

Theology Matters

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Changing the Vision of Heaven: Abortion and Relative Truth

By Terry Schlossberg*

How much does it matter what we hold to be true? There's a case to be made that we Protestants "reformed" ourselves into myriad sects with doctrinal jots and tittles, fracturing our unity in a search for truth and purity. There are almost countless Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, and Presbyterian denominations today, to say nothing of the almost infinite variety of other denominations, some with rather obscure names. One denomination split, I am told, first to assert its belief in adult rather than infant baptism, and then split again over whether the baptized person would be dunked forward or backward into the water.

And now in recent decades, continues the argument, recognizing the error of our way, we have abandoned doctrinal differences as divisive--as the cause of our constant splintering. As a result, say some researchers, not only are the doctrinal differences minimized; in some cases they have vanished altogether from the landscape. It has become more and more difficult for church members to say what it is that they believe. Most of us Presbyterians under the age of 60, for example, have only passing, or less, familiarity with our confessions of faith, and few of our churches continue the practice of catechizing their youth, and even our Bible reading has plunged.¹

The post-modern influence of society encourages the loss of doctrinal distinctives by persuading us that truth is simply a matter of perspective. You see things one way; I see them another. And so, in some sense, we're both right

and neither of us is wrong. What unifies us, therefore, is our commitment to tolerance of each other's views.

Richard John Neuhaus observes that we have become a "radically individualistic culture" that no longer discerns and obeys what is objectively true. "Rather," he says, "each of us decides what is true for me. We create truth."

G.K. Chesterton, in high dramatic style, called it "the whole collapse and huge blunder of our age" to view the overwhelming problems of the modern world and decide that the only way to cure them is by adjusting the standard, by deciding that absolutes are, after all, relative. This relativizing of truth is not done in the abstract. It occurs in everyday situations, as when we respond to marital problems by concluding that "till death do us part" is unreasonable, and a good divorce is better than a bad marriage. It occurs as we witness increased sexual activity among our children and conclude that a standard of chastity is unreasonable in our modern world, and must be altered to a standard of protection against pregnancy, and when a pregnancy occurs, prevention of birth. Chesterton, in his little book *Orthodoxy*, pointed out that in continually changing the standard we leave the circumstances unchanged and thereby fail to make any progress. It's a profound observation. "As long as the vision of heaven is always changing," he said, "the vision of earth will be exactly the same."² The shifting standards produce increasingly complex problems, producing a downward spiral of increasingly shifting standards.

* Mrs. Terry Schlossberg is Executive Director of Presbyterians Pro-Life and is co-author with Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier of *Not My Own: Abortion & the Marks of the Church*, published by Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995.

Those who grow up with the underlying, and perhaps, unconscious, presupposition that truth is relative (and who view attempts to make truth absolute as a thinly-veiled attempt to impose one person's values on everybody else--the height of intolerance) can hardly be persuaded that doctrinal distinctives are of any consequence. A Presbyterian seminary professor can assert that purity (which has its application in both doctrine and life) must submit to unity, and Presbyterians don't bat an eye.³ Purity, after all, has demanding overtones that unity does not appear to have. And unity surely is a more attainable goal than purity, particularly if you allow--even for a moment--a concept of original sin.

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And the church is right in step with the culture. Neuhaus pointed out recently that it is the attempt by mainline Protestantism to accommodate the broadest possible diversity of beliefs that leads ultimately to the sacrifice of truth. It means that those who argue their position from a biblical perspective constitute only one possible view among many in the Church. There is no longer truth and falsehood, right and wrong, good and evil; instead we have a variety of truths represented by each person's personal point of view.

But C.S. Lewis was one who liked to point out that, like it or not, absolutists have less trouble reconciling their position with reality than the relativists do. His point was illustrated not long ago in a college classroom. When a philosophy professor insisted repeatedly that there is no absolute truth, a student raised his hand and asked, "Are you absolutely sure of that?" His question provoked chuckles, but he made his point. To insist that there is no absolute truth is an absolutist statement, and leaves one rather in a bind.

Further, if we think about it long and hard enough, we may have to agree that relativizing all truth leaves us with no fixed point in the universe. If truth is not absolute, everything moves and readjusts to personal preferences, or to an infinite number of extenuating circumstances, or to what "seems right in our own eyes." If we forsake the standards external to ourselves, we may be able to agree on a moral point today; but because situations are always changing, tomorrow we may no longer be able to agree. That is an unsettling way to go through life. In fact, it has a lot of potential for chaos. Wouldn't it be a sort of cosmic joke to discover that unity is *dependent* on truth rather than being its nemesis as we have come to believe? After all our efforts to tolerate the widest possible diversity, wouldn't it be a surprise to discover that our efforts have been producing the very disunity we have been trying so hard to avoid?

The conflict of truths

The post-modern world may not accept any fixed standard for truth (except the one that says there are no fixed standards). But we Presbyterians have characterized ourselves by holding a fixed standard, and we have declared the fixed standard to be Scripture, the Word of God. For us, that declaration was the essential nature of the Reformation. So seriously did reformed people take the Scripture as the fixed point in the universe that they placed it as the opening chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. And, that confession, as if anticipating our propensity to reduce truth to the human domain, declares that the Scripture is not our fixed point because we say so, but because it is its own authority.

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (Westminster, 6.004.)

Not everything is a matter of absolute truth to be sure. Even the Confession allows that some things are a matter of prudence.⁴ On some matters--more, probably, than we would want to admit--we ought to leave our fellow human beings to their personal preferences, and on other matters--because we live in communities--we ought to submit to the will of the majority. But on matters essential to the nature of God, to our salvation, and to moral right and wrong, we have clear, unchanging--and absolute--direction from Scripture. On those matters, Scripture is the fixed point by which we can safely correct our own course, even if the rest of the world is headed for a precipice.

