

# Theology Matters

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## Abortion and the Sacraments

By Elizabeth Achtemeier

### A Different People

“You are the light of the world.” “You are the salt of the earth”(Matt. 5:14, 13). “. . .once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord”(Eph. 5:8). “We know that we have passed out of death into life. . .”(1 John 3:14). Throughout the New Testament, the followers of Jesus Christ who make up the Christian Church are those who live in newness of life. They are not those of the old age so characteristic of our world, with its death and destruction, its violence and its hatreds, its sins and its sorrows. Instead, Christians are those who live, at least partially, in a new age of life and justice, peace and love, goodness and joy. They are those who are no longer enslaved to the ways of this world, but are those who are given a foretaste of the freedom of the coming Kingdom of God. Though citizens of this earth, they stand with one foot in heaven, and they live not by their own powers, but by the powers of the triune Lord. We Christians are made to be different—different from the society and world around us, different in our actions, our thoughts, our world-view—different in whom we worship and what we treasure.

It has always been thus with the people of God. Previously, in the Old Testament, Israel was a nation set apart for

God’s purposes (Exod. 19:6), “not reckoning itself among the nations” (Num. 23:9), following not the ways of Egypt or Canaan, but the ways of the Lord (Levit. 18:1-5). And that unique character of the covenant people continues into the New Testament. “Do not be conformed to this world. . .” writes Paul. Be different.

If we ask where such uniqueness comes from, then it is clear it comes from our God. We gather each Sunday morning, or more frequently, to worship an incomparable God, who is like no other deity known to human beings (cf. Isa. 40:18). He is not some numinous world soul who is known through the forces of nature (cf. Deut. 6:4; 1 Kings 19:11-12), not some mystic Om who is sensed as indefinable Other, not some ingrained spirit possessed by all human beings (cf. Hos. 11:9), not the power in crystal, pyramid, guru, magic charm or amulet (cf. Isa. 8:19; Deut. 18:10-11). No. He is the Lord solely revealed by his own words and actions to his people Israel, and finally incarnated in his fullness in his Son Jesus Christ (John 10:30). “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” that Son tells us (John 14:9), and so he reveals God’s person—full

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of grace, glorious in majesty, Lord over nature and history, Power beyond all powers, King above all kings, just Judge and hater of evil, but unlimited in mercy and love. And he calls those who worship him to imitate his nature—an imitation defined by his sacrificial love in Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:1-2). Surely it is a call to every one of us Christian worshipers to be different in the world.

It is not easy to be different, however, not easy to be a unique people who are in the world but not of it. The world's ways call us to a life of comfort—at least they do so in this country. Despite the sufferings and worries that everyone goes through, our physical necessities are usually met and the daily rounds of our lives are for the most part stable. So it is tempting to live as our society lives, to adopt the goal of the accumulation of things, the relativistic definitions of right and wrong, the bogus freedom of everyone for himself, and the indifferent acceptance of every lifestyle. And if we don't, our society makes us suffer for it. The ways of God and goodness are out of fashion in our country, and we are set against the tide if we try to live a distinctly Christian life, with God as Lord over what we do. According to God's ways, humility and not self-centered pride has to become our stance. We have to depend on a Word and a Presence not found in ourselves. We lose control of our own days and destinies. Justice, mercy, love like Christ's become our goals, and we are subject to the ridiculous necessity of forgiving our enemies and loving the weak and believing that the meek shall inherit the earth. Surely no things are more difficult in twentieth century America!

