

Theology Matters

Addressed by The Word: Theology, Ethics and Abortion

by Mark R. Patterson

“Truth is in Order to Goodness...”

Theology and ethics are inextricably bound. Our *a priori* perspectives, interpretive and deductive labors, and ultimate conclusions in either theology or ethics profoundly determine the shape of the other. This is not surprising to Presbyterians who have constitutionally maintained the principle that “truth is in order to goodness,” that is, our understanding of truth or reality is necessarily bound to a certain and appropriate response.

But this simple premise is not easily maintained and history has repeatedly shown that this fact can be perverted by either of two errors. The first lies in separating a specific behavior or ethic from theology, leaving it isolated and unfettered from any basis while maintaining its authority. The other, while affirming in some degree or another a theological premise nevertheless denies, ignores, or abbreviates any corresponding ethical response. While nearly opposite courses are followed in each of these responses, the effect is the same: theology and ethics are rent and held in isolation from one another. But this is neither Christian nor Reformed. Properly done

theology, lest it become mere noetic insight, expects and even demands a response that is correspondingly appropriate, while properly done ethics must be founded upon truth lest it be mere subjective opinion or cultural whim.

Clearly the Presbyterian Church (USA) has struggled in recent years—some would say decades—with both theology and ethics. Recent Christological controversies have combined with the longstanding debates on sexuality to suggest we are certain of neither our theological basis for our ethics nor our ethical response to our theology. That uncertainties, disagreements, and trauma exist is undeniable. More difficult to grasp or explain is why or how this may be so.

It is the aim of this brief study to provide some reflection upon this question by looking specifically at the issue of abortion. While other ethical issues could be addressed, abortion provides the clearest approach to the questions at hand for a variety of reasons. First, it is huge. To deal with the issues, theology, and ethics of abortion is to

Mark R. Patterson is the Senior Pastor of Community Presbyterian Church in Ventura CA. He has an M.Div from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology and History of Doctrine from King's College, London.

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already, initially, have dealt with a broad array of other issues. This is not as easily said of the (more pervasive) debates on sexuality and ordination standards. Second, our understanding of theology and its corresponding ethic is perhaps more clearly seen in abortion than other areas that may be addressed. Third, as both a cultural and ecclesial issue, abortion allows us to appraise the larger worldview and its corresponding values, their nature and validity, and most importantly, their influence upon the church. And finally, abortion is a greater moral issue than any other the church is facing. If the premises held by pro-life movements are correct, then the loss of literally millions of infants through human-induced miscarriage (or worse) remains a vastly more important and pressing issue than any other the church is currently facing or fighting over. Indeed, issues of sexuality and ordination standards—as important as these are—pale before the ethical and theological issues raised by abortion.¹

The Elephant in the Living Room—Abortion in the PC (USA)

To say that the abortion debate is the elephant in the living room of the PCUSA is neither hyperbole nor mere rhetorical device. Clearly we face here issues that touch upon deep questions regarding our understanding of individual rights and freedoms, sexuality, parenting, sickness and health, and the role of the church in caring for the lost, hurting, helpless, and broken. Decisions made regarding abortion do not remain in isolation but influence related issues of euthanasia, assisted suicide, cloning, and stem cell and fetal tissue research. And, appropriately, the debate is not isolated to ethics. Theology too is shaped and expressed in our questions, methods, and decisions made regarding abortion. Our ethic on abortion shapes such doctrines as the sovereignty of God, His providence, will, and very involvement in the human order, and our understanding of creation, life and stewardship. Christology falls under the shadow of the abortion debate and becomes inseparable from it as the incarnation is understood as occurring not in the adult Jesus (adoptionist heresy) or even the infant born of Mary but at the conception itself. Issues, questions, and decisions made on abortion touch and shape the faith and practice of the church and its ethic raised in response to the gospel is profoundly influenced by issues raised with the abortion question.

Yet for all its importance and gravity, for all the implications it bears in both ethics and theology, abortion has, in the Presbyterian Church (USA) been kept from the center ring of discussion. In recent years issues around the sanctity of life have been eclipsed by the seemingly endless debates on human sexuality and ordination standards. But, the church (and the larger culture) has, for additional reasons, avoided significant or intentional discussion of abortion. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the issue is largely perceived as too painful, too complex, and too controversial to enter with any hope of

fruitful gain. From arguments and experiences to policies and opinions, the abortion question is perceived as too vast, opaque, and too odious to produce any edifying or definitive conclusion. Consequently the entire topic is shunned, hushed, and avoided.

Secondly, fresh debate is restricted too by the power of precedence. What can be said that has not already been stated? With little hope then of finding any new or helpful, let alone ultimate, answers to the debate, many remain content to allow past decisions—from the Supreme Court or the General Assembly studies—to provide the basis of policy, perspective, and ethics. Such guidance is, in the absence of anything better, made definitive and authoritative. The debate then is cognized as answered, if not perfectly, then at least as well as can be expected. And again, the subject is relegated to the margins, an unwanted and unneeded debate and thus little more than a troublesome *cul-de-sac* in the life and witness of the church.

Finally, the issue is held to be not only complex and essentially resolved, for many, it is functionally irrelevant. In spite of the number of problem pregnancies and the literally millions of aborted children, the issue remains an academic and thus non-essential debate for most. This, combined with the two areas above renders it easy and often desirous for individual believers, congregations, and whole denominations to keep this divisive subject at arm's length.

The perceived complexity, opacity, and irrelevancy of the debate are increased by the silence of the New Testament on the subject. Obviously, the Bible makes no *explicit* reference to abortion² and this silence, combined with the church's increasing proclivity toward pragmatic-romantic reasoning, has become the dominant force in determining the values, goals, and ethics of the issue. Arguments for (and often, even against) abortion rights are derived more from the cultural milieu than Reformed theology and its corresponding ethic. This methodology is, of course, not unexpected when done by the larger culture in a post Christian age. That the church has followed this course and allowed its position and understanding of abortion to be primarily shaped by cultural values, secular rationalism, short term pragmatism, and romantic subjectivism is surprising, and in the end both unhelpful and unfaithful.

There are two pressing reasons why abortion must be courageously, openly, and seriously discussed by and within the Presbyterian Church (USA). The first lies in the fact that more than a decade has passed since the church last initiated a serious study of the subject of abortion. Consequently, the last (and therefore definitive) study mandated by the 1988 General Assembly and received by the 1992 General Assembly is seriously outdated. At the time the report was written personal computers used the DOS operating system, Microsoft's Windows was in its infancy, and the internet was only just

being created.³ More to the point, changes in medical technology—unheard of in 1987-92, have raised complex questions the 1992 report did not and could not address. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has not adequately studied or seriously addressed such issues as stem cell or fetal tissue research, genetic engineering, cloning, partial birth and post-viability abortions,⁴ and such drugs as “the morning after pill,” or RU-486. Additionally, the last ten years have brought profound advancements in neo-natal care, dramatically extending the viability of prematurely born infants.⁵ Such details are of extreme relevance for the abortion debate but are yet to receive any serious study by the Presbyterian Church (USA). Finally, the church has never addressed the effects of abortion on women’s health, though recent studies indicate abortion is more dangerous and harmful than previously understood.⁶ In short, the Presbyterian Church’s latest study is not only outdated, it remains completely silent on the labyrinth of issues raised over the last decade.