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A common critique of the modern church is its inability to make the distinctions expressed by the Westminster Assembly. It has lost its firm grip on what it once believed to be true and, consequently, the ability to provide moral leadership to a society beset with moral problems. In an interview on modern culture, a New York theater director observed, ". . .our culture no longer has a framework for meaningWe used to hang meaning on the framework of the church, but as a culture we don't anymore. The new priests are psychiatrists who interpret dreams and open insights the way medicine men used to."⁵ He was not criticizing the change, merely making note of it. But we in the church should be able to see what a great treasure we have allowed to be buried.

The critique comes from within as well as from without. Says one theological observer in our own denomination,

“The church wanes and fragments, without influence on society; ideologies rule the day; preachers often proclaim merely psychological therapy; ethics become a matter of personal opinion; and the church’s light to the world goes out.”⁶

Truth and Faith

The reduction of truth to the domain of human judgment challenges the very core of Christianity. That’s because Christian faith is not limited to our personal beliefs about God, and to our personal devotional lives. Christian faith is an expression of ultimate reality. It explains the very nature and order of the universe. When Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see,” it is explaining that ultimate truth is not visible to the naked eye. Christian faith, understood through God’s revelation in Scripture, is a way of seeing into the very nature and order of the universe. The third verse of Hebrews 11 explains that it is only by faith that we understand how the universe was formed: “The universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” When this passage uses the word faith, it is not talking about our personal, subjective views of creation; it is telling us that in order for our finite minds to comprehend the invisible and the infinite, they must trust in what God has revealed in his Word. Faith is a way of knowing objective truth, not of making subjective judgments.

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Faith as a means of knowing truth has enormous implications for whether we gain a right or wrong understanding of the universe we live in. The Catechism says, “The Scriptures principally teach what [mankind] is to believe about God . . .” Another way of saying that is that Scripture reveals God to us. Revelation teaches us what sin is, and the meaning of grace. It is from Scripture, enlivened by God’s Holy Spirit, that we learn how to escape judgment; it’s where we gain the assurance of forgiveness and restoration; it’s what gives us confidence that we are not adrift in a mindless, purposeless universe.

The Creation account teaches us that we live in a moral universe. Nothing is so inherent in our understanding of God and his relationship to us than that God himself has given definition to the meaning of right and wrong, good and evil, moral and immoral. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, explained how the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves, has its basis in the second tablet of the law.

God has so divided his law into two parts, which contain the whole of righteousness, as to assign the

first part to those duties of religion which particularly concern the worship of his majesty; the second, to the duties of love that have to do with men.

. . . The Second Table prescribes how in accordance with the fear of his name we ought to conduct ourselves in human society. In this way our Lord, as the Evangelists relate, summarizes the whole law under two heads: that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our powers; and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. [Luke 10:27f; Matt 22:37,39]⁷

The Scriptures and reformed teaching maintain the connection between love and law. It is the modern priest, Joseph Fletcher, who popularized a new “doctrine” that disconnects love from law. And no one is clearer than Fletcher about the deadly consequences of such disconnection. He argues in his book, *Situation Ethics*, that love for our neighbor, without the moral restraint of the law, may lead us to steal from him, or kill him, compassionately. “. . . [I]n principle, even killing innocent people might be right, he wrote.”⁸ “If God is dead, everything is permitted,” observed the Russian writer, Feodor Dostoyevsky, and Fletcher’s philosophy illustrates the point. Fletcher’s “new morality” turns the teachings of Christian faith upside down, by connecting moral decisions to judgments about individual circumstances rather than to objective and absolute teachings from God’s revelation. It is an earthbound view of reality that eliminates the “God out there.”

Jesus’ view of love and law was quite the opposite of Fletcher’s. When he told us that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves, he was helping us to see that our measure of love for each other is that we will not steal from our brothers (or sisters), or envy them, or bear false witness against them, or kill them. That is the law of love. Far from allowing us to harm our brothers and sisters, Christian discipleship calls us to give up our lives, our personal aspirations and comforts to bear each others’ burdens.

Jesus understood our hearts of darkness. Fletcher did not. Jesus understood that we are sinners who need a standard, as well as a Savior. Fletcher regarded us all as little gods, able to judge right and wrong for ourselves, Satan’s promise to Eve in the Garden. Jesus understood that left to our own “compassionate” judgments, we each have our “little list” of who is not worthy to live or who would be better off dead.

Joseph Fletcher was a good evangelist. His book helped effect a shift in the views of a whole society, even among people who never read the book and never heard of him.⁹

Truth and Ethics

The ideas popularized by Fletcher have so invaded the church that we no longer argue over what is the truth. Rather the modern argument is over whether there is any truth outside ourselves, any absolute or ultimate truth. And

issues like abortion--and homosexuality--demonstrate that the theological and philosophical questions of truth have implications that affect our lives, and the lives of our children. This is not an abstract intellectual debate. The matter of what we hold to be true affects the decisions we make and the way we live. As one writer put it, "Ideas have consequences."

Probably the single most important factor in the change of views about abortion--and about morality in general--has been the loss of belief in objective truth generally in our culture. It is no coincidence that ideological feminism teaches a rigid adherence to "choice" devoid of objective moral content, and promotes a goddess spirituality, an almost divine ability of women to determine moral good, led by a truth they find within themselves.