Perhaps no problem presents us more clearly with the radical Christian call to be in the world but not of it than does our present society's wrestling over the issue of abortion. Our society's views, or at least those of our government, on the issue are very clear—no woman who desires an abortion should be hindered in her right to obtain it. To be sure, the majority of Americans harbor doubts about the advisability of such laws, and many want some limits put on the ability to obtain the operation. Equally, many women agonize over their decision when they consider undergoing the procedure. Yet the siren song of our society is very strong: women should be able to maintain control over their bodies and personal lives; lifestyles, education, future plans should be undisturbed and left in comfort; the weak and helpless can be sacrificed to the able; there are some who will never contribute to the material wealth of the nation or who will cost it money, and who therefore should be eliminated. Control, comfort, ability, wealth—these characterize the goals of our society and prop up the demands for abortion rights. And everyone of them contradicts the unique life asked of Christians, for Christians are called to turn over control of their lives to God in Jesus Christ and to look for all their ability and welfare from their Lord. Especially is that Christian contradiction odious to many radical feminists, for they are fighting their battles specifically for power and control, and the Christian requirement to give up those rights brings forth only their scorn.

## God's Desire That We Live

That there is final wisdom in the Christian faith comes sharply into focus, however, when we consider the ultimate contradiction that the Christian faith makes to our society. Over-against the death-dealing ways of the world and the finality of the grave for all of us, the God of the Bible sets the contradiction of life abundant and eternal. If there is one fact that characterizes the biblical narrative, it is God's desire that we live. “. . . choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19); “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezek. 18:32); “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48); “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10); “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). God wants us to live and not to die. And so finally he bursts the tombs of earth with the resurrection of his Son and renders death's darkness impotent to hold us, and gives to every one who trusts his victory the gift of eternal life. Plainly, as our Lord Jesus taught us, when we lose our life—that is, when we surrender it into the hands of God—we save it (Mark 8:35 and parallels). For our God is the God who gives life instead of the death of the world.

Right there, it seems to me, is the most radical contradiction to abortion—that God desires that all persons, whom he has created, live and not die. And surely the child in the womb is included in that number, for “it is he that made us, and we are his”(Ps. 100:3). He clothed us with skin and flesh and knit us together with bones and sinews (Job 10:11), until we emerged the wondrous, unique creatures that we are, each with our own DNA and fingerprints, our stature and our special voice. We clever human beings may fertilize human eggs in a petri dish or even clone ourselves, but God furnished the initial cells and the DNA, and apart from his creation of life, our science would be impossible. We come from God, and his purpose for all of us—born and unborn—is that we live.

The Christian faith calls us, therefore, to that life-giving surrender to our Father, in which we trust his purpose in making us and our unborn children in the first place, and then further rely on him to guide and provide for us and our child, no matter what our circumstances. Yes, children interrupt our lifestyle and comfort; they require our money; some of them may seem to have the most dismal futures; and goodness knows, we never can control them, much less ourselves, to our satisfaction. But God has willed our children in his creative purpose and we continue to trust him with our lives and theirs. That trust is the way of life and not the way of death. And it is radically different from the ways of the world.

## Baptism Into Life

Are all of these facts not those that we confess when we and our children are baptized? Baptism is initiation into the different life of the Christian faith, and it shares all of those characteristics.

First and foremost, baptism is God's act toward us—the fact that distinguishes sacraments from our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving and offerings to God. In sacrifices, we act toward God. In sacraments God acts toward us. And so baptism is God's objective pouring out of his grace upon us. It is not primarily parents' or sponsors' dedication of a person to God, and it is not simply a christening whereby a Christian name is bestowed. No. Baptism is God's act of giving of himself to us. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit. . ."(John 15:16).

And what is the nature of the gifts that God gives in baptism? He bestows on us his Holy Spirit, his active working of himself within us. Every baptismal ceremony, therefore, asks first for the gift of the Spirit. And by that Spirit, then, we are given newness of life, as if we had undergone a whole new birth (cf. John 3:1-10). We are removed from the old way of life and set into the new, and we receive such a gift because the Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Christ.

"Do you not know," writes Paul, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4). In short, for every baptized Christian, the old life of the old age is gone. The ways of the world and our participation in them have been forgiven, and by the death and resurrection of our Lord, we have been given a new start in the new age of God's coming kingdom. "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come"(2 Cor. 5:17). As Karl Barth once remarked, "Life doesn't begin with birth; it begins with baptism."And Christians have passed, though still imperfectly, in their baptisms, into that new world that is different from our old.

