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Introduction to ECO Theology Series

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”
— Romans 12:2

“Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.” (ECO Essential Tenets III.D).

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians is committed to the renewal of our minds in the twenty-first century. This century is unprecedented in the church’s history. Christianity is moving from its historical centers in European countries and those places Europeans settled, to countries of the global south. Churches do not enjoy the same power in the secular arena they did in ages past. Secular humanism, the rise and dominance of a technological environment, and mass globalization have transformed the way Christians have to think. These are the patterns of the world. They are facts on the ground. But this is a radically different world than that of Jesus’s time, the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the high Middle Ages, the Reformation, or even of the period of revivalism. Although our theological traditions have equipped us in some ways, we need to confront our new world head-on, understand it, and seek to bring the message of the reconciliation of all things in Christ to this world. To do that, we must have our minds renewed.

This series of books is designed to equip you in the process of having your mind renewed. This renewal is never easy. It requires that we analyze the normal patterns of thinking around us. We have to reevaluate our traditional beliefs according to the Word of God. We have to ask where our forebears have been blind in the past due to their cultural situation, and discern how we might be blinded by our own cultural beliefs. With confidence in beliefs that are thoroughly rooted in the Word of God that are communicable to the people of this present evil age, we can shine the light of the kingdom of God to a dark and dying world.

We have hope: hope in the kingdom of God, hope in the resurrection of the dead, hope in the renewal of all creation. We are a people of hope with a message of hope. But we must be able to communicate that hope. These books aim to equip you to explain the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

Introduction to Theology of Life

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live." (John 11:25).

"I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10).

The theology of life is bigger than birth and death. In Christ, we must have a theology of resurrection life, a theology that looks forward to new creation, and a theology that gives the world a taste of the abundant life of the body of Christ.

Abortion has been a hot topic for well over 50 years in the United States. And yet, as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre first noted in 1981's *After Virtue*, the arguments never seem to get anywhere between "pro-life" and "pro-choice" groups. Why, he wondered, are our modern moral arguments doomed to talking past each other? His answer boils down to the rise of "emotivism" and the centrality of the individual's expression rather than the good of the community. Put another way, almost all the talk has revolved around protecting the rights of this or that group of people, the unborn or pregnant women. What is almost never discussed are the *responsibilities* of individuals as part of a community. Community has broken down and demands for rights eventually enter into a combative mode. Instead of asking how individuals can contribute, individuals make demands for protection. Protecting the vulnerable is vital, of course, but if there is never a conversation about what sort of people we are being formed into, there will soon no longer be any "us." Culture war is embedded within the fabric of modern moral thinking.

The breakdown of community leads to the end of productive moral reasoning. No moral progress has been, will be, or even can be made in modern democratic societies, because there are no rational grounds on which a common good can be established once the primacy of the individual is asserted.

It is within this situation that the church has generally become trapped into taking sides in a zero-sum culture war, arguing, in our case, for the rights of the vulnerable unborn. While this is a valid point, it misses the forest for a single tree, and has missed the goodness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, both in its comfort for sinners and its call to become mature as the body of Christ. How can we reveal the abundant life of the resurrected and ascended king of all things to a world of darkness, death, and decay?

This book expands the dialogue from the single issue of abortion, which has been thoroughly covered in a variety of sources and looks at a positive theology of life. What does the Bible say about life? What does the Reformed theological tradition have to say about life? And why has that come into such contrast with what the world believes is the good news of expressive

individualism? How did we get to this point, and how do we form our churches into places where the abundant life of the kingdom of God can be tasted and seen?

Part I examines three foundations of our discussion—the Bible, the church’s theological heritage, and the world we live in. Part II puts these foundations into conversation to move in the direction of a theology of life to form our churches so that we can be good news to a world that systematically deals in death. Part III addresses some common themes and questions of life and death, and offers some ways of thinking about them. As always, we do not provide authoritative answers, but resources to further discussion while remaining robustly committed to the authority of Scripture.

Part I: Foundations

Foundations I

Biblical Foundations

Chapter 1

Biblical Metaphors of Life

Dr. Meredith Riedel

In the New Testament, Jesus claims that he has come so that we may have life more abundantly.¹ What does that mean, exactly? An examination of the Bible's use of metaphor illustrates God's definition of life, the good life, the abundant life.

Word

In Genesis, the beginning of all life, the creation came into existence by a word spoken by God. The pattern of creation in the first chapter of Genesis is "And God said..." followed by "and there was..."² The Word of God itself from the beginning is thus the source of life, according to Scripture. Later, in the New Testament, Jesus elaborates when tested by the tempter that human beings live not merely by what they eat, but by every word that comes from God.³ It is the Word of God that has power to bring and sustain life.