While the obsolescence and inadequacies of the 1992 report are themselves sufficient cause to warrant a new study, it is not the primary reason one should be done. A second, and for the church, more pressing issue is at stake: the Presbyterian Church (USA) has yet to discuss, debate, or wrestle with the issue of abortion and its constituent details from a *primarily* theological perspective. Certainly Scripture, theological reflection, and prayerful deliberations have played a role in the previous studies. But this does not change the fact that the past two studies—1983 and 1992—are culturally, sociologically, and pragmatically, not theologically controlled. In other words, the initial and governing frame of reference is not the Scripture, theology, and tradition of the church but personal needs, social implications, and cultural values.⁷ And in the end, the only unique word the church has to furnish is the biblical-theological one. It is this word alone that must determine the church’s belief and practice and it is uniquely this word the church has to provide to the larger debate, whether it is heard or not. But it is this word the PC (USA) has failed to provide, restating instead the values and perspectives of the culture which then are sanctified and allowed to define the debate.

This brings us back to my initial points. If ethics are the appropriate response to a foundational and determining belief, what does our current approach on abortion reveal of our actual belief and theology? And, conversely, does what we *say* we believe, actually and faithfully correspond to an appropriate ethic of abortion? To put it most clearly and simply, how exactly are we approaching these debates and in what sense are they faithful to our theology and thus right or wrong?

Off to a Bad Start...

We have been unable to adequately or helpfully address the issue of abortion (and homosexuality) because of our

faulty starting point. The dominant worldview of contemporary, twenty-first century western culture is the result of a tectonic joining of two vast and different intellectual forces. The first is Enlightenment⁸ modernity, manifesting in pragmatic rationalism and the second is post-modernity manifesting in romantic subjectivism. These combine to provide a specific worldview or frame of reference from which our debates are raised, analyzed, and answered. Because a worldview or frame of reference is both universal and tacit it remains uncritically held and essentially ignored. This subtlety, rather than diminishing its influence, actually increases its leverage upon the debate and its conclusions. The overwhelming scope and power of the worldview engendered by these combined perspectives has influenced nearly every theological-ethical debate within the Presbyterian Church (USA). Enlightenment rational pragmatism and postmodern romantic subjectivism have combined to shape the questions we raise, the answers we seek, and the conclusions we reach. Thus, like the illustration above—though far more complex—an uncritically and broadly held worldview has determined a perspective that is then affirmed or accurately described in its conclusions. So how then do these intellectual forces actually work to shape our theological and ethical debates?

Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern subjectivism have perhaps had their greatest influence on our understanding of doctrine of revelation⁹ and epistemology¹⁰. How do we know something to be real and true? Where does knowledge come from and what makes it valid? Does or should the Christian view of knowledge differ from that of the surrounding culture? The relevancy of such questions is both obvious and foundational. When we discuss either theology or ethics in general or a specific point such as abortion, we must ascertain the source, validity, and authority of our knowledge. In any ethical or theological debate, opinions, details, “facts” and claims of truth may abound. But in what sense can any of these be said to be true, valid, and authoritative? As Christians the issue must go even deeper, for perspectives and conclusions must have more than an empirical or utilitarian validity. Looming above such issues is the far greater issue of God’s will on the matter. Does he care about abortion and the decisions we make regarding it? Does he reveal his will and if so, how can it be known? All of these epistemic questions have been radically altered by the overwhelming perspectives of Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern subjectivism which have combined to govern and control our debates and the decisions they reach.

The concept of revelation is essentially a modern concern, becoming decisive only in the wake of critical questions raised by the Enlightenment, as the knowledge of God became problematic and no longer assumed. The authority of reason had not only supplanted the Bible but had challenged its inspiration and verity. Questions once unknown and unthinkable swirled increasingly through

the intellectual currents of the day, becoming, through the cultural worldview, both respectable and relevant while decisively affecting the traditional understanding of the Christian faith and its articulation. Revelation itself became a dubious concept as a Newtonian and mechanistic worldview was all but universally assumed, making God a transcendent watchmaker, uninvolved and unneeded in a self-governing, self-sufficient world of self-evident truths.

Even more, the fact that questions of the nature, means, and actuality of revelation had become, for the church, a vital concern suggests that theology no longer derived its life from the reality of revelation. God, for the modern world, was no longer the objective basis of faith from which theological and ethical deductions were made, but had become, instead, the problematic object of human understanding. Inquiry and interpretation of God's nature and acts fell before the epistemic questions of how and how much any of this could be known. Tacitly felt or explicitly stated, theologians and biblical scholars were forced to do their work under the pressure of a critical scrutiny which not only challenged the central tenets of the Christian faith but the very concepts of revelation and Scriptural authority upon which they were based. Under the pressure of the Enlightenment worldview theological labors turned from dogmatics¹¹ deduced from revelation to justifying the validity and place of revelation itself.

Ethics were consequently isolated from theology and re-forged to show their inherent rationality. Traditional ethics derived from revelation were seen as insufficiently grounded to bear any universal authority. Only those which demonstrated to reasonable criticism a broad or universal validity were maintained while those failing to meet this standard were dropped, ignored or denied. Ethics, in short, became defined not by God's will revealed to His people, but by what made sense and what worked.

This had a profound—though again largely tacit—effect upon the church, ironically touching both its left and right wings. Those within the liberal side of the church became increasingly skeptical of many traditionally held positions and their epistemic basis. Many doctrines, under the light of critical reason, came to be regarded as merely irrational superstition, incongruous and implausible to a modern illumined age. Ethics too were sardonically regarded as archaic legalisms or imperialistic attempts at control. Ironically those on the right, ensconced within the same worldview, rose to defend traditional beliefs and ethics from the very underlying assumptions as their opponents. Modernity had brought a perspective conservatives decried and condemned for its incredulity, even as it tacitly determined their own worldview and ultimately gave primary shape to their methodology and critical response. Liberals, turning from revelation and using the assumptions and tools of modernity sought a new and higher way. Conservatives, rising to the challenges presented by modernist expectations also turned from

revelation, endeavoring to demonstrate the inherent rationality of traditionally held beliefs and values. Largely unbeknownst to either side, faith and revelation had ceased to bear any epistemic value, being replaced by a rationalism that decreed the true and valid was determined by reason and empirical validation alone.

But our worldview is more than merely modern. A second intellectual force, postmodern romantic subjectivism, has combined with Enlightenment rationalism to form the governing perspective of our age. Because postmodernism is intrinsically a theory about language and the interpretation of texts, it has profoundly shaped the church's understanding of the Bible. The postmodern perspective contends that the traditional way of reading a text makes a number of misleading and faulty assumptions about the very nature of the text itself which leads to misinterpretation. Traditionally, a reader would approach a text assuming its language bore an inherent perspicuity and was thus capable of expressing the ideas intended by its author, across time and culture, without its inherent meaning being changed. The source of meaning lay in authorial intent and language could be depended upon to convey this accurately if not always clearly.

Postmodernism approaches the written texts from a nearly opposite direction, challenging three essential premises of traditional interpretation: that language is fixed and unchanging, that a text has an invariable or unified meaning, and that the author's intended meaning can be known (or matters). The meaning of a particular text has become, within the postmodern hermeneutic, something fluid and bound not to language or authorial intent but interpretive perspective. Here the text has little or no inherent gist and the author no longer speaks. Meaning instead lies within the interpreter who brings to the texts and creates from the texts the only valid meaning. A text then bears not one meaning but potentially as many interpretations as there are interpreters, and all legitimate.