Moreover, by the Spirit given in baptism we Christians are given the risen Christ's power to live the radically new life. Certainly, weighed down by the temptations and turmoils of our society's old ways, we by ourselves have neither the desire nor the power to live differently. But because we have been baptized by the Father into Christ Jesus by the Spirit, it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives and works in us (cf. Gal. 2:20). And he has triumphed over all of the old world's evil ways. The baptized have the power, in Christ alone, to live in newness of life.

### **Baptism as Redemption and Adoption**

The New Testament states that fact in the figure of redemption. To be "redeemed" in the Bible is to be bought back from slavery (cf. Levit. 25:47-52). And we have been bought back from our slavery to sin and death by the "redemption which is in Christ Jesus"(Rom. 3:24). "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us"(Eph. 1:7). By Christ's death and his resurrection, God "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved

Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin"(Col. 1:13-14). The old age has been overcome and the new inaugurated, and we are participants in it.

For that reason, baptism further signifies, as an outward visible act, the fact that the baptized person now belongs to God. There is no thought in baptism that we are our own person, responsible only to ourselves and managing our own lives, as our society seems to think. No. The baptized person belongs to God, as his child (cf. John 1:12). He or she has been adopted into God's family. He or she has been set apart by the family name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He or she can now call God "Father" in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

In baptism, God now reclaims the child whom he created in the beginning, but who wandered away in sin or, in the case of an infant, who was born into a sinful world (cf. Ps. 51:5), and now that child belongs to God and to no other. And nothing now can snatch that child away from God's hand. The evil principalities and powers of the world no longer hold the baptized captive. Indeed, we are assured by the Apostle Paul that nothing now can separate the baptized from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38).

To be sure, we baptized Christians continue sometimes to forget our Father and to fall often into sin, wandering away like some prodigals, with all the inheritance of God's promises in our pockets (cf. Gal. 4:7). But the Father waits eagerly each day for our return, and welcomes us always into his household, because he is rich in mercy toward his children whom he has adopted as his own.

### **The Challenge of Baptism**

Given these facts about baptism, the question arises, then, why it is that the church continues to sanction those ways of the old age, including abortion, that belong to the world with its darkness. Obviously no child, born or unborn, is ours to do with what we like. The child belongs to God; we affirm that unconditionally in baptism. And just as obviously, we no longer need be captive to the ways of the old age. Our sins and deaths are overcome, and Christ's Spirit is poured out upon us. In faith, we therefore have the power to live in newness of life, to trust the Father, even in a "problem pregnancy," and to walk in the ways of his new age of the kingdom. Why then do we persist in living as if we have never been redeemed, slaughtering our unborn children and thinking that we have to provide for ourselves and them, all on our own? Christ died and rose again—those events have taken place. Why do we continue to ignore their benefits?

There is more to consider, however. We are not just baptized as individuals, but are anointed with water and the Spirit into a community—into the one universal Christian Church. We thereby are given a history—a history that was prepared amidst a bunch of semitic slaves in ancient Egypt, that was dreamed of by prophets in places like Anathoth and Moresheth and Babylon, and that took shape among a little group of men and women gathered together for prayer in an upper room in Jerusalem. That history has spanned

twenty centuries since biblical times and has included persons from every race and nation. And that history will continue long after we have made our little contributions to it. So you and I now have a sacred past and a sacred future in the purposes of God, and it is God's intention that we incorporate into that future history every child who comes forth from the womb. "For the promise (of forgiveness and baptism) is to you and to your children and to all that are far off"(Acts 2:39). There is no thought that we should erase the future life of any child created to be incorporated into God's history.