Our differences over the nature of truth is at the heart of our disagreement over abortion. This debate is a good example of how loath we are in the modern church to put forth the objective standard of Scripture as the measure by which we will assess the differing perspectives.

To say that Christians hold differing views about abortion is quite different from saying that Christian faith holds contradictory views on any matter of morality. God, after all, is not the author of confusion. But we human beings are fully capable of holding conflicting beliefs simultaneously, and often unconsciously. As long as our consciously-held convictions can be separated from our presuppositions, we are unlikely to discover the conflict. Many of us Christian women have been caught in a tension of conflicting beliefs without realizing it. We have been proponents of the idea that abortion is a woman's individual and private choice, and that nothing and no one should interfere with her judgment about how to act in response to her own particular circumstances. But we have also committed ourselves to following our Lord and to obey his teachings in Scripture. The modern church has not helped us to see the conflicts that exist in those two strongly held convictions.

Our denomination's modern position on abortion comes very close to acknowledging the presuppositional conflict. But instead of helping us test our views against the truth of Scripture, current official teaching bypasses scrutiny of the conflicting positions and, presumably in the interest of promoting unity, awards all views the support of Scripture, leaving truth divided and the issue unresolved. The denomination's position acknowledges a diversity of personal interpretations, and it is these personal interpretations that it holds to be authoritative. It declares the church's inability to give moral guidance on abortion, because "...the issues remain complex and ambiguous."¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton once remarked, not without sarcasm, that situations always appear more complex to those who have no moral principles. But once truth has become "unfixed," moral principles are difficult, if not impossible, to establish.

This method of shifting from a search for the plain meaning of Scripture to the possibility of a variety of individual interpretations is the means by which objective truth becomes subjective without a direct challenge to the authority of Scripture. The meaning of "authority" has been

significantly adjusted so that it can now meet a variety of individual circumstances.

Our confessions tell us that "the Scriptures are not of private interpretation." (II Helvetic 5.010.) They explain that while not everything in Scripture is equally clear, nevertheless, everything we need to know for faith and life "is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (Westminster, 6.006-6.007), and that Scripture provides its own interpretation (Westminster, 6.009).¹¹ The confessional teaching implies the use of reason in understanding the Word of God, but it does not imply that we may abandon the Word in order to follow a voice within us. When the Westminster Confession declares that God alone is Lord of the conscience, it is not referring to a private, inner voice, but rather says we are free from any law or commandment devised by human beings which is any way *contrary* to Scripture (6.109). The confessions, therefore, stand in stark opposition to the modernist commitment to private truths. The modern church's ignorance of the confessional teaching and absorption of the cultural relativism does violence to women by placing solidly on their backs the full moral weight of abortion decisions and the consequences of these decisions--both physical and spiritual.

Before it was caught in the trap of modernist moral relativism, the church found the whole teaching of Scripture unambiguous on ethical matters, including sexuality and abortion.

Central teachings of Scripture on Creation, Sin, and Redemption all relate to abortion, and serve as a fixed standard for decisions about life

God's revelation stands in sharp contrast to the spirit of our modern age in its teachings about who is the Giver of life, the meaning of life, the value of human life, and about what governs the taking of human life.

Scripture teaches that God himself is our Creator. The Psalmist uses poetic language to describe God's personal knitting us together in our mothers' wombs (Psalm 139:13-16). Pictures of developing unborn babies reveal how perfectly descriptive that language is. The Scripture tells us in Jeremiah 1:5 that God knew us even before he formed us in the womb; and that, in the words of Paul in the New Testament, God gives our lives meaning and purpose while we are still in the womb: "For even before I was born," he says in Gal. 1:15, "God had chosen me to be His, and called me . . ."

The Bible describes the unborn John the Baptist leaping with joy at the voice of the Mother of his Lord in Luke 1. Scripture attributes personality to the unborn that we can now see for ourselves as we watch the ultrasound pictures of babies springing playfully off the walls of their mothers' wombs.

The creation account teaches that each of us is made in God's very image. That's a truth we learn only from

Scripture, and it is central to our obligation to protect and care for the human species in a way that is distinct from our obligations to the rest of creation. The “image of God” teaching makes discussions of “ensoulment” unnecessary. The time of “ensoulment” is a speculative philosophical argument. That human beings are created in God’s image as human beings is unambiguous biblically, and is directly related to the accountability we have for each other’s protection: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made [the species] humankind.” (Gen. 9:6 NRSV) This teaching follows well after the effects of the Fall on the image of God in us.

In its teaching on the moral law, “Thou shalt not kill,” the Westminster Catechism includes the obligation to “preserve the [lives] of ourselves and others, by resisting all thoughts and purposes. . . and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any. . . and protecting and defending the innocent.” (7.245)

Those passages establish for us the continuity of our humanity both before and after we are born. The Scripture is very clear about who creates and forms the unborn in the womb and about God’s purpose for each life while it is still in the womb. The Scripture leaves no opening for a subjective judgment that the unborn are not human beings, and the findings of every applicable branch of science conform to the biblical teaching about this reality. The Scripture also leaves no loophole for a Fletcher-like understanding of love that permits the killing of the innocent. The church from its earliest days responded to these teachings by recognizing the humanity of the unborn, by referring to abortion as infanticide and, until the latter part of this century, speaking clearly against abortion.¹² Those who reject Christian faith may reject these teachings about the unborn, but those who adhere to Christian faith should face them squarely as they consider the morality of abortion.