Our worldview at the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first century is an amalgamation of the Enlightenment-modern and postmodern understandings. The perspectives these forces engender are broad, diverse, subtle, and even paradoxical. Yet there can be no question that they exist and have exercised profound influence upon every ethical and theological matter faced in the last three decades, including abortion. This worldview has made us what we are and in turn has become the lens through which we see and interpret our world. Church and culture alike, ever malleable under the pressures of the governing worldview, are continually forced to bear its imprint and thus we are a culture—and church—characterized primarily by skepticism, individualism, rationalism, and utilitarianism.

Shaped by modernity and postmodernity, both our culture and church are fundamentally skeptical. If modernity taught us to doubt the indemonstrable,¹² postmodernity has taught us to doubt everything. Consequently, we live

in an age characterized by a profound and broadly held skepticism that ultimate truth or reality exists and can be known. Perhaps more significant is the belief that the ultimate is in fact irrelevant. Since truth is not given by that which is beyond us, but drawn from that which is around us (Enlightenment-rationalism) and within us (romantic-postmodernism) there is a perception that we have all we need within ourselves. While we might believe in God, we are skeptical of miracles, leery of claims of revelation and doubtful that God can be objectively known. Our denomination has increasingly come to perceive faith more in terms of personal opinion or journey than response to an objective reality or fact. Theology then becomes more a look inward than upward and ministry an act of affirming, clarifying, and encouraging one's innate and natural union with God than a leading of others to one who is wholly Other. Theology becomes individual spirituality and ethics simply its personally determined expression. And our every labor becomes governed by the questions, who really knows what is true, what is right, what is of God?

Shaped by modernity and postmodernity, both our culture and church are fundamentally individualistic. From Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" to the postmodern axiom that we each "have a story," our current worldview is profoundly self-centered and self-absorbed. The Enlightenment with its confidence in the powers of human reason has combined with postmodern confidence in the epistemic powers of human intuition to create a highly subjective and romantic epistemology. If the former affirmed the right of each individual to *discover* truth, the latter provided unbridled confidence in the ability of individuals to *determine* truth that, while perhaps not ultimately, was nevertheless subjectively and therefore legitimately real. Each person's story is true and valid not in spite of its subjectivity but because of it. Diversity can be celebrated because no particular view is superior (or inferior) to another; rather all perspectives may claim a relatively equal verity.¹³ Both theology and ethics are stripped of any objective character and allowed, even required, to bear the seal of individual affirmation to attest and maintain its validity. Abortion then becomes a thing of choice, inherently neither wrong or right, for such assessments can only be individually and perhaps culturally, but never ultimately determined. Skeptical of objective or ultimate truths faith and practice must be personally determined as each decides in his/her own eyes what is right and true.

Shaped by modernity and postmodernity, both our culture and church are fundamentally rationalistic. From Enlightenment rationalism we have learned to believe that the real or most real is that which is verifiable, provable, and demonstrable. From postmodern subjectivism we have come to believe that in the absence of universals, diversity of belief and behavior are normative and tolerance of this reality is the most reasonable ethic. Underlying this perspective is an optimistic theology which understands

human reason and deductions as tantamount to God's will and mind. God has become a transcendent, unknowable, and uninvolved spectator. Naturalism,¹⁴ has replaced supernaturalism to become the regnant belief system from which traditions are evaluated and ethics defined. Since God's will is seen as either unknowable (postmodernism) and little or no different than that which may be rationally deduced (modernism), our concepts of right and wrong are determined not by deductions made from God's self revelation but from individually or culturally determined perspectives perceived to be most reasonable and most functional. Ironically (at least for the church) the issue of God's will has become inapplicable. In a rational-individualistic culture we are left to determine a course that makes the most sense for an individual and is most practically useful in meeting their needs or solving the difficulties they face. Because such answers cannot be universal in any real sense, rational ethics are ultimately relative,¹⁵ subjective, and utilitarian. It is from this premise that the church has approached abortion, sexuality, ordination standards, and nearly every other ethical issue it has faced in the last forty years.

Shaped by modernity and postmodernity, both our culture and church are fundamentally utilitarian. We are less concerned with ideas than practice, theory than pragmatism. If reality is determined by demonstrability, value is determined by practicality. From diet plans to self improvement, from doctrine to ministry, what we most esteem is that which best works. In approaching abortion, our guiding principle is not concern for some ultimate right or wrong but what works best to solve a specific difficulty, namely, a "problem pregnancy." Utilitarianism has become the basis of our ethics and theology nothing more than a divine justification for what we have already decided is best, true, and expedient.

Personhood, Abortion and a Rational-Subjective Age

These intellectual pressures and influences have redefined our understanding of personhood and it is this "new" understanding that most affects our current ethical and theological debates. Skepticism, individualism, rationalism, and utilitarianism have defined our perception of God, ourselves, our theology and our ethics. Under these influences, personhood has become perceived in essentially volitional-experiential terms. That is, a person is one who possesses both a will and specific personal existence which is both determined by and made manifest in subjective experiences. Full personhood is realized where these realities are allowed full expression, while, conversely, personhood is diminished where they are restricted, annulled or denied.

The effects of this on our theology and ethics are obvious. From the Enlightenment we have believed as axiomatic the premise that "man is endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights." Volitional personhood requires

the free and unrestricted exercise of individual rights, be they gun rights, property rights, democratic rights, reproductive rights or others. Thus, to be human is to possess, as our own, certain rights and freedoms. The church, accepting uncritically a volitional-experiential anthropology has made itself the defender of personal choice and liberties, tacitly accepting the maintenance of free volition as tantamount to realizing and maintaining personhood as God created it to exist. To deny a person's right to have an abortion, to refuse a gay man's right to serve God in ordained office, to denounce choice of lifestyle or behavior is nothing less than the stripping of the inalienable right of personal choice and thus the corrosion of full personhood.

This is only deepened and furthered by postmodern influences which have led us to understand that personhood is not merely volitional but experiential. Here life is defined by subjective experience thus making experience life's primary reality. The experiences we bring to choice and the choices we make from subjective experiences are deemed as fundamentally and primarily valid. We possess or own our lives, are masters of them and alone determine what is right and best. Full or right expression of these attributes leads to the full actualization of personhood, while the limiting, loss, or denial of any or all is seen in turn to be destructive to the concept and reality of a person. Value and truth are determined by what helps, fulfills, equips, or encourages me.

Again, the effects on our debates are obvious. With ultimate truth unknowable and the Bible ultimately meaningless, with individual volition and experience the definition of personhood, with life understood as a personal right and possession, and with truth a personal and thus relative reality, our theology has taken a decidedly un-Reformed characteristic. Our theology and ethics are done now "from below," being wholly shaped by subjective feelings, personal opinions, and cultural values. No longer is humanity defined by God in his self revelation; instead it is God who is defined by our opinions and experiences and thus made to take a shape and will that affirms our *a priori* choices, beliefs, and ethics. Our contemporary worldview has made God no more than the One who divinely affirms our choices, attitudes, and beliefs, however diverse, contradictory, and vapid they may be. In the end, this is not Reformed theology but idolatry, the making of God into the image and being we desire and the raising of our own perceptions and opinions to the level of ultimate. And it is this idolatry that has often shaped the church's faith and practice, from abortion to ordination standards.

Persons in Communion

The Reformed (and biblical) view of personhood is defined by completely different criteria. In the Reformed tradition existence is not predicated on subjective volition or experientialism but upon the decisive act of God's addressing humanity as a covenant partner. We are

addressed as the intended recipients of the Word of God and it is this address and the consequent relationship it creates that renders us human, persons in communion with God. This address is not limited to age, sex, race, economics, or education, but is addressed to human life, at every age in every place. From the womb until death we remain God's, alive by his Spirit, our lives defined by his will.