More than that, far from being on our own, we are participants in a confessing company of saints and prophets, wise men and shepherds, psalmists and historians, apostles and disciples, monks and nuns, evangelists and servants, and a whole motley crew of sinners across the earth, who are just like ourselves. All have been baptized into Christ Jesus. And we are bidden by our Lord to draw all persons whom he has made into that company (Matt. 28:20).

The result is that we take responsibility for one another in the community of the church. Whenever a person is baptized, not only do the parents or sponsors take vows, but the present congregation takes them also. And they promise to nurture and to love one another in the power of Christ's Spirit, to help each other grow in sanctification and to live lives of example to one another. Does that not say something to us baptized Christians about our ministry toward those with "problem pregnancies"—to the unwed mother, the poor woman struggling with too many children, the ashamed, the fearful, and yes, the indifferent, who plans easily to be rid of her pregnancy? Does it not say something to us about the teaching we give in the church concerning sex and marriage? And does it not equally lay upon us baptized souls the responsibility for every child in the womb and out? As Paul constantly reminds the Corinthians, we need to live up to our baptisms! Indeed, perhaps we need to rethink our entire attitudes toward abortion and the ways of our society's life in the old age. For we are not of the way of darkness, but of the way of light in Christ Jesus. And he is our Lord who wills life for all and not death. Life—abundant, eternal—that must be the goal of Christ's church.

## **The Lord's Supper**

Had we only all of these facts of our baptisms to go on, we might feel bereft, like those first disciples who stood gazing bewilderedly into heaven when the risen Christ was taken up in his ascension (Acts 1:9-10). Then we would have only the memory of what God had done to us in the past in our baptisms to fortify our endeavors. It is hard to live the life of the new age of the kingdom on the strength of memory alone. But Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them desolate, but come again to them (John 14:18), and it is in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that his promise is time and again fulfilled. The Scriptures tell us that Christ is with us always to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). But the eucharistic sacrament forms the heart of that communion.

At the table of the Lord's Supper, we commune with Christ. His is a "real presence" with us, and by the symbols of the bread and the wine, we participate in his very being. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation—a communion, a sharing—in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ"(1 Cor. 10:16)? "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them"(John 6:56). Through the Supper, we live in Christ and Christ lives in us, and we are lent his risen, newness of life.

All the gifts of baptism are included in that gift—our forgiveness, our redemption from sin and death, our receipt of Christ's Spirit, our resurrection into new life, our adoption into the family of God from whose hand we cannot be loosed, our participation in the history of God's ongoing universal purpose, our future of eternal life. All those acts wrought by God in the past are not just remembered, but are rendered anew in the present, as God in Christ works in us here and now through the sacrament. It is no wonder that the Lord's Supper is called "the feast of God for the people of God," for our past baptisms into the church are rendered no longer past but present.

It is in the Supper, therefore, that we once again, in repentance and faith, vow to live the new life in Christ and not the old life of our sinful world. It is in the Supper that we renew our covenant with our Lord, for from its beginning, the Lord's Supper has been a covenant meal. Its forerunner in the Bible is that covenant meal of Moses and the elders of Israel, eating and drinking with God on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:9-11). Its historical precedent is Christ's last supper with his disciples before he goes out to be crucified (Mark 14:1-15 and parallels). But noteworthy from the beginning is the fact that those who eat and drink with God make the covenant promise, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do"(Exod. 19:8; 24:7). Thus, the classic introduction to the Lord's Supper in the church has been the vow on the part of the people to walk in newness of life.

Ye who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to live a new life following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God. (The Book of Common Worship, 1946).

The church used to have a preparatory service of repentance in which the congregation prepared its hearts and minds to receive that invitation and to walk anew in God's ways. Now the custom is sometimes to read the Ten Commandments at the beginning of the communion service itself, in order that the people may examine their hearts. Then the service proceeds with the confession of sin. But whatever the approach, our vow in the covenant service of communion is to turn and to live the new life in Christ. We all come as sinners to the celebration of the Lord's Supper—and no baptized sinner need feel that he or she is unworthy, not even those who have participated in some way in the abortive murder of an unborn child. With

God is plenteous mercy. But the Supper stands as the guard, after baptism, to persistence in sinful backsliding, and it offers to all the opportunity of living the new life in Christ, because it incorporates us into him.