It is not only the unborn who, in our modern culture, are deprived of the humanity clearly granted them by God. “Personhood” has now displaced membership in the human species as the qualifier for protection. Personhood, however, has no objective definition. Members of the human species can be identified by objective means. Personhood is a completely subjective term. Well-known animal rights activist and medical ethicist, Peter Singer, explained nearly two decades ago that a serious modern problem is that too many of us continue to hold to a sanctity of human life ethic derived from Christian faith. That ethic, he said, keeps us from making reasonable decisions about who shall live and who shall die. But Singer expressed his hopefulness over the erosion of the sanctity of life ethic in our modern society. The sooner we can erase the distinctives based entirely on “species,” the better for all of us, he said.

If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of the sanctity of all human life, we may start to look at human life as it really is: at the quality of life that each human being has or can achieve. Then it will be

possible to approach these difficult questions of life and death with the ethical sensitivity that each case demands. . .¹³

Singer’s article is one of the few that surfaces a presuppositional basis for modern abortion decisions and shows the direct assault it is on biblical teaching. He gets beneath the surface, examines, and then rejects the biblical presupposition about the meaning associated with the “image of God,” and the consequent distinction between human and other species.

Christian faith stands in conflict with other belief systems about the value of each human life. The refusal of the Christian church, throughout its history, to make any distinction among humans has made it not only the champion of human rights, but the protector and rescuer of the outcasts of any society where the Gospel has made inroads. The objective word of God has taught us that “just as you have done it unto the *least of these* who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:40, emphasis mine.) No minimum criterion.

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Probably the most profound biblical statement of the value of human beings over the rest of creation, was the decision of God to rescue human beings at the cost of his own life, incarnate in Jesus Christ. So precious are we, that Jesus suffered humiliation and the death of the cross in order to give us life. God did that for no other species, and he did it without setting up a set of “quality of life” criteria. “Made in the image of God.” That’s it.

Scripture tells us, therefore, that God is our Creator; that he has set us apart from the rest of creation by creating us in his image; that he has assigned great value to each one of us; and that he does not permit us to take the lives of the innocent among us but, rather, charges us with their protection and care. And Scripture teaches us not only that it is sin to take the lives of the innocent, but also that we have no claim of ownership over ourselves or anybody else.

“It’s my own body,” asserts the feminist teaching on abortion, and the modern church picks up the strain, unconsciously adopting the presuppositions of the unbelieving culture, instead of affirming its own creed. In “affirming the ability and responsibility of a woman to make good moral choices regarding problem pregnancies,”¹⁴ the church gives women claim to autonomy that has no basis in Scripture. In a pretense of setting women free, the modern church isolates each woman from the community not only to which she is accountable but also from which she ought to find help. Leaving a woman

to decide the right or wrong of abortion alone and on her own is a repudiation by the modern church of its own tradition of caring, even for the “least of these.” She too, is a recipient of the “sanctity of life” ethic of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The teaching of Scripture is quite different from the feminist message of autonomy. From the Bible’s pages we learn that we belong to God and not to ourselves. I Corinthians 6:19 is the basis of the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, which declares, “I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.” That teaching of our belonging to God is a direct contradiction of the teaching that any child is unwanted, or that any woman is truly autonomous. At the very point where the church bears spiritual responsibility for the lives and souls of women, and could, if it chose to, give not only moral guidance but also material and spiritual support--at that very point--it abandons women. That abandonment is not faithful to the church’s calling.

The church cannot help us by constructing a cover for sin

Truth and Caring

In declaring that the church has “neither the wisdom nor the authority” to address the “many complicated and insolvable circumstances”¹⁵ surrounding abortions, the modern church echoes the unbelief of the culture and rejects the peculiar calling it has from God, which it has sought to fulfill throughout its history. Do we really think it is biblically defensible to declare that the church has no responsibility to us when we face dire circumstances, to help us see that not all possible courses of action are morally good or even morally neutral? Most of us face “complicated and insolvable” circumstances at some time in our lives. And we face enormous temptations at times to rationalize some courses of action as necessary under the circumstances. If the church finds the circumstances fraught with ambiguity, how will we be able to see them with any clarity? A church that is willing to withhold moral guidance has to have concluded that sin is a matter of little consequence. But that is not the truth. Sin changed everything in the world by producing the Fall. And it continues to change everything in our lives when it takes us captive. The great price of our redemption is testimony to the spiritual seriousness of sin. The church cannot help us by constructing a cover for sin. The only help we have comes from facing it, confessing it, repenting of it, and experiencing the forgiveness and restoration to life that comes from the grace of God. Those who have lived for years with a burden of guilt before discovering this great mercy of God, give grateful testimony to the difference between denying sin and confessing it.

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The last thing we need is to be abandoned to our own decisions. In difficult times we need the church’s demonstration of confidence in God’s ability to help us face calamity, and its own willingness to be a community that will help us. We need the encouragement to ground our actions in faith when we face difficult circumstances. The church cannot help us if it withholds either moral instruction or tangible support from us.