God's addressing us with His word reveals the utter (ontological) distinction between our two realities. We are addressed as creatures by our Creator, as finite by One who is eternal. But this does not take a high and heavy hand. Rather, we are joyously greeted and addressed as those who have been granted the gift of life by One who desires our relationship. The fact that this life is given reveals that it is not us but Another who is Lord. This *new* life is granted and exists—undeniably in our theology—from conception. For life is not mere *bios*, life-force, or personal energy. It begins and ever remains a gift of God who sustains every moment and remains involved through its whole course. Human existence is not a right but a loan, not a possession but a gift and as such it is to be lived in response to God's Word by those who are ontologically and volitionally under it. Because God has so gifted us and thus revealed himself as Creator and Life giver, our ethic must reflect this dependence and contingency. Personhood is defined not by personal choice but Divine act, not by our will but God's.

God's address comes not to persons, but a person, singularly addressed as a covenant partner and being in communion. Personhood is defined not by subjective will, reason, or experience but God's choice and command. This address relates to all, yet not in some vague, anonymous totality but to specific and unique individuals. God's personal address calls each to that life they were created to know. Each life then must be honored, protected, and given free access to hear this Word. And each person is to be held then to this high and immutable responsibility to care, honor, and defend life as God's own. It is not personal rights or experiences we seek to protect but life itself, personally given, individually addressed by a loving Creator Lord who has given His Word that each may know and enjoy Him forever.

On the list could go. God's address defines our existence, describes its course, purpose and goal, provides its meaning, demands its obedience, and meets its every need. Each of us is more than "our stories," more than the sum of our experiences. "In him," the Scriptures say, "we live and move and have our being." If this is so, it stands opposed to the modern/postmodern worldview that has too long been allowed free reign to shape our theology and ethics.

A Basis-based Ethic

Theology and ethics are inextricably bound. Properly expressed and understood theology will always seek to

create a practical response through which faith may be concretely manifest. Ethics, when properly done will be founded upon a valid basis from which its goals and parameters are defined. As a church we are concerned with theological ethics, that is, ethics raised in response to God's acts of redemption and revelation. Where the subjective, romantic, or utilitarian are made determinative, where these or other "words" are allowed near or equal authority to the one Word then the resulting ethic can be called neither theological nor Christian. And it is precisely these perspectives that have governed the policy of the PC (USA) on abortion. Taking the visage of piety and spirituality our current understanding of abortion is in fact clothed in the values of our surrounding culture.

Theology does indeed matter. It is time for the church, at every level, to turn again to honest, serious, and committed *theological* work in the area of abortion. This may begin in several ways. First, a new study of abortion, from a theological position, must be undertaken by the PC (USA). This will not only address the many inadequacies of the 1992 report, it will provide what our denomination has yet to possess: a theological statement on the nature, purpose, and care for life, a statement that provides a sound theological basis and clear ethical response to it.

Second, abortion must be allowed to become an open discussion across the larger church. Because of the vast theological and ethical issues at stake and because the issues involved touch not only abortion but the debates around Christology, ordination standards, and general revitalization of the church, they should be taken up by the whole church. Abortion and the larger issue of doing proper theological and ethical work are the responsibility of the whole church. It is time for the church to proclaim a biblical ethic based on Reformed theology that enhances, encourages, and defends life at every level.

¹ It should of course be noted that the real issue and magnitude of the ordination standards debate is not really homosexuality per se, but our understanding of Scripture, its proper interpretation, and authority.

² This is not to say the Bible is silent on the matter or the issue is biblically irrelevant. My point is simply to acknowledge that the word "abortion" does not occur in either the Old or New Testaments and we must therefore use the larger hermeneutical and theological dimensions to shape the belief and approach of the church on this issue. On the hermeneutical approach see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996). A fascinating and brilliant example of the theological approach may be found in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4 The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), pp. 324-424.

³ The World Wide Web was developed through the 1980s as a project within the European Organization for

Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland. The initial implementation of the Web occurred at CERN in 1989 and the first web browser, called Mosaic, was developed at the NCSA (National Center for Super Computer Applications) at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana in 1993.

⁴ This is not to say the church has been silent on these issues. The 1997 General Assembly adopted a "word of counsel to the church and our culture that the procedure known as intact dilation and extraction (commonly called 'partial birth' abortion) of a baby who could live outside the womb is of grave moral concern that should be considered only if the mother's physical life is endangered by the pregnancy." But this brief statement can not replace a serious and intentional study of the subject.

⁵ A normal pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks, or 280 days. Recent advances in medical care have made infant viability possible as early as twenty weeks. Current medical technology now makes it possible in situations where a woman's life is in danger, to terminate the pregnancy without terminating the life of the infant. Furthermore, advances in pre-natal surgery have made it possible to repair medical problems of infants prior to birth. The PC (USA) has never studied these issues in any serious matter nor addressed the implications they have upon our faith and practice.

⁶ Evidences of this are well documented in the following: Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy and Ian Gentles, *Women's Health After Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence* (Toronto: The deVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research, 2002). Thomas W. Strahan, ed. *Detrimental Effects of Abortion: An Annotated Bibliography with Commentary* 3rd ed. (Springfield, IL: Acorn Books, 2001). And finally in the excellent study *Post-Viability Abortions* done by Dr. Patty June, MD and posted on the Presbyterians Pro-life web page at (http://www.ppl.org/PJune_PostViability_2001.html).

⁷ An illustration: Overture 02-52 coming before the 214th General Assembly asks the Assembly to instruct the Office of *Theology and Worship* to prepare pastoral resources for women who have experienced abortion. In a letter sent to GA commissioners 16 May 2002, the group Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options (PARO) recommends this task be given not to the Office of Theology but to the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), Advisory Committee on Women's Concern (ACWC), and the Presbyterian Association of Specialized Pastoral Ministries (PASPM). Once again, a legitimate request for theological study is hijacked from its intended course and made to reflect and convey not theology but social witness policy.

⁸ Beginning in Europe in the 18th century, the Enlightenment was a movement characterized by the philosophical and intellectual conviction that truth was only obtainable through the powers of human reason and empirical observation.

- ⁹ Lat. *revelatio*, an “uncovering” refers to God’s act of self-disclosure and self-communication.
- ¹⁰ “The branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* Copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.
- ¹¹ “The formal study of the Christian faith which presents it beliefs and doctrines in an organized and systematic way.” Donald K. McKim. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 81.
- ¹² Enlightenment modernity can be said to have begun with Descartes’ decision to determine meaning and reality from the perspective of doubt. Cartesian philosophy begins from the premise that nothing is true until legitimate grounds for its existence might be established.
- ¹³ This has proven in practice to be a naïve panacea. The vague notion of “tolerance,” while generous sounding, has been made the *de facto* center of modern ethics and given near totalitarian authority over all other belief systems. One may believe or do most anything as long as that opinion or practice is not held to be ultimate or forced on another whose differences must be “tolerated.” The apparently benign concept of tolerance has in fact

- become an intellectual despot before which all other perspectives, beliefs, and practices must bow as only relative truths. Regretfully, we have not learned the simple fact that “toleration is a social and political rather than cognitive value. It promotes peace, not truth.” J. Weinsheimer, *Eighteenth Century Hermeneutic: Philosophy of Interpretation in England from Locke to Burke* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 25.
- ¹⁴ Naturalism is a philosophical movement that maintains nature is the whole of reality and can be known only through scientific investigation. Dismissing or denying any supernatural reality, Naturalism holds that all phenomena can be understood strictly in terms of natural cause and effect. With the denial of the transcendent or supernatural naturalist ethics are determined by the social context. Ethics then are relative and based on cultural values, inclination, and utilitarianism.
- ¹⁵ For an intriguing perspective on the breadth, complexities, and reality of relativism in ethics, see Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson, eds., *Moral Relativism: A Reader* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2001).