### Communion with Neighbor and Saint

We not only commune with Christ in the Lord's Supper, however. We also commune with one another, and there once again, as at our baptisms, we take on the responsibility for one another's lives. How can I possibly be at one with my neighbor if I ignore her need in her problem pregnancy? If she is unwed, I cannot condemn her. If she is alone, I cannot fail to give her friendship and support. If she is poor, I cannot fail to supply her need. The persons surrounding me in the pews at the Supper have multiple anxieties and troubles—sometimes guilts, sometimes ignorance, sometimes weaknesses—as do I. All of us have failed to live up to our baptisms. But in the forgiveness, the renewal, the vitality, the love of Christ, we are bound together as one in the Supper, and that is the new energy that sets the people to minister to one another. Just what is your church doing to help those with difficult and problem pregnancies? What is it doing to guide young people to use their sexuality according to the ways of God? What is it doing to welcome the new child, born to a mother in impoverished or unpromising circumstances? Anything at all? For years, most congregations have closed our minds to these questions and said, "Those are not our problems." But the Lord's Supper makes us all one, and as Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together"(1 Cor. 12:26).

At the table of the Lord, we not only commune with those present, however. We also commune with all that great company of faithful who have gone before us in the "communion of the saints." We are bound together with Abraham and Moses, Isaiah and Peter, Mary Magdalene and Mother Teresa, indeed, with every faithful soul who has confessed the lordship of Jesus Christ and passed on to Christ's eternal life. And yes, we commune with our deceased, Christian loved ones—with our parents who have died, and the friends we have buried, and all those whom we have so cherished. At the table of the Lord, we commune with the mothers who did not abort us, but who were willing to bring us forth to life. And we commune with the fathers who paid the bills and played with us and guided our years, and who loved us so very much. That whole marvelous company of life—all the motley, mixed, milling multitude of it—eats and drinks with us at Christ's table, and we are one with them in faith and in the love of Jesus our Lord.

That vast company brings with it to the table their witness from the past—Martin Luther's words: ". . . those who have no regard for pregnant women and who do not spare the tender fruit are murderers and infanticides."<sup>1</sup> And there is the witness of Calvin:

If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his most

secure place of refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy the unborn in the womb before it comes to light.<sup>2</sup>

And those are only a small sample of the words against abortion that come to us from that great cloud of witnesses from the past that commune with us at the Supper. Can we eat and drink with them in integrity since the passing of *Roe v. Wade* or since the government approval of partial birth abortion? Can our congregation? Surely our participation in the body and blood of Jesus Christ demands a new life that does not follow the ways of the old!

### Thanksgiving and Future Kingdom

The Lord's Supper is called the eucharist, however, and that means "thanksgiving," stemming from the Greek *eucharisto*, "to give thanks." And out of all of our heartfelt penitence for our sin in the past and for our easy acceptance of the old ways of our world, there emerges from the celebration of the Lord's Supper finally good news. For the Supper is our Lord's gracious invitation made possible to live a new and abundant life. There at his table he mercifully forgives us once again. Eating and drinking with him he wipes clean the past, and pours into our bodies and souls his risen life, full of vitality that never dies and love that never ends. By his Spirit we are once again born anew and made whole. By his Spirit we can think and do what is good. By his Spirit, he pours out upon us those clean, refreshing, bubbling waters that well up to eternal life (John 4:14) and that allow us, indeed, to celebrate life, marvelous life!

