

ONE



What Is the Kingdom of God?

It is early morning, June 19, 1988. I am standing in the middle of Spring Street in midtown Atlanta as sunlight begins to filter through the long narrow spaces between buildings into the chilly street below. A few miles away at the Omni, final preparations for the 1988 Democratic National Convention are being made. For an entire week the bleary eyes of the nation's political junkies will be fixed on Atlanta as the Democratic Party meets to perform its quadrennial rite of initiation for its latest political messiah.

On Spring Street, however, another drama is about to unfold before me, one that will electrify the Christian community, propel a hitherto obscure activist into the national spotlight, and reveal the deep fissures that divide the American people. It is a drama that will confirm that America is in the midst of a second civil war, one that is already far bloodier than the first.

Around eight o'clock some 135 men and women quietly walk or trot up Spring Street toward the Atlanta Surgi-Center, Atlanta's largest abortion "clinic." It is a varied group: Young and old, men and women. Some—a very few—clerical collars are visible. A mountainous bearded man wearing a flowery Hawaiian shirt takes what appears to be the "linch-

pin" position directly in front of the door. The rest gather three or four rows deep on the steps at the entrance of the clinic, sit down, and wait—quietly, soberly, resolutely. Some pray. Some sing hymns. A friend of mine, who will later become the Atlanta coordinator for Operation Rescue, paces up and down the sidewalk, talking into and listening to a black walkie-talkie.

Minutes later the abortionist arrives. Standing, the rescuers form a human wall. There is a tense moment as the abortionist, a policeman on each arm, tries to push his way to the door. After several attempts, he backs off. Through a megaphone, the police captain orders the rescuers to disperse. There is another tense moment, a long silence. I have the feeling that one of the rescuers will stand to say that it's all been a very bad mistake or a big joke, we didn't mean to upset the police, have a nice day. No one budes.

After huddling for a few moments with his officers, the police captain orders his men to begin making arrests. When one of the policemen spots my friend with the walkie-talkie, my friend falls to the ground and is carried to a waiting van.

Then I get that sinking feeling you get when you have crossed a bridge and there is no turning back. For those 135 rescuers, there is no turning back. What some pro-life activists would later call the "Battle of Atlanta" has begun.



The night before, I attended a pre-rescue rally at Perimeter Presbyterian Church on the outskirts of Atlanta. Randall Terry, now well known as the founder and leader of Operation Rescue, spoke with warmth and fervor. He reminded us of the babies being slaughtered. He warned us of impending judgment. He encouraged us by saying that those who fight for the unborn would be considered heroes by future generations. It was not so much a sermon as a summons to battle. Terry sounded less like Spurgeon than like Henry V before the battle of St. Crispin's Day.¹ Despite Terry's moving and

passionate appeals, I remained unconvinced. I decided not to participate in the rescue. I would wait and see.

As I stood up the street from the Surgi-Center the next morning, handing out pamphlets and talking with passers-by and policemen, I saw my pastor and several other close friends being arrested. Observing their implacable resolution, their orderliness, their prayerfulness, I began to doubt my decision not to participate in the rescue. I felt an urge to cross the sidewalk to take my place among the rescuers. Deep down, in spite of all my doubts about the wisdom of the rescue, I felt instinctively that I was on the wrong side of that sidewalk.

I did not follow my urge that morning, but as I walked back to my car, I knew that I had witnessed a memorable event. What has stayed with me from that late spring morning in Atlanta is not so much my sense of guilt for failing to fight abortion more boldly. It is not so much my desire to stand with my friends in a good cause, or the unsettling memory of seeing my pastor and close friends roughly packed into a police van. Instead, what has stayed with me is the conviction that America is a battleground. More than ever, I have sensed that the boundary lines are being drawn more sharply, that the middle ground is rapidly falling away, and that we face the necessity of taking sides. I realized that I had witnessed a major battle in a very real war.

A Nation at War

The conclusions I drew from observing the 1988 rescue were not at all unique. Over the past decade, many commentators have argued that contemporary America is the scene of a *Kulturkampf*, a "cultural war."² Competing visions of the past, present, and future are struggling for dominance of America.³

Kulturkampf is a historical and sociological term. In biblical language, we can describe our time as a time of *judgment*. In Scripture, judgment means more than "punishment." When God judges nations, He punishes His enemies, but that is not all He does. Judgment also means that God comes near

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to discriminate, to make distinctions. In Scripture, judgment is pictured not only by the image of the wine press, but also by the image of the winnowing fan (Lam. 1:15; Matt. 3:12, 17). When God judges, He separates sheep and goats, wheat and tares. The apostle Peter wrote that in one particular period of judgment, “the earth and its works will be discovered” (2 Peter 3:10).⁴ Times of judgment reveal the hearts of men and force them to a crisis of choice. And when people are forced to make choices, they are drawn into conflict with those who make different choices. To live in a time of judgment is to live in a time of conflict.

No one has described the intellectual front of the cultural war more vigorously than Notre Dame’s moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre has argued in several books that modern Western moral debate is in chaos. We argue about what “ought” to be; we act as if we had some authoritative foundation for ethical absolutes; we discuss what is “good”—we do all this as if we all knew and agreed on what these words mean.

But this assumed agreement is an illusion. Though we use the same words, the words carry very different and sometimes opposite meanings. For some, economic justice means that everyone should have close to an equal share of a nation’s aggregate wealth; for others, it means that everyone’s paycheck should reflect the free market value of his work. For some, being compassionate means helping a poor, unmarried woman to obtain an abortion, or rescuing a baby seal from a ruthless Eskimo; for others, compassion requires that we block abortion clinics to prevent that same woman from murdering her child and let the Eskimo provide for his children. For some, freedom means liberty to display graphic photographs of homosexual acts in prominent museums at taxpayers’ expense; for others, freedom means the liberty to do what is right.

We have, MacIntyre contends, no common moral principles, no common conceptions of justice, no common ideas of rationality. We do not even agree on how we go about deciding what we should agree on. Americans are deeply divided