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The Basics About Stem Cells

By Maureen L. Condic

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In August of last year, President Bush approved the use of federal funds to support research on a limited number of existing human embryonic stem cell lines. The decision met with notably mixed reactions. Proponents of embryonic stem cell research argue that restricting federal funding to a limited number of cell lines will hamper the progress of science, while those opposed insist that *any* use of cells derived from human embryos constitutes a significant breach of moral principles. It is clear that pressure to expand the limits established by the President will continue. It is equally clear that the ethical positions of those opposed to this research are unlikely to change.

Regrettably, much of the debate on this issue has taken place on emotional grounds, pitting the hope of curing heartrending medical conditions against the deeply held moral convictions of many Americans. Such arguments frequently ignore or mischaracterize the scientific facts. To arrive at an informed opinion on human embryonic stem cell research, it is important to have a clear understanding of precisely what embryonic stem cells are, whether embryonic stem cells are likely to be useful for medical treatments, and whether there are viable alternatives to the use of embryonic stem cells in scientific research.

Embryonic development is one of the most fascinating of all biological processes. A newly fertilized egg faces the daunting challenge of not only generating all of the tissues of the mature animal but organizing them into a functionally integrated whole. Generating a wide range of adult cell types is not an ability unique to embryos. Certain types of tumors called teratomas are extraordinarily adept at generating adult tissues, but unlike embryos, they do so without the benefit of an organizing principle or blueprint. Such tumors rapidly produce skin, bone, muscle, and even hair and teeth, all massed together in a chaotic lump of tissue. Many of the signals required to induce formation of specialized adult cells must be present in these tumors, but unlike embryos, tumors generate adult cell types in a hopelessly undirected manner.

Maureen L. Condic, is Assistant Professor of Neurobiology and Anatomy at the University of Utah, working on the regeneration of adult and embryonic neurons following spinal cord injury.

If a developing embryo is not to end up a mass of disorganized tissues, it must do more than generate adult cell types. Embryos must orchestrate and choreograph an elaborate stage production that gives rise to a functional organism. They must direct intricate cell movements that bring together populations of cells only to separate them again, mold and shape organs through the birth of some cells and the death of others, and build ever more elaborate interacting systems while destroying others that serve only transient, embryonic functions. Throughout the ceaseless building, moving, and remodeling of embryonic development, new cells with unique characteristics are constantly being generated and integrated into the overall structure of the developing embryo. Science has only the most rudimentary understanding of the nature of the blueprint that orders embryonic development. Yet, recent research has begun to illuminate both how specific adult cells are made as well as the central role of stem cells in this process.

The term “stem cell” is a general one for any cell that has the ability to divide, generating two progeny (or “daughter cells”), one of which is destined to become something new and one of which replaces the original stem cell. In this sense, the term “stem “ identifies these cells as the source or origin of other, more specialized cells. There are many stem cell populations in the body at different stages of development. For example, all of the cells of the brain arise from a neural stem cell population in which each cell produces one brain cell and another copy of itself every time it divides. The very earliest stem cells, the immediate descendants of the fertilized egg, are termed embryonic stem cells, to distinguish them from populations that arise later and can be found in specific tissues (such as neural stem cells). These early embryonic stem cells give rise to all the tissues in the body, and are therefore considered “totipotent” or capable of generating all things.

While the existence of early embryonic stem cells has been appreciated for some time, the potential medical applications of these cells have only recently become apparent. More than a dozen years ago, scientists discovered that if the normal connections between the early cellular progeny of the fertilized egg were disrupted, the cells would fall apart into a single cell suspension that could be maintained in culture. These dissociated cells (or embryonic stem cell “lines”) continue to divide indefinitely in culture. A single stem cell line can pro-

duce enormous numbers of cells very rapidly. For example, one small flask of cells that is maximally expanded will generate a quantity of stem cells roughly equivalent in weight to the entire human population of the earth in less than sixty days. Yet despite their rapid proliferation, embryonic stem cells in culture lose the coordinated activity that distinguishes embryonic development from the growth of a teratoma. In fact, these early embryonic cells in culture initially appeared to be quite unremarkable: a pool of identical, relatively uninteresting cells.

First impressions, however, can be deceiving. It was rapidly discovered that dissociated early embryonic cells retain the ability to generate an astounding number of mature cell types in culture if they are provided with appropriate molecular signals. Discovering the signals that induce the formation of specific cell types has been an arduous task that is still ongoing. Determining the precise nature of the cells generated from embryonic stem cells has turned out to be a matter of considerable debate. It is not at all clear, for example, whether a cell that expresses some of the characteristics of a normal brain cell in culture is indeed “normal”—that is, if it is fully functional and capable of integrating into the architecture of the brain without exhibiting any undesirable properties (such as malignant growth). Nonetheless, tremendous excitement accompanied the discovery of dissociated cells’ generative power, because it was widely believed that cultured embryonic stem cells would retain their totipotency and could therefore be induced to generate all of the mature cell types in the body. The totipotency of cultured embryonic stem cells has not been demonstrated and would, in fact, be difficult to prove. Nonetheless, because it is reasonable to assume embryonic stem cells in culture retain the totipotency they exhibit in embryos, this belief is held by many as an article of faith until proven otherwise.

Much of the debate surrounding embryonic stem cells has centered on the ethical and moral questions raised by the use of human embryos in medical research. In contrast to the widely divergent public opinions regarding this research, it is largely assumed that from the perspective of science there is little or no debate on the matter. The scientific merit of stem cell research is most commonly characterized as “indisputable” and the support of the scientific community as “unanimous.” Nothing could be further from the truth. While the scientific advantages and potential medical application of embryonic stem cells have received considerable attention in the public media, the equally compelling scientific and medical *disadvantages* of transplanting embryonic stem cells or their derivatives, into patients have been ignored.

There are at least three compelling scientific arguments against the use of embryonic stem cells as a treatment for disease and injury. First and foremost, there are profound immunological issues associated with putting cells derived from one human being into the body of another. The same

compromises and complications associated with organ transplant hold true for embryonic stem cells. The rejection of transplanted cells and tissues can be slowed to some extent by a good “match” of the donor to the patient, but except in cases of identical twins (a perfect match), transplanted cells will eventually be targeted by the immune system for destruction. Stem cell transplants, like organ transplants, would not buy you a “cure”; they would merely buy you time. In most cases, this time can only be purchased at the dire price of permanently suppressing the immune system.

The proposed solutions to the problem of immune rejection are either scientifically dubious, socially unacceptable, or both. Scientists have proposed large scale genetic engineering of embryonic stem cells to alter their immune characteristics and provide a better match for the patient. Such a manipulation would not be trivial; there is no current evidence that it can be accomplished at all, much less as a safe and routine procedure for every patient. The risk that genetic mutations would be introduced into embryonic stem cells by genetic engineering is quite real, and such mutations would be difficult to detect prior to transplant.