Our Lord tells us at the last supper with his disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you. . . ." (Matt. 22:15). Our Lord eagerly desires that we live! And later he adds, "I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). The Lord's Supper looks toward the future, not the future of this darkened and sin-pocked world with its ways leading to death, but to the future of the Kingdom of God when all things have been made new and all things in heaven and earth have been united in one great communion of life (Eph. 1:10). Then, the Scriptures tell us, abortion and its sufferings, evil and its ways, will have been done away for good. God himself will be with us, and we shall be his people. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying nor pain any more, for the former things will have passed away (Rev. 21:3-4). The Creator and Giver of all life, and his risen Son will be the victors. And the God of life will have banished this world's death forever!

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *What Luther Says: An Anthology*. Compiled by Ewald M. Plass. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, Vol. 2, No. 2826, p.905.

<sup>2</sup> *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950, pp. 414-2.

# Changing the Vision of Heaven: Abortion and Relative Truth

By Terry Schlossberg

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> The shifting standards produce increasingly complex problems, producing a downward spiral of increasingly shifting standards.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

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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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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 meaning . . . . We 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

### 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.

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)<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> “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.<sup>9</sup>

## 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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).<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. . .<sup>13</sup>

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.

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,”<sup>14</sup> 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.

### **Truth and Caring**

In declaring that the church has “neither the wisdom nor the authority” to address the “many complicated and insolvable circumstances”<sup>15</sup> 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.

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.

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.

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

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

<sup>3</sup>“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.

<sup>4</sup>“...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)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>10</sup>*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.

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Louisville, KY 40202. References are to statements on pages 8, 10.

<sup>11</sup>“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.”

<sup>12</sup>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. . . .”

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<sup>13</sup>“Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life,” *Pediatrics*, July 1983.

<sup>14</sup>*Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, p. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup>*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.

# The Mandatory Presbyterian Church (USA) Health Plan Pays for Abortions

By Terry Schlossberg

Not everybody believes that every abortion is morally wrong. But nearly everybody believes that some abortions are morally wrong. Current PC(USA) General Assembly policy (1992) says that there are some instances in which abortion is clearly morally wrong. For example, it says that “abortion should not be used as a method of birth control,” or “for gender selection only,” or “solely to obtain fetal parts for transplantation.”

The policy also states the “five most common viewpoints” among Presbyterians about when a human life begins. Four of the five viewpoints hold that a human life begins at some point prior to birth (according to the Presbyterian Panel findings, roughly a third of us hold that a human life begins at conception). The policy says that “taking human life is sin.” According to current church policy, then, a rather large majority of us Presbyterians hold views about the beginning of life that render abortion a sin—at least at some point in the developmental process before birth.

General Assembly policy is sensitive about the violation of consciences of Presbyterians on abortion. It instructs “the General Assembly Council and the presbyteries to affirm procedures by which particular churches may be assured that their mission funds will not be used in violation of conscience on this issue.”

The Board of Pensions’ medical benefits plan abortion coverage is an obvious area of concern for the violation of conscience. Here’s why. The plan is based on the assumption that no abortion is morally wrong. The plan covers any abortion, for any reason, at any time during pregnancy. The plan is mandatory for all installed pastors. The dues are paid by each local congregation from the tithes and offerings of church members.

No General Assembly ever mandated abortion coverage. But the 1992 General Assembly policy did mandate relief of conscience. In 1998 the Board of Pensions devised a procedure for providing “relief of conscience” for churches. In March

of 1999 the board sent a letter to each church explaining that the measure allows churches to choose to provide medical care for adopted newborns as an alternative to abortion.

The Board of Pensions divides the dues stream between those employing organizations (churches) and subscribers (pastors and church employees) who have not sought relief of conscience and those who have been certified by their presbytery of jurisdiction to be relief of conscience employing organizations. All medical claims for abortion procedures and HMO capitation fees shall be paid from the non-relief of conscience dues stream. A dollar amount equal to the cost of abortion claims from the prior year will be set aside from the relief of conscience dues stream and placed in an account to assist in the medical claims of adopted newborn dependents. After payment of those claims and fees, the two dues streams will be joined and all other medical claims and costs will be paid from the merged dues streams.

