent mode of opposing abortion in the United States, and the abolitionist movement that ended chattel slavery in the United States and the British Empire in the nineteenth century. Those differences prompted Hunter to critically examine the theological and political foundations of the pro-life movement and therefore to launch the first efforts to abolish abortion in Oklahoma.

Hunter was raised in a nominally Christian home. He recalled that the large black Bible that belonged to his father sat untouched on a desk throughout the week except when his father would take the Bible to church with the family on Sundays. When he was ten years old, Hunter heard the gospel at a summer camp and was struck by the truth that “you’re going to stand before God, and if you’re not putting your faith in Christ, you’re not going to be with Him.”

Throughout his adolescence, Hunter said that he was “worried about girls and basketball” until he was seventeen

years old, when a pastor at his church recommended that he read *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. At that point, Hunter learned there was a need for “actually following Christ in my day-to-day life.” He thoroughly studied the New Testament while still in high school and continued to follow the Lord, becoming “more serious about Christ” in college.

From his undergraduate years to his doctoral studies, Hunter noticed a continual progression in his life away from acting as a “keep-my-head-down Christian,” who was only bold around fellow believers, to a Christian who also represented his commitment to Jesus before unbelievers. His simultaneous interests in art, philosophy, and history synthesized with a natural affinity for Christian apologetics, all of which likewise shaped his pursuit of a history of science degree.

Hunter eventually found himself working on a dissertation challenging the questionable idea that Charles Darwin proposed his theories on evolution to effect the end of slavery. While reading the works written by and examining the lives of the actual slavery abolitionists, such as William Wilberforce, Frederick Douglass, and William Lloyd Garrison, Hunter quickly noticed their distinctively Christian approach toward addressing the national sins prevalent in their day.

“They were theological in their approach. They weren’t secular,” Hunter described. “They didn’t leave out the judgment of God, what God wanted them to do, or what the Bible says. They went about trying to rectify that their nations were at odds with God and His law, they were oppressing their neighbors, and they were not being Christian, so I had been convinced that sentiment is right.”

At the same time, Hunter happened to be part of a roundtable group at Trinity Baptist Church in Norman, Oklahoma, in which the members were assigned various

discussion topics to research and defend. He was given the task of defending the modern pro-life movement, but he was left unimpressed while comparing that movement to the slavery abolitionists he was studying.

“When I looked at the pro-life movement, I was seeing that yes, they say they’re Christian, and they’re raising money from churches, so they want the support of Christians,” Hunter continued. “But they have this ‘leave the theological stuff on the back burner’ kind of mindset.”

Hunter was meanwhile increasingly convicted over his own apathy toward abortion. In his personal life, Hunter and his sister had an opportunity to minister to a woman who was thinking about having an abortion but eventually chose life through their influence. Within Hunter was kindled a newfound and deepening desire to “be like these abolitionists of slavery” and sacrifice his life for the sake of “those who are being oppressed and dehumanized and destroyed.”

“Holding that baby wasn’t some kind of intellectual activity. That was something God did. I saw what’s intellectually and biblically and theologically correct, but I also felt it. I realized that I needed to love God, and I needed to love my neighbor. I repented of my abortion apathy.”

Though he was challenged to compare the pro-life movement to the slavery abolitionists, Hunter never delivered his presentation in defense of the pro-life movement. He instead contended before the roundtable group that the broader pro-life movement was “actually wrong and off-kilter.”

Hunter articulated five ways in which the abolitionists and the modern pro-life movement significantly deviated, and where the former “stood out as exemplary types of Christians of their era dealing with evil.” He was forced to conclude that the pro-life establishment entrusted with the task of

abolishing abortion was akin to the historical foils of the slavery abolitionists: the antislavery gradualists who professed to desire the abolition of slavery and the slave trade but who insisted that regulations and compromises were needed before reaching such a goal.