The church, in its message and ministry, is called to be the alternative to simply accepting abortion as a necessary reality of modern life. There is a way to reconcile the objective truth of Scripture with the difficult circumstances that leave so many people with a despondent “lesser of evils” philosophy. The teachings do not change, but Jesus declared that his yoke is easy and his burden light--because he bears it with us. The magnificent history of the Christian Church in contrast to pagan religions, of protecting and caring for the innocent and vulnerable, for the outcasts of societies, came from the teaching of Scripture. The prophetic passage about the Messiah in Isaiah says,

. . . he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him. . . . He was despised and rejected by men . . . he was despised and we esteemed him not. (Is 53:3 RSV)

We learned that the God of the universe--the one who purchased our redemption with the price of his own blood--was himself an outcast. And we ourselves, who should have been rejected, were instead loved into his kingdom. And from him, we learned to love others like ourselves:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

The Catechism teaches us that God delivered us from our condition of sin and misery, and saved us. There is no merciful death outside the rescue of Jesus Christ. Our calling is to seek life for all, both physical and spiritual. The solutions delivered by Christians should always be life-giving, life-affirming solutions. And those solutions must have very practical applications. The Scripture admonishes us,

If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14b-17)

Abortion is the crisis of our age that challenges the church to confront the faithless subjectivity of the culture that finds itself sliding into all kinds of “good” and “compassionate” killing of the innocent and vulnerable. It is the crisis that challenges the church to speak the words and display the character of her Lord. People ought to find help from the church in learning a truth outside themselves that will protect them from sin; they ought to find support and care from Christians that demonstrates that they are not alone; and they ought to find help from the church when they fall into sin.

The doctrine of Redemption carries with it God’s intent to restore those who have fallen. There is no sin that is more powerful than God’s mercy and willingness to forgive. The calling of the church is to help us all find the forgiveness and restoration available in God through Jesus Christ. Abortion reveals the deadly consequences of moral relativism. If we are willing to accept the challenge involved, it can also reteach us Christians the life-giving capacity of the doctrines of Christian faith, and put feet on those doctrines.

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If we are to restore the moral voice and life of the church, we shall have to find the courage to reaffirm God’s Word as the objective truth we will submit ourselves to. If we are to discern the word of Scripture for our faith and how we shall live our lives with respect to abortion, we shall have to come to terms with the objective and plain meaning of Scripture on the unborn, on our obligation to protect and care for our innocent and vulnerable neighbors, and on our duties of love to those in need. We shall have to teach the truth again, that sin is real, and that redemption is also real, and that healing and restoration are available. And we shall have to take care to provide the community in which the resources of God supply both physical and spiritual needs, so that both women and babies experience the blessing of God through the ministry of the church.

Christian Faith is only one operating framework for discerning meaning and direction in life. It has many competitors. And those who do not know their faith well may be easily confused, adopting the tenets of a different or even contradictory faith system. Abortion is regarded as a divisive issue, but the important division it creates is not between church members. The serious break is between the modern church and its own roots. Ultimately, abortion reflects a conflict between the doctrines of modernity and those of Christian orthodoxy, and the modern aversion to doctrine clouds our ability to see that. But we Christians must not be content to seek a peace that leaves abortion a

moral ambiguity. The Scripture is not divided on matters of morality. Our hope for unity lies not in an acceptance of all points of view, but on our agreement to submit together to God’s Word.

¹ “Panel Finds Bible Reading by Presbyterians is Sporadic,” by Jerry Van Marter, *News Briefs*, April 5, 1995, pp. 13-15.

² See Chapter VII, “The Eternal Revolution.” The quotes are taken from pp. 106-107.

³ “Characteristics of the baptized community are valuing...unity above purity.” The Rev. Cynthia Campbell, preaching at the worship service before the opening plenary, G.A. 1994.

⁴ “...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” (Westminster, 6.006)

⁵ New York’s Circle Repertory Theater director B. Rodney Marriott, in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 25, 1990, p. 9E.

⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier in *First Things*, The Institute on Religion and Public Life, New York, March 1990, p. 4.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 75.

⁸ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 75.

⁹ *Situation Ethics* became a standard text in high school, college, and even some Christian education classrooms in America.

¹⁰ *Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, a policy statement adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church(USA), 1992, published by the Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, KY 40202. References are to statements on pages 8, 10.

¹¹ “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

¹² Many church documents from the second to the fifth centuries A.D., including the Didache, considered to be one of the earliest documents, condemn abortion specifically. The Didache says, “thou shall not murder a child by abortion.” Others referred to abortion as “infanticide,” or “murder.” Reformers retained unity with both Rome and Constantinople on abortion, while departing from them on other serious theological matters. Both Luther and Calvin spoke specifically in opposition to abortion. Opposition by the church has been unbroken and undivided until the latter part of our current century. The Presbyterian Church, as late as 1965, not only spoke against abortion, but also against individual judgments on the matter: “the fetus is a human life to be protected by the criminal law from the moment when the ovum is fertilized ...as Christians, we believe that this should not be an individual decision on the part of the physician and couple. ...”

¹³ “Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life,” *Pediatrics*, July 1983.

¹⁴ *Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, p. 10-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 10.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the difference between absolute truth and relative truth? Discuss relative truth in terms of Chesterton’s statement, “As long as the vision of heaven is always changing, the vision of earth will be exactly the same.” Give an example of how we are prone to relativize truth in particular situations.
2. How are faith and objective truth related? What is the relationship between love and law? What does Scripture teach about the nature of human beings as the image of God and how we are to respond to one another? Relate this to the issue of abortion.

On Education and Self-deception

by Dean Turbeville

Presbyterians and other reformed Christians have always had an enthusiastic view of education and the life of the mind. It is no accident that more American schools and colleges were begun under our auspices than under any other Protestant denomination, or that we require the extensive education of our ministers. And it is no accident that Presbyterians Pro-Life highlights education in its formal title.