To obtain “relief of conscience” sessions must submit a written request to their presbytery. It is the presbytery that grants the relief and notifies the Board of Pensions. The request honors the consciences of those in a congregation who do not believe it is moral for their tithes and offerings to be used to pay for abortions. Requesting relief does not change the dollar amount of a congregation’s dues for the medical plan and does not change the plan’s coverage. Abortion coverage continues to be provided for all plan members. For further information, contact PPL at 703-569-9474 or the Board of Pensions at 800-773-7752.

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## The Confessions

### A Study of the Book of Confessions Study 9 - The Confessing Church as a Teaching Church

by Rev. Theresa Ip Froehlich

Before the Israelites crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land, Moses had taught them all the commands, decrees and laws that they and all their future generations were to obey after they began to live in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 6:1-3).

Under Joshua’s leadership, the Israelites crossed the Jordan, conquered and took possession of the land God had promised to give them. “The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. . . . After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the god of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them” (Judges 2:7-12).

Moses envisioned his teachings to be obeyed not only by his contemporary Israelites but also to be passed on from one generation to the next. This intergenerational link is similar to the links of a long chain that guarantees the continuity and perpetuity of the faith. To Moses’ chagrin however, the Israelites who were Moses’ and Joshua’s contemporaries failed to pass on the teachings to the next generation. The emerging generation abandoned the LORD and worshiped other gods. This created a crisis of faith, a situation in which the Israelites professed to be the LORD’s covenant people but practiced foreign religions.

### Crisis of Faith

This crisis situation of Israel is more similar to the crisis of faith in the Presbyterian Church than we Presbyterians want to admit. This crisis of faith is rooted in the theological confusion of our time (theological crisis), watered by a long-standing educational oversight (educational crisis), and is now being harvested as an identity compromise (identity crisis).

#### \* Theological Crisis

As the millennium draws to a close, many professing Christians in the Presbyterian communion take pride in embracing beliefs that are contradictions of and departures from scriptural teachings. This creates a kind of theological tribalism which, when lauded and encouraged by denominational leaders, results in theological confusion.

#### \* Educational Crisis

Biblical literacy is perhaps the most daunting task the church must face in the new millennium. It was not by accident that each time the Israelites had drifted away from the LORD and later returned, their leaders would invariably teach the law of God (e.g. Nehemiah 7-8).

#### \* Identity Crisis

The body of beliefs contained in the *Book of Confessions* is what describes and defines us as Christians in general, and as Reformed Christians in particular. In the creeds, catechisms and confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes and what it resolves to do.<sup>1</sup> When Presbyterians attempt to delete some of the confessional teachings or to throw the *Book of Confessions* out the window altogether, we lose our identity, our *raison d’etre*.

All these three crises are part and parcel of the same problem: somewhere along the way one generation failed to teach the next. It is time to dust off the *Book of Confessions* and begin fulfilling the mandate of the Confessing Church as a Teaching Church.

### Time For A Matching Game

In the early church the creeds were used as the litmus test for authentic faith in Jesus Christ. A candidate for baptism had to recite a compendium of fundamental facts or truths of faith as evidence of his or her faith before being baptized and accepted as a member of the church. The beliefs embraced by the candidate had to match the standard, apostolic, scriptural teachings adopted by the early communion of the saints.

In order to recover our theological identity, each congregation must have some mechanism whereby it can teach and test their candidates for baptism and membership. Each congregation must also design a process to fully “catechize” (teach) those who have been baptized as infants and later become ready to participate as young adults in the life of the church.

By designing and using such a process, each congregation participates in a kind of matching game, ensuring that the beliefs of their members match the beliefs of the Presbyterian Church.