Breath

In Genesis 2:7, further details emerge: Adam is created from the earth, whence comes his name (in Hebrew, Adam sounds like the word for earth). But Adam is not alive until God breathes life into him, whereupon "the man became a living being." Woman is created of the very same stuff as Adam; indeed the woman comes from the side of the man as his equal. And both, according to Genesis, were created in God's own image.⁴

Tree of Life

One other metaphor from the creation narratives of Genesis is used: the tree of life. This is a living tree, created by God like all the other plants, that God endued with the power of life, so that anyone who eats of its fruit lives forever. An interesting detail arises here: in Genesis 2:17, God forbids Adam to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but not from the tree of life. This shows that God's intention for Adam from the beginning was for him to have eternal life, without death. Adam's mortality came about only through his own disobedience. But God desires those who bear God's image to be like God, enjoying unending life. God created life to

¹ John 10:10.

² Genesis 3:6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24.

³ Matthew 4:4.

⁴ Genesis 1:27.

be enjoyed forever, to be tasted and to provide nourishment. Life was created to be lived in a garden of delights, where nothing with the breath of life in it died.

It's not a stretch to think about how throughout history many people have searched for a way to live forever, the fountain of youth, a way to cheat or at least delay death. Books and poetry are written about this desire, and it's been a plotline in more than a few movies. The youth-obsessed culture of the United States tries to ignore death and improve life by remaining as slim and unwrinkled and pain-free and cool as possible for as long as possible; this is essentially a way to escape death. It is a craving for eternal life.

Now, most people do not walk around saying to ourselves, "if only I had eternal life...!" The best description of this primal desire we have all inherited is found in a beautiful essay by C.S. Lewis called "The Weight of Glory". In that essay, he manages to describe an ineffable sensation that humans experience sometimes. It's that feeling you get when you replay happy memories or gaze at extraordinary beauty or think about your deepest, most treasured desires. Lewis says this:

...it [the thing we all seek] was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."⁵

Nothing on earth can fully satisfy the deepest yearning of the human heart. Whatever thing we choose to bear that burden becomes an idol. And idols always destroy their worshippers. No, what we are looking for is—

The scent of a flower we have not found.

The echo of a tune we have not heard.

News from a country we have never yet visited.

The taste of fruit from a tree we have never tasted.

This deep, human longing for fulfillment, for joy, for the utter satisfaction of deep happiness is what the tree of life represents. It is sweet. It is beautiful. It is better than anything we could possibly dream of.

Despite the design in the garden for people to enjoy abundant life eternally, they rebelled, as they still do.⁶ Shame, toil, pain, and death entered the world, and humanity, bearing the image of God, longed for life. Adam longed for life so much that he named his wife Eve, in anticipation of her role as the mother and thus the source of future living beings through

⁵ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (HarperOne: 2001), 30–31.

⁶ Genesis 3:1–19.

childbirth.⁷ It is noteworthy perhaps that this particular method of attaining eternal life was not one seen before Genesis 3.

Children

By the grace of God, humanity increased but so did disobedience. Throughout the era of the patriarchs, children were viewed as life. Every single account of the patriarchs includes the names of their sons, or that they became fathers to others in their own likeness,⁸ to sons and daughters. In the Scriptures, failing to bring forth new life in the form of children was tantamount to death, and triggered the same grief, despair, and resignation. The examples are well known: Sarah (the mother of Isaac), Rebekah (the mother of Jacob and Esau), Rachel (the mother of Joseph), Tamar (the mother of Perez and Zerah), the mother of Samson, Hannah (the mother of Samuel), the Shunnamite woman⁹ and Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist). Each of these women prayed for their shame to be taken away, or their husbands prayed for them, or God was said to have mercy on them, because having no children was a kind of death. The births of their sons in every case were a vindication, a redemption, a blessing of life. The blessing of life in Deuteronomy included *not* being childless.¹⁰

Although each of these famous biblical women did eventually have at least one child, many others in the Scriptures did not, and the mention of those who failed to bring sons or daughters into the world are redolent of death. The prophecy against those whose children would be carried away to Babylon, and be made eunuchs, was a curse.¹¹

Manna

In order that the Israelites might not die of starvation, that is, in order to keep them alive, God provided manna and quail in the wilderness. The manna, which literally means “What is it?”¹² was the bread of heaven,¹³ sent every morning by God so that the Israelites would have food for the day. The divine nature of this manna was underlined by the fact that it would go bad after one day¹⁴ and that there was twice as much on the day before the Sabbath,¹⁵ so that no one would have to collect bread on the Sabbath. Moses explains the purpose of the manna later

⁷ Genesis 3:20.

⁸ Genesis 5:3.

⁹ Who had a son, cf. 2 Kings 4:14–17.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 7:14.

¹¹ 2 Kings 20:18; Isaiah 39:7.

¹² cf. Exodus 16:15.

¹³ Psalm 78:24.

¹⁴ Exodus 16:19–21.