Education has limits

In many ways, this is all for the good. It is one of the reasons I rejoice in being in this historic strand of Christian life and tradition. We can say with confidence that ignorance is no friend to faith. But we also must recognize the limits of education as we usually have conceived it. American Presbyterians have never been better educated, nor has our church ever been in more darkness and distress. We simply must recognize that far greater than the power of education is the power of sinners to deceive ourselves. Professor Diogenes Allen of Princeton Seminary reflects on this in one of his fine books:

“When I was a boy in school, I remember once in a fifth grade art class that the teacher, who wasn’t very good at teaching art, let us talk about what we were going to be when we grew up. My answer was, ‘I am going to be a detective.’ She shook her head sadly and said, ‘I’m terribly sorry, Dicky, but by the time you grow up everyone will be so well educated there won’t be any crime.’ This woman only voiced what has been taught in our schools of education, and which has been the basis of American social theory. It’s taught everywhere. Education can do everything. We’re now recognizing that it cannot remove evil.”

Indeed, not only does secular education by itself fail to remove evil, it can buttress and feed the engines of evil. Witness the extraordinary capitulations of liberal German scholars to the rhetoric and reasons of Hitlerian fascism. Witness (until recently) the seduction of countless American university professors to the cruel pipe-dream of Marxist-Leninism and relativistic ethics. And finally, witness the current defense of the indefensible in the pro-abortion stance of many of America’s cultural elite.

Language and self-deception

It can no longer be said that most people do not have the facts about what happens in abortion. Some may not, but most surely do. Despite the rhetoric about the “unknowability” of when life begins, even most “pro-choice” people have an unadmitted, and almost instinctive sense that a human life is lost in abortion. Yet there are powerful forces which drive that moral sense underground. And then an elaborate game of self-deception begins. It mainly involves the misuse of language.

The best example of this I can think of was a network news magazine show several years ago which highlighted the story of an amazing and successful operation on an unborn child during the fifth month of a woman’s pregnancy. The operation saved the baby’s life, and there was a touching interview with the parents who wept as they expressed their gratitude for the doctors and their healthy one year old child. The thing that was so striking is that the news anchors referred throughout the show to “*the baby in the womb*” and “*the unborn child*.” These same reporters would never refer to the victim of abortion in those terms. A story by the same reporters about the same child being aborted would have included only impersonal references to “the fetus” and “the terminated pregnancy.”

The really frightening thing is that I suspect these well-educated news anchors do this with little or no sense of intellectual dishonesty. When subjective “truths” take the place of objective truth, all such contradictions conveniently evaporate. And when a sense of the real truth about abortion does begin to push itself into consciousness, the sheer horror of it makes it unnameable. It is hard indeed to confess that you have not recognized a holocaust for what it is.

The stark reality

Yet, a few in the pro-abortion movement confess their support for abortion in the most stark and naked terms. A free-lance writer, Nancy Loughlin, offered a revealing op-ed piece that appeared last July 18 in a northern New Jersey paper called *The Record*. Her opening sentence was, “I have been a pro-choice liar.” Why was she a “fraud?” Because “never once [did she believe] the standard pro-choice argument” that the unborn child was not a life. “The simple truth is I can’t remember a single moment when I cared whether the embryo was alive or not. Life or no life, murder or not, in the face of an unwanted pregnancy, the fetus will go down.” She related this to the “nearly invincible. . . instinct to protect one’s self.”

The need for education of the soul

Of course, we should still educate, educate, educate. But America and the PC(USA) do not need education as much as exorcism. Or, we might say, the real education needed is the education of the soul. Perhaps prayer, and only prayer, should now stand at the center of our efforts and lives. Perhaps God will not rescue us from ourselves until we discover how utterly

dependent we are on God for the rescue. In any case, we must always remember that education apart from spiritual rebirth is useless to our cause, for “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” (Jeremiah 17:9) Knowing Jesus as Lord is infinitely more important than knowing more facts about abortion. Because in the end, we must not only be informed *about* good and evil, we must be converted to the good *from* evil. People must be changed, not just ideas, for the true goal of education is not the accumulation of information, but doxology.

And so, as always, Jesus Christ stands at the center. “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” (John 3:19-21)

* *Dean Turbeville is senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, NC and a member of the PPL Board of Directors. This is reprinted with permission from the Presbyterians Pro-Life NEWS, Fall, 1995.*

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made (From Psalm 139), is a collection of sermons on life preached in Presbyterian churches. It is an effort by Presbyterians Pro-Life to demonstrate how preaching can avoid the heated political debate and focus on the spiritual needs associated with abortion. It begins with an introduction by Elizabeth Achtemeier, who addresses not only the silence of the pulpit on this matter, but also helps the reader consider perspective and content for a well-grounded sermon on abortion. For a complimentary copy, write PPL, P.O. Box 11130, Burke, VA 22009.

***Not My Own: Abortion & the Marks of the Church* and *God the Almighty: Volume 3 of Christian Foundations* were winners of *Christianity Today's* 1996 “Top 25” Book Awards. The books were selected by ballots cast by a “large and diverse panel of scholars, pastors, writers, and other church leaders.”**

Not My Own: Abortion & the Marks of the Church by Terry Schlossberg and Elizabeth Achtemeier (Eerdmans 1995) “That two women from within the Reformed tradition have written an explicitly theological and liturgical book about abortion is significant in itself. The character and depth of their argument, especially in the chapters on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, make the book even more important for the church’s ongoing examination of abortion. Those who share the authors’ basic orientation will find their understanding of the issues broadened and deepened. Those who begin the book disagreeing with Schlossberg and Achtemeier will discover a clear and cogent challenge to the dominant view of abortion in our culture and in many churches.” Michael Gorman, The Ecumenical Institute, St. Mary’s Seminary & University, Baltimore, MD Reprinted with permission of *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*.