### Reordering Priorities

Aside from teaching our adults and children in the congregations, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must also reorder its priorities in order to become an effective instrument for the Good News of Jesus Christ.

\* Redefine diversity as a value  
“Diversity” or “variety” of beliefs, i.e. theological diversity, has been elevated to a doctrinal status in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). While cultural and racial/ethnic diversity should be valued as a way to enrich the life of our church, theological diversity should not be allowed to govern or to hold the church hostage to unscriptural ideas about Jesus Christ.

\* Reassign a high priority to theological unity  
Unity of the body of Christ is first and foremost theological unity.<sup>2</sup> Unless and until a reasonable degree

of theological unity is achieved, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will suffer from an identity crisis and will continue to be ineffective in its mission.

\* Rededicate ourselves to the teaching of doctrine  
One retired pastor who had had a fruitful ministry said, “If I could start all over again, I would use my pulpit as a teaching desk.” We must teach our people doctrine because the church of Jesus Christ is charged with the mandate to impart and preserve sound doctrine (1 Timothy 1:10; 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9-10; 2:1; also see Study 3 of this series).

\* Rediscover the Confessions as a teaching tool  
*The Book of Confessions*, along with the new catechism “Belonging to Christ” passed by the 210th General Assembly in 1998, provides a marvelous tool for our matching game. At the congregational level, the confessions can be used in a wide variety of ways: preaching from the pulpit, officers training, church-based theological education for adults, new members training, and teaching baptized children who are ready to receive communion.

### Conclusion

In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples two pivotal questions: “Who do people say the Son of Man is” and “Who do you say I am” (Matthew 16:13-20). Against the background of multiculturalism and against the backdrop of varied religious traditions, the Lord Jesus Christ called on his twelve apostles to express their theological convictions about his Messiahship and to declare their personal and exclusive loyalty to him. The church of Jesus Christ has the scriptural mandate of making disciples of Christ and teaching them to obey Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). This mandate to teach includes no less than imparting the sound doctrine in answer to the question, “Who do you say I am”.

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Order* G-2.0100

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Confessions*, Second Helvetic 5.141

**This study in its entirety is now available in booklet form. If you would like to request copies, contact us at PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325, email (scyre@swva.net).**

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**Please also consider sending us the names and addresses of people you think should be on the mailing list to receive *Theology Matters*.**

## News From Around the World

THIS YEAR'S GENERAL ASSEMBLY will again have before it overtures calling for changes in Book of Order paragraph G-6.0106b that deals with sexuality. There will also be overtures that call for prohibiting the use of General Assembly funds to support ministries to those in sexual confusion.

THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE established by Moderator Oldenburg to analyze the work of the National Network of Presbyterian College Women, has recommended to the General Assembly full funding and additional staffing for the Network. Oldenburg as well as Vice-Moderator Jim Mead were on the special committee.

THE SELECTION COMMITTEE for the Women of Faith award, which is presented at a breakfast during the Assembly, selected lesbian activist Janie Spahr, Re-Imagining leader Letty Russell, and Jane Dempsey Douglass to receive the award. The selection committee includes representatives from The National Network of Presbyterian College Women, Presbyterian Women, The

Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, the National Association of Presbyterian Clergywomen, and The Association of Presbyterian Church Educators.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY WILL RESPOND to overture 99-24 from Western New York presbytery mandating the use of feminine names for God in worship. The proposed change to the Book of Order, W-1.2006b, if approved by the GA and approved by a majority of the presbyteries would read, "In its worship the church shall use language about God which is intentionally as diverse and varied as the Bible and our theological traditions. The church is committed to using language in such a way that all members of the community of faith may recognize themselves to be included, addressed, and equally cherished before God. . . ." The overture includes in the "where as" section examples of feminine images such as "Mother, Bakerwoman, Mother Bear, Mother Eagle, Mother Hen, Midwife." The overture omits references to Sophia but one could assume that it would be included in the worship mandate.

### 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). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and 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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