Alternatively, the use of “therapeutic cloning” has been proposed. In this scenario, the genetic information of the original stem cell would be replaced with that of the patient, producing an embryonic copy or “clone” of the patient. This human clone would then be grown as a source of stem cells for transplant. The best scientific information to date from animal cloning experiments indicates that such “therapeutic” clones are highly likely to be abnormal and would not give rise to healthy replacement tissue.

The final proposed resolution has been to generate a large bank of embryos for use in transplants. This would almost certainly involve the creation of human embryos with specific immune characteristics (“Wanted: sperm donor with AB+ blood type”) to fill in the “holes” in our collection. Intentionally producing large numbers of human embryos solely for scientific and medical use is not an option most people would be willing to accept. The three proposed solutions to the immune problem are thus no solution at all.

The second scientific argument against the use of embryonic stem cells is based on what we know about embryology. In an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* (“The Alchemy of Stem Cell Research,” July 15, 2001) a noted stem cell researcher, Dr. David Anderson, relates how a seemingly insignificant change in “a boring compound” that allows cells to stick to the petri dish proved to be critical for inducing stem cells to differentiate as neurons. There is good scientific reason to believe the experience Dr. Anderson describes is likely to be the norm rather than a frustrating exception. Many of the factors required for the correct differentiation of embryonic cells are not chemicals that can be readily

“thrown into the bubbling cauldron of our petri dishes.” Instead, they are structural or mechanical elements uniquely associated with the complex environment of the embryo.

Cells frequently require factors such as mechanical tension, large scale electric fields, or complex structural environments provided by their embryonic neighbors in order to activate appropriate genes and maintain normal gene-expression patterns. Fully reproducing these nonmolecular components of the embryonic environment in a petri dish is not within the current capability of experimental science, nor is it likely to be so in the near future. It is quite possible that even with “patience, dedication, and financing to support the work,” we will never be able to replicate in a culture dish the nonmolecular factors required to get embryonic stem cells “to do what we want them to.”

Failing to replicate the full range of normal developmental signals is likely to have disastrous consequences. Providing some but not all of the factors required for embryonic stem cell differentiation could readily generate cells that appear to be normal (based on the limited knowledge scientists have of what constitutes a “normal cell type”) but are in fact quite abnormal. Transplanting incompletely differentiated cells runs the serious risk of introducing cells with abnormal properties into patients. This is of particular concern in light of the enormous tumor-forming potential of embryonic stem cells. If only one out of a million transplanted cells somehow failed to receive the correct signals for differentiation, patients could be given a small number of fully undifferentiated embryonic stem cells as part of a therapeutic treatment. Even in very small numbers, embryonic stem cells produce teratomas, rapid growing and frequently lethal tumors. (Indeed, formation of such tumors in animals is one of the scientific assays for the “multipotency” of embryonic stem cells.) No currently available level of quality control would be sufficient to guarantee that we could prevent this very real and horrific possibility.

The final argument against using human embryonic stem cells for research is based on sound scientific practice: we simply do not have sufficient evidence from animal studies to warrant a move to human experimentation. While there is considerable debate over the moral and legal status of early human embryos, this debate in no way constitutes a justification to step outside the normative practice of science and medicine that requires convincing and reproducible evidence from animal models prior to initiating experiments on (or, in this case, with) human beings. While the “potential promise” of embryonic stem cell research has been widely touted, the data supporting that promise is largely nonexistent.

To date there is *no* evidence that cells generated from embryonic stem cells can be safely transplanted back into

adult animals to restore the function of damaged or diseased adult tissues. The level of scientific rigor that is normally applied (indeed, legally required) in the development of potential medical treatments would have to be entirely ignored for experiments with human embryos to proceed. As our largely disappointing experience with gene therapy should remind us, many highly vaunted scientific techniques frequently fail to yield the promised results. Arbitrarily waiving the requirement for scientific evidence out of a naive faith in “promise” is neither good science nor a good use of public funds.

Despite the serious limitations to the potential usefulness of embryonic stem cells, the argument in favor of this research would be considerably stronger if there were no viable alternatives. This, however, is decidedly not the case. In the last few years, tremendous progress has been made in the field of adult stem cell research. Adult stem cells can be recovered by tissue biopsy from patients, grown in culture, and induced to differentiate into a wide range of mature cell types.

The scientific, ethical, and political advantages of using adult stem cells instead of embryonic ones are significant. Deriving cells from an adult patient's own tissues entirely circumvents the problem of immune rejection. Adult stem cells do not form teratomas. Therapeutic use of adult stem cells raises very few ethical issues and completely obviates the highly polarized and acrimonious political debate associated with the use of human embryos. The concern that cells derived from diseased patients may themselves be abnormal is largely unwarranted. Most human illnesses are caused by injury or by foreign agents (toxins, bacteria, viruses, etc.) that, if left untreated, would affect adult and embryonic stem cells equally. Even in the minority of cases where human illness is caused by genetic factors, the vast majority of such illnesses occur relatively late in the patient's life. The late onset of genetic diseases suggests such disorders would take years or even decades to reemerge in newly generated replacement cells.

In light of the compelling advantages of adult stem cells, what is the argument against their use? The first concern is a practical one: adult stem cells are more difficult than embryonic ones to grow in culture and may not be able to produce the very large numbers of cells required to treat large numbers of patients. This is a relatively trivial objection for at least two reasons. First, improving the proliferation rate of cells in culture is a technical problem that science is quite likely to solve in the future. Indeed, substantial progress has already been made towards increasing the rate of adult stem cell proliferation. Second, treating an individual patient using cells derived from his own tissue (“autologous transplant”) would not require the large numbers of cells needed to treat large populations of patients. A slower rate of cell proliferation is unlikely to prevent adult stem cells from generating

sufficient replacement tissue for the treatment of a single patient.

The more serious concern is that scientists don't yet know how many mature cell types can be generated from a single adult stem cell population. Dr. Anderson notes, "Some experiments suggest these [adult] stem cells have the potential to make mid-career switches, given the right environment, but in most cases this is far from conclusive." This bothersome limitation is not unique to adult stem cells. Dr. Anderson goes on to illustrate that in most cases the evidence suggesting scientists can induce embryonic stem cells to follow a specific career path is equally far from conclusive. In theory, embryonic stem cells appear to be a more attractive option because they are clearly capable (in an embryonic environment) of generating all the tissues of the human body. In practice, however, it is extraordinarily difficult to get stem cells *of any age* "to do what you want them to" in culture.

There are two important counterarguments to the assertion that the therapeutic potential of adult stem cells is less than that of embryonic stem cells because adult cells are "restricted" and therefore unable to generate the full range of mature cell types. First, it is not clear at this point whether adult stem cells *are* more restricted than their embryonic counterparts. It is important to bear in mind that the field of adult stem cell research is not nearly as advanced as the field of embryonic stem cell research. Scientists have been working on embryonic stem cells for more than a decade, whereas adult stem cells have only been described within the last few years. With few exceptions, adult stem cell research has demonstrated equal or greater promise than embryonic stem cell research at a comparable stage of investigation. Further research may very well prove that it is just as easy to teach an old dog new tricks as it is to train a willful puppy. This would not eliminate the very real problems associated with teaching *any* dog to do *anything* useful, but it would remove the justification for "age discrimination" in the realm of stem cells.