God the Almighty: Volume 3 of Christian Foundations by Donald G. Bloesch, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 1995). “In recent years the Christian Church has been challenged by a wide variety of “doctrines” of God which has led to furious debate concerning how we define, conceive and speak of God, as well as how we relate to and worship God. In light of this situation and in view of the previous praise for *A Theology of Word and Spirit* and *Holy Scripture*, the recent publication of the third volume of the projected seven volume systematic theology by Donald Bloesch (professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Duquesne Theological Seminary) entitled *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* is a welcomed guide for pastors, professors, teachers, philosophers, students and lay people. It is a work that surveys and takes seriously the competing doctrines of God that are being advocated inside and outside the church, yet clearly affirms what he calls a “biblical-classical synthesis” of the doctrine of God in view of modernist and post-modernist positions (process theology, New Age spirituality, etc.). As he takes into full account the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Holy Scripture and the historical teachings of the church, Bloesch addresses the need for balance in the doctrine of God, between divine transcendence and immanence, power and wisdom, holiness and love. The reader will also find the chapter on the Trinity particularly helpful. As always, Bloesch is precise and concise in his presentation of other views as well as his critique in view of divine revelation. What comes from the book is a deeper awareness of the importance of the doctrine of God for many of the matters which concern the individual Christian and the church as it lives, worships and ministers in the name of the triune God. It is therefore a very useful guide for all Christians in these important times in the church, in the halls of the academy and in the wider world.” Dr. Bryan Burton, interim head of staff Providence Presbyterian Church, NJ.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark: The Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark(chapters 1-8) which appears in each issue of *Theology Matters* is now available in booklet form for personal and group study. To obtain a copy call or write: PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325. A donation of \$2.50 per copy is suggested.

The Great Encourager: A Study of John 14 by Marilyn Anderes, (United Methodist women’s renewal ministry, RENEW, publication) Ten lessons on Jesus Christ the Great Encourager! Encouraging facts: God has a plan! God is enough! God enables! God cares! God is faithful! God counsels! God is in control! Results: An active working faith! Copies are available from Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry by writing PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062-0249. Please include a donation to PFFM of: \$5.00 for 1 copy ; 2-10 copies, \$4.50 each; 11-20 copies \$4.25 each.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 8

(chapter 9 will follow in the next issue)

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Observe the Text to understand the author's meaning:

Read 8:1-9. This is the second feeding of the multitude. Here Jesus is in Gentile territory. What is Jesus' motivation for doing the miracle?

What is the disciples response? Do they understand who Jesus is? What should their response have been after chapter 6 when Jesus fed 5000?

Who does the serving this time? Do you see Jesus trying to teach them by doing?

Why do you think Jesus sent the multitude away?

Do you think this narrative refers back to 7:5?

Do you think the multitude ate "with impure hands" because they were unable to wash them properly?

This is a "desolate place." Do you see God providing manna in the wilderness as he did during the Exodus wilderness journey in the OT?

Read 8:10-13. Jesus briefly comes back to Dalmanutha which is in Galilee on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. Immediately the Pharisees come and begin questioning him. What do they want this time? What is Jesus' answer?

Do you see this as a question from blindness and Jesus' answer acknowledging their blindness rather than refusing to give them a sign? What signs has Jesus already given from heaven? What does this tell us about their "blindness?" Where does it come from?

Read 8:14-21. Who is rebuked in this passage? What is the disciples' problem? How are they still "blind?" What should they have said to Jesus? How do the Pharisees and disciples differ in their blindness?

What leaven is Jesus talking about? What does Jesus mean when he says "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod?"

Read 8:22-26. Jesus heals a blind man in steps. At first the man sees men as trees. Only after Jesus touches him again does the man "see everything clearly." Jesus has just told the disciples in vs 18 of the previous narrative that "having eyes, you do not see." Mark is relating the physical to spiritual.

How did the man have to cooperate in his healing? Jesus never heals people who reject him. Remember 6:5 where he could do no healing in his hometown where he was rejected. We have to come willingly to Jesus--seeking his healing.

It is interesting that this healing, in stages, comes between the Pharisees in vs 11-13 who are looking for a sign, the disciples who understand some things but not all, and then the question in the next section "who am I?"

Read 8:27-38. Notice Caesarea Philippi is still in the very northern parts of Israel. Jesus stays near the Sea of Galilee and travels back and forth across the sea to the villages around that area.

What is the first question Jesus asks the disciples?

Apparently people believed in re-incarnation because everyone knew these men were dead. Are there logical reasons why people associate these three men with Jesus? Why?

Even though many people are following Jesus, they really are not sure who he is. There are many theories which exist. Then Jesus presses the disciples further and asks who THEY say he is. What does Peter say? "The Christ" means "The Messiah or the Anointed One." What is Peter saying?

Do you see this as something of a climax of the book? The book began with "A messenger who prepares the way" and now, at last, a disciple confesses Jesus is the Christ. There must have been trumpets and fireworks in heaven that began at the sound of Peter's confession.

Just as the trumpets in heaven and earth sound, Jesus warns them to tell no one--a damper on the celebration! Again, want to speculate on why Jesus warned them?

From all that the disciples have seen and heard--the healing, the miracles, the multitudes, the teaching, the fulfillment of prophecy--what would they have expected of the Messiah? Instead in vs 31 what does Jesus say lies ahead? Why was that such an offense?

What do you think Peter expected Jesus to do to the elders and scribes and chief priests?

This is the first of three times that Jesus tells the disciples what events will take place. What do you think was one of his reasons for telling them? What is Peter's reaction in vs 32? What word in that verse clearly shows that Peter still does not understand? What do you think Peter said in his rebuke?