Those five tenets of abolition included gospel centrality rather than moralism, alignment with divine providence rather than human pragmatism, emphasis on the church rather than individualism, reliance on biblical truth rather than worldly philosophy, and immediatism rather than delay.

Animated by these new convictions, Hunter launched an “abolitionist society” in 2011, modeled after the organizations once started by the slavery abolitionists to coordinate their efforts. He said that the small band of newly minted abortion abolitionists, which included men such as Josh Malone, Aaron Hoffman, and Jeremy Brown, was largely the half-dozen fellow Christians he met in a class about Charles Darwin for which he served as the teaching assistant.

“It was very nerdy. I mean, we were a bunch of grad students, PhD candidates, and young, nerdy guys interested in theology,” Hunter fondly remembered. “It’s that small group of Christians in the church who are reading Puritan paperbacks for fun. That kind of group.”

The organization started spreading their assertions by means of online Facebook discussion channels, with four or five other ideologically aligned abolitionist societies appearing in other cities between 2011 and 2012. The groups were temporarily accepted by the broader pro-life movement until they started to criticize Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney for running commercials in which he denounced bans on abortion

in the cases of rape and incest. Most pro-life entities were endorsing Romney, a devout Mormon, in his candidacy.¹

“By the end of 2012, because we followed those theological principles, people were angry with us because it had become clear to them that we weren’t just going to play the game,” Hunter recounted about that time. “That had the effect of alerting other people to the reality of—wait a second—the pro-life movement isn’t working for biblical principles. The abolitionist movement didn’t have any actual political impact at that point, but it had the sort of impact of making people notice that what these abolitionists are saying is different, so let me look into it.”

Hunter noted that the movement at first was growing “without any sort of direction or plan,” leading to skirmishes within local churches as adherents tried to convince others that “pro-life isn’t the way to go.” The abolitionists were opposing the pro-abortion movement for their open support of abortion, but they were indeed starting to oppose the pro-life movement for their patterns of compromise. Over the next three years, the abolitionists drew more attention and started to direct their efforts toward influencing their elected officials to abolish abortion.

The first such effort in Oklahoma was a state initiative petition that would have allowed residents to cast their ballots in favor of abolishing abortion as murder. Hunter said that he was “trying to accelerate the shift” away from incrementalism with the

¹ See, e.g., “National Right to Life Endorses Governor Mitt Romney,” press release, National Right to Life, April 12, 2012, <https://nrlc.org/communications/releases/2012/release041212>.

petition by demonstrating to the broadly pro-life voting base that they could, in fact, move to immediately abolish abortion.

The original plan was to recruit the three hundred attendees of the first Abolish Abortion Oklahoma conference to collect petition signatures in the state over the course of a week, but the American Civil Liberties Union successfully asked the Oklahoma Supreme Court in early 2016 to toss the petition since *Roe v. Wade* was in effect.² In their decision, members of the Oklahoma Supreme Court said, “This court is duty bound by the United States and the Oklahoma Constitution to follow the mandates of the United States Supreme Court on matters of federal constitutional law.”

Hunter said that the conference was placed in a bind over “what to do with the three hundred people that have decided to come to Oklahoma to collect these signatures.” Beyond sidewalk ministry at abortion mills and evangelism in the community, the attendees traveled to the Oklahoma State Capitol and tried to recruit legislators willing to sponsor an abortion abolition bill, only for those lawmakers to brandish their pro-life credentials while remaining largely uninterested.

“The abolitionists were going into every single office talking to each legislator and being told that they were ‘one-hundred percent pro-life’ or that they had an ‘A+ pro-life rating.’ They said that they were ‘totally with us’ but didn’t see the need for adopting a bill of abolition,” Hunter observed. “They had this other pro-life bill all about taking away the license of doctors who performed abortions.”

² “State Supreme Court Stops Anti-Abortion Petition,” American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma, March 22, 2016, <https://www.acluok.org/en/news/state-supreme-court-stops-anti-abortion-petition>.