The second counterargument is even more fundamental. *Even if* adult stem cells are unable to generate the full spectrum of cell types found in the body, this very fact may turn out to be a strong scientific and medical advantage. The process of embryonic development is a continuous trade-off between potential and specialization. Embryonic stem cells have the potential to become

anything, but are specialized at nothing. For an embryonic cell to specialize, it must make choices that progressively restrict what it can become. The greater the number of steps required to achieve specialization, the greater the scientific challenge it is to reproduce those steps in culture. Our current understanding of embryology is nowhere near advanced enough for scientists to know with confidence that we have gotten all the steps down correctly. If adult stem cells prove to have restricted rather than unlimited potential, this would indicate that adult stem cells have proceeded at least part way towards their final state, thereby reducing the number of steps scientists are required to replicate in culture. The fact that adult stem cell development has been directed by nature rather than by scientists greatly increases our confidence in the normalcy of the cells being generated.

There may well be multiple adult stem cell populations, each capable of forming a different subset of adult tissues, but no one population capable of forming everything. This limitation would make certain scientific enterprises considerably less convenient. However, such a restriction in "developmental potential" would not limit the *therapeutic potential* of adult stem cells for treatment of disease and injury. Patients rarely go to the doctor needing a full body replacement. If a patient with heart disease can be cured using adult cardiac stem cells, the fact that these "heart-restricted" stem cells do not generate kidneys is not a problem for the patient.

The field of stem cell research holds out considerable promise for the treatment of disease and injury, but this promise is not unlimited. There are real, possibly insurmountable, scientific challenges to the use of embryonic stem cells as a medical treatment for disease and injury. In contrast, adult stem cell research holds out nearly equal promise while circumventing the enormous social, ethical, and political issues raised by the use of human embryos for research. There is clearly much work that needs to be done before stem cells of any age can be used as a medical treatment. It seems only practical to put our resources into the approach that is most likely to be successful in the long run. In light of the serious problems associated with embryonic stem cells and the relatively unfettered promise of adult stem cells, there is no compelling scientific argument for the public support of research on human embryos.

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Repent, Reform, Overcome: A Proposal to Renew the Church, Part 5

By Susan Cyre

In order for the church to be renewed, theology and polity must be restored to their proper relationship in the church. There are three areas that need to be addressed:

- 1) Presbyterian government is self-government. That means there is an implied requirement that our leaders demonstrate fitness for the exercise of their offices before they are ordained and installed.
- 2) Our form of government is designed to give lower governing bodies free and open access to higher governing bodies to hold them accountable to redress wrongs and to facilitate changes to advance the mission of the Gospel.
- 3) Our form of government requires that higher governing bodies hold lower governing bodies accountable to the Gospel which is given expression in our Confessions.

The first requirement for a renewed church is that leaders must demonstrate their fitness for the exercise of their office. Therefore, we must be attentive to the process by which leaders are nominated and elected to national office. The way in which we choose those who serve on the national bodies of the church needs to be reformed to shift the nominating and electing power down toward the lower governing bodies to the greatest extent possible. Currently a sixteen member appointed committee follows a process that essentially appoints the membership of General Assembly entities.

General Assembly Nominating Committee (GANC)

The GANC nominates people for more than 500 national level positions including the GA Permanent Judicial Commission (the church's highest court) and the General Assembly Council. GA commissioners elect the people nominated by the GANC—usually about 180 per year.

Each GA moderator appoints one-fifth of the sixteen member GANC—one from each synod. The GA moderator may make these appointments in consultation with synod representatives; however no governing body has veto power over the moderator's choice of appointee. Members are appointed to the GANC for one 5 year term.

How the GANC functions

The appointed sixteen member GANC then makes nominations for the more than 500 national church positions. To make these nominations, members of the GANC receive endorsements from individuals, presbyteries or synods. In addition, each GANC member relates to one or more of the entities that the GANC will make nominations for and requests suggested nominees from those entities. This process of soliciting suggested nominees from the entities themselves establishes a closer relationship with GA level entities than with the concerns and recommendations of the lower governing bodies. And, this process risks perpetuating the same perspective as current committee members.

The GANC then presents their nominees to the GA commissioners for their vote. Until a few years ago, the GANC usually submitted their report to the commissioners with those 180 names after the Assembly convened and with no information regarding the nominee's qualifications for office. That process has changed in the past two years. Overture 00-63 in 2000 proposed changing the GA Standing Rules to require the GANC to submit its report 120 days before GA, thus meeting the same report deadline as all other GA entities. Without changing the standing rules, the GANC volunteered to submit their report 45 days before the opening of the GA. The GANC agreed to furnish some biographical data on nominees on an internet site only. Commissioners who do not have access to the internet must request a paper copy from the Office of General Assembly.

This voluntary change in the process that was prompted by an overture is a step in the right direction. However, the biographical information remains difficult to obtain unless a commissioner knows it is available and looks for it on the internet or requests a paper copy. And the information remains inadequate by providing only the race/age/synod/presbytery of the nominees and their service to the church. Commissioners do not receive information regarding the nominee's knowledge, understanding and support of Scripture and the Constitution. This is especially crucial when commissioners vote on nominees to the GA Permanent Judicial Commission—the highest court in the church.

GA Floor Process for Nominations

If a GA commissioner chooses to offer an alternative nominee for an office or committee, the commissioner must submit paperwork to the Office of General Assembly 24 hours before the GANC report comes to the floor of plenary. When the GANC report is presented in plenary, the commissioner then may make his/her nomination and give a 3 minute nominating speech. A GANC member then gives a 3 minute nominating speech for their nominee. GA commissioners are not allowed to ask either candidate any questions. They may not seek further information from the candidate or the GANC regarding a candidate's leadership qualifications, knowledge of Scripture, or knowledge and support of the Constitution.

In the case of nominees to the GA PJC, alternative nominees must be the same gender and clergy or lay as the GANC nominee. Since the GANC does not present their slate until 45 days before the GA, that gives commissioners only 45 days to search out the nominee's leadership qualifications by contacting colleagues and the nominee himself and then if they are found to be inadequate, to find a "matching" alternative nominee.

Amendment Being Sent to the Presbyteries

The GANC is an appointed body. Nominating committees are perhaps the most powerful groups in any organization. They decide who participates in leadership and who does not. The GANC should not be an appointed body. The GANC should be an elected body. When there is an election process, there is also the possibility of alternative floor nominations from commissioners. The recent 214th GA, in response to an overture from Western Colorado presbytery, voted to send to the presbyteries for their vote an amendment to the Constitution that would require the GA moderator to nominate members of the GANC, and the GA

commissioners to vote on the nominations. If this amendment passes the presbyteries, it will begin to open up the nominating process for selecting qualified leaders.

Additional Weaknesses in the GANC Process

1) Although GA commissioners have more information than before on nominees to the more than 500 church positions, the information remains inadequate. Commissioners are not given sufficient information to assess the qualifications and leadership abilities of nominees. Most candidates are strangers to commissioners; therefore, in most cases the commissioners can only rubber stamp nominees sent to it by the GANC.

We must work toward a body of commissioners who are better informed regarding the leaders they elect. That might be done minimally by asking candidates to respond in writing to a list of questions. It would be even better to provide opportunity for commissioners to raise pertinent questions of the candidates or the GANC.

2) The slate of nominees should be available to commissioners 120 days before the GA convenes. Most vacancies are known years ahead. With a few exceptions for late changes in status by nominees, vacancies and nominees should not be withheld until 45 days before the Assembly begins.

The reporting deadline of 120 days should be added to the Standing Rules of the GA so that is not left to the discretion of GANC members. GANC members change each year. The deadline set by one committee may not be the deadline followed by a new committee. The GA should stipulate the time-frame it requires in order to conduct its business responsibly.