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Peter tried to take Jesus aside, but the disciples are listening--maybe in their heart they felt the same way. So Jesus' response is very public and as plain as his statement in vs 31-32. What is Jesus response?

The one who first confesses Christ, immediately denies him and is called Satan. Why does Christ call him Satan? Where does human wisdom, which contradicts Christ's plain word, lead us? See Is 55:8 and Mark 4:19

Don't we often respond the way Peter does? Scripture plainly tells us things about Christ but then we look around us and in our own wisdom we think know better. We humanly plan strategies and manipulate and reason in ways that contradict God's plain word. We try to make Christ into our own image of what a redeemer should be and do.

vs 34-35 Can you explain the teaching in these verses in light of Jesus and Peter's discussion just before it?

What is the reason according to Jesus that you loose your life?

vs 36-37 Can you explain these verses in light of the discussion between Peter and Jesus?

Who in the gospel of Mark are gaining the whole world, materially, and loosing their soul by denying Christ?

Can you relate this back to the seeds in chapter 4:14-19? How then does vs 38 relate to the discussion?

Interpret the Text

1. What is the text saying about who Jesus is? What is the meaning of Messiah? Is there anything outside of Jesus' power and authority? Is the cross a surprise to Jesus? Or is he a willing sacrifice for our sins?
2. What is the response of the Pharisees to Jesus?
3. What is the response of the disciples? As human beings what do we want of the Messiah?
4. Do you ever feel "ashamed" of Jesus and his word when they disagree with the political correctness of our day? Was Peter ashamed of Jesus later on?
5. Do you see a difference between "evil" and "sin"? An example of "evil" occurs in vs 33 when people call Christ's will or commands evil and the opposite of his command good. They turn God's laws and words into the opposite. On the other hand, "sin" occurs when we recognize God's laws as good but we do not do them--we miss the mark. In which case is there the possibility of repentance? Why is there no repentance when there is evil?

(Compare these notes to your thoughts after you have looked at the passages and answered the questions yourself)

Mark 8:1-9. Once again we see Christ is able to supply our physical needs abundantly with little or no resources. He can feed 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish or 4000 with 7 loaves and 1 fish or millions for 40 years with dew from heaven that he invents!

Mark 8:22-26. Throughout Mark, as people are physically healed, it is related to spiritual healing. Their spiritual blindness is related to physical blindness. Jesus' healing opens their heart-eyes to see he is the Messiah. Jesus is showing that blindness drops away slowly. We, like the disciples, see a little but it takes Jesus touching us again and again before we see clearly. Paul says in 1 Cor 13, "now we see in a mirror dimly but then [we will see] face to face."

Mark 8:27-38. An interesting aside--when the kingdom of Israel split into the northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam and the southern kingdom of Judah under Rehoboam, King Jeroboam did not want the people in the north to go south into Judah to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, so he set up two worship centers for sacrifices and installed his own priests. The sites were at Dan in the very northern part of Israel and Bethel in the southern part of Israel. Dan, the old cultic worship site of Baal worship, became Caesarea Philippi. So, at a place where the question long existed, "who is the god you are worshiping?", the question is now asked, "who do you say I am?" Jesus is theologically and geographically as far away from Jerusalem as he can get.

Calvin writes, "Jesus' kingdom would be ushered in, not in great pomp, not with great riches, not with joyful applause of the world, but by a shameful death."

Notice that Jesus is not talking about "crosses" of health or other problems unrelated to the gospel. Jesus is talking about crosses that come *because* of the Gospel. The disciples will be martyred because of their gospel witness just as many in the early church were martyred because they refused to renounce Jesus Christ.

But what are good works?

Only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with the Law of God, and for his glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on the traditions of men.

Heidelberg Catechism 4.091

News from Around the World

OVERTURES HAVE been received by the Office of General Assembly calling for the General Assembly to clear the way for the ordination of those practicing homosexuality. Other overtures call for those ordained to be faithful in marriage and celibate if not married. If the action of the GA includes a recommended change to the Constitution of the Church, a majority of the presbyteries must vote to support the amendment before it becomes effective.

UNITED METHODIST delegates to their Quadrennial General Conference held in Denver, April 16-26, voted not to change their *Book of Discipline* to permit the ordination of those who practice homosexuality. In spite of heavy pressure from homosexual advocacy groups, the delegates voted by a 60.4 percent majority not to change their *Book of Discipline*, which declares the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching."

The Methodist delegates also voted by a 74 percent majority to prohibit churchwide money from being given to any "gay caucus or group" or to be used to "promote acceptance of homosexuality."

IN SPITE OF THE REJECTION of Re-Imagining theology by the 1994, 206th Presbyterian General Assembly, Re-Imagining speakers continue to be invited to address Presbyterian audiences and share their ideology. Delores Williams, who told the Re-Imagining group that we don't need a theory of atonement, will speak at Ghost Ranch, June 10-17. Catholic Re-Imagining speaker, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz will be the featured speaker at the 1996 Peacemaking Conference, at Montreat Conference Center, August 1996.

Songs by Miriam Theresa Winter, the 1995 Re-Imagining Conference speaker, were sung at the Massanetta Springs Conference, "HerStory 1996" co-sponsored by Presbyterian Women. Winter's, "Psalm in Search of the Goddess" invoking pagan goddesses provoked a controversy when it was recited at United Methodist Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary last May in their chapel service. Winter's works are also quoted in the Presbyterian College Women's Network Packet calling for the "Christa of the New Creation" and Presbyterian Youth Curriculum.

Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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