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 9: The Book of Revelation Chapters 14-16: Three Visions of Hope

By Rev. Mark Atkinson, Union Church, Lima, Peru

In chapters 12 and 13 of Revelation we encountered three frightful visions. John saw a dragon, who was Satan; a beast arising from the sea and a second beast arising from earth. Now, in chapter 14, we will see three contrasting visions. The first, in vs. 1-5, is of the church in worship. The second, in vs. 6-13, is of the ministry of the church through preaching. The third, in vs. 14-20, is of the evangelistic harvest of men and women turning to Christ in faith.

First, John sees God's people worshiping the Lamb of God. They are numbered at 144,000, but, as we have seen, this is a symbolic number. We have met these worshipers before, in chapter 7. There, immediately after their number is given, we are told that John sees a great multitude that no one could count. The number symbolizes the totality of God's elect. The mark of their election is that they bear a name (v. 1). In contrast, those marked by the beast bore an impersonal number (13:18). Those who belong to God are known by name. Here, as in chapter 7, those who are God's elect are shown as secure in the face of the troubles to come. Though an uncountable multitude, they are numbered nonetheless, to show that not one is lost, they are all accounted for. In v.4 we are told that God's elect are sexually pure. The image

is intended to suggest that Christ's followers are loyal to him alone. Their purity is in contrast to one we will meet later, the great whore of Babylon. Here we see that God's people are purely devoted to Christ, but they are not kept separate from the troubles of the world. In v.4 we are also told that those who bear the name follow the Lamb wherever he goes. There may be a military overtone to this image: like good soldiers they go wherever the Lamb may send them.

The second positive image of chapter 14 is of the preached word going out upon the earth. Three angels are sent. The first declares the gospel of salvation. The second declares the fall of the false world. The third declares God's judgment upon the world, calling people to repentance. This is the three-fold task of the preacher: declare the gospel, unmask the world, and call persons to repent. The image of Babylon symbolizes the seductions of the world in general and the moral corruption of the city of Rome in particular. Rome stood for all that was opposed to the work of God: paganism, emperor worship, persecution, corruption, cruelty and immorality. Babylon is condemned (v. 8) for her fornication. She distracts the heart, divides the loyalties, and draws us away from God, the one who should be our first love.

The third positive vision is of the evangelistic harvest. It is the work of the gospel in the world. There are, however, two harvests described: grain and grapes, the sheep and the goats.. The first is the harvest of the righteous, God's elect. The second is the harvest of those who will bear the brunt of God's wrath poured out. Two things mark this time of reaping. One is the revelation of Christ (v. 14). His coming divides the human community into two. The second is the readiness of the crop. Both the wickedness of the wicked and the righteousness of the church are complete.

Chapters 13 and 14 present two contrasting visions of the world. On the one hand is the work of Satan, the temptations of the world and the power of falsehood. On the other, against these three stand the act of worship, the power of preaching and the evangelization of the world. For the church throughout the ages, these are the only things we possess to stand against the dark forces. Yet, these three are enough. With them, the early church turned the world upside down.

Readying the Wrath of God

John sees, at the beginning of chapter 15, the seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended. At this point in his vision, however, the end is not yet. In chapter 15 the bowls of wrath are readied but not yet released. Instead, John sees again the imagery of worship. This time, the worshipers stand beyond a *sea of glass*. The image is baptismal. God's judgment is about to be poured out upon the earth.

Those who escape the bowls of God's wrath poured out are those who have already borne the judgment and rescue of baptism. God's wrath has already been poured out upon Christ. The baptized have already passed through the waters of judgment, having been buried with Christ in his death and raised with him to new life. Historically, the waters divided the saved from the judged in Noah's time, in Moses' time, and now here at the end of time. The worshipers here are singing the Song of Moses, which has now become the Song of the Lamb. God is not doing anything new. The Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb are the same, for both are songs of God's mighty deliverance and redemption. Those who know this song are those who have overcome the beast: his image, his mark and his number. The emphasis is upon what has already been accomplished, but has yet to be worked out in history

The subject matters of the song are God's mighty acts, his marvelous character, and the glory of his name. One of the marks of the worship songs we read in the book of Revelation is that they focus upon God, not the experience of the redeemed. This is a far cry from too much modern hymnody which tends to focus upon the experience of the redeemed, not the nature and character of God.

In v. 5 John sees the temple open. The temple is the place where God's presence abides. Each time he sees the temple a different emphasis is placed upon its meaning and significance. Here the emphasis is upon divine judgment. Hebrews 10:31 says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The truth of that affirmation is about to be revealed. The bowls of judgment come from the hands of one of the four living creatures. As we learned in an earlier study, they symbolize nature, the created realm. The imagery is that nature itself is bringing forth God's judgment. The number of punishment is seven, signifying a judgment that is perfect, complete, just.

The vision John gives us in chapters 14 and 15, just prior to the pouring out of God's wrath, speaks of the work of the church and the assurance of the church. Our work is our worship, our message and our outreach. Our assurance is that those who sing the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb have obtained victory, come what may.

The Wrath of God Poured Out

In chapter 16 we enter the fifth of the eight scenes of revelation. The bowls of God's wrath are about to be poured out. It is important to view their arrival in the context of the flow of the vision. The seals that were broken in chapter 6 unleashed the four horsemen of the apocalypse. In the popular mindset they are seen as apocalyptic, but in fact, within John's vision, they merely symbolized the troubles of history: war, famine, disease

and death. The seven trumpets in chapters 8 and 9 were an intensification of the ordeal of earth, but the destruction unleashed by each was still partial. The trumpets were warning, not wrath. Now, however, we find the bowls are not warnings, but punishments. The opportunity for repentance is gone. The sequence of the bowls of judgment is quite similar to the sequence of the warning trumpets. In each the sequence unfolding is: earth, sea, rivers, sky, torment, penultimate destruction and, finally, end.

First, there are several things that should be highlighted regarding the bowls of wrath. In v. 7 the heavenly altar is seen. Throughout Revelation there is a connection between the altar and judgment. In chapter 6:9–11 we saw the martyred saints of God below the altar praying for vindication. Here their vindication comes. The third bowl of wrath is specifically poured out because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, “you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” The first answer to the martyr’s prayers was a trumpet of warning. The final answer is a bowl of judgment. Second, when the seals were broken and the trumpets blown we saw that the fifth of each brought a qualitative increase to the drama unfolding. At this point in John’s vision, the fifth bowl is said to be poured out upon the beast. The imagery

suggests that the world system is breaking down. Thirdly, the imagery of the sixth bowl has become part of our popular imagination. The kings of the world gather to do battle against Almighty God. The place of their muster is the Mount of Megiddo,¹ better known as *Armageddon*. What are we to make of this imagery? We resist fanciful interpretations and note that conflict between God and the world is the mark of our time. There are seasons when the scope and intensity of that conflict increase. In v. 15 the Lord Jesus speaks, reminding us that he will come again, as a thief in the night. The imagery of this bowl is telling us that the climactic battle between God and the corrosive forces of this world will take place one day. There will be a final reckoning at the Second Coming of Christ. Lastly, note that the seventh seal (8:1) brought silence. The seventh trumpet (11:15–19) brought a proclamation of the kingdom of God. The seventh bowl (16:17–21) brings utter destruction upon the earth.

¹ The city of Megiddo was located at the key point where the trade route between Egypt and Mesopotamia entered the fertile Jezreel valley of Israel. Megiddo was a place of great conflict through the ages. However, there is no mountain of Megiddo. What John means by the Mount of Megiddo is not clear.

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