¹⁵ Exodus 16:22–26.

to the Israelites, saying that it was “to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”¹⁶

The manna was a gift from heaven for life, given daily, not to be saved for later but received and used on the same day. Similarly, when God gives us lifegiving gifts, they are not for hiding away to use at a later time, but rather to be used when God gives them. Life is a gift for today.

Blood

In the book of Leviticus, life is carefully presented as something that finds existence in blood. Part of the Israelite sacrificial system is centered around this: offering blood in sacrifice meant one was offering the life of another in exchange for one’s own life. It is important to know that Israel was unique among ancient Near Eastern societies in its high view of blood, particularly as a part of religious sacrifice, as associated with life. All other cultures of the time and associated blood with death. Israel alone equated blood with life, and this was not only clear in Israelite religion, it was atypical for the era.

Epilogue: the Tree of Life

The very last chapter in the Bible, Revelation 22, mentions the tree of life three times. In 22:2, it describes the tree of life planted in the middle of the heavenly city “on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” This tree provides more than any tree that has ever existed: twelve kinds of fruit, continual fruitfulness – with no off season! Winter with its chill winds and gray skies and dying leaves will no longer exist in the holy city. The leaves of that tree do not provide mere beauty – they actually heal. They heal everyone and everything.

Revelation 22:14 describes how to get access to the tree of life and why we want it: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.” Those who wash their robes, those who wear clean garments cleansed by the blood of Christ gain entrance. No one enters by his or her own righteousness of course. We know from Isaiah 64:6 that all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags in God’s eyes. There is no one righteous. Isaiah 53:6 says it even more clearly: We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

If we want to enter the holy city legitimately, by the gates as it says in 22:14, we must be clothed in the clean garments of Christ’s righteousness alone. And then we will have access – the verse here says the *right* to the tree of life. That means it can’t be taken away. It belongs to us forever. This is what Christ has given us.

¹⁶ Exodus 8:3.

Finally, Revelation 22:22 sets the loss of the tree of life as the punishment for neglecting God's whole truth. It's the warning in the last verse of the Bible. It says, "and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." This is the worst penalty imaginable. The tree of life is everything. To lose access to it is to die.

In between the beginning, the Garden of Eden, which we can't understand fully because we weren't there—and the end of God's revelation, which we can't understand fully because we aren't there yet—here in the middle, where we live now, God gives us four glimpses in the book of Proverbs to help us understand the tree of life.

3:18 — "She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed."

11:30 — "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise."

15:4 — "a gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit."

13:12 — "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life."

These four proverbs each mention "a tree of life" and give insights for what it might mean to experience the eternal life that comes to those who have access to this tree. These are, of course akin to what C.S. Lewis was describing: they are "the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited." These glimpses are precious, they feed our souls, they give us life. They point us to the way of life, here between the forbidden garden and the holy city.

In this proverb, Wisdom is personified as a woman, as a person whom one can get to know, someone we can learn to hold onto. Most people perhaps think of wisdom in the context of Solomon's request in 1 Kings 3 when he asked for understanding so that he could govern Israel with discernment. It was a humble prayer. Solomon admitted he didn't know what he was doing; he even called himself a child. His request delighted God, so he received wisdom greater than anyone before or since. It was a gift from God.

However, the proverb here compares it to a person who can be embraced and held onto. Proverbs 7:4 exhorts us to "call wisdom your sister" —in other words, think of wisdom as a sibling who deserves love and loyalty. How is she a tree of life? Ecclesiastes 7:19 tells us that wisdom gives strength greater than ten rulers. Job 28:28, Micah 6:9, and Psalm 111:10 all describe wisdom as the fear of the Lord. Wisdom personified? There's really only one, but it appears in many places in the Bible.

Isaiah 11:2 describes the shoot from the stump of Jesse, saying "the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

Luke 11:49 and 1 Corinthians 1:24 both explicitly describe Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God. So both the second and third persons of the Trinity are called wisdom. Don't be distracted here by the use of the feminine pronoun to refer to wisdom in Proverbs. English is an odd language in that our nouns don't have gender; most other languages have gendered nouns. For

example, in Hebrew the word for Spirit (ruach) is feminine; same in Syriac, the indigenous Christian language of the Middle East related to Hebrew [rucha]. The early church for centuries used feminine pronouns in these two languages to refer to the Holy Spirit, and wrote about the Spirit having maternal qualities. But it doesn't mean that the Spirit is a woman, because that would involve having a physical body, which the Spirit doesn't have. The important thing is that wisdom is a spirit, THE Spirit, and the Spirit of Christ, and thus wisdom can be said to be a person to love and know and treasure and speak with and listen to and obey.

In Proverbs 11:30, we read that "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise." What is the fruit of the righteous? This proverb reminds one instantly to the passage in Galatians 5, which describes the fruit of the spirit. Interesting that Galatians refers to the fruit, singular, composed of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." We cannot have any of these if we do not have them all in some measure. They are tied together, and together, they embody the good that is available from the tree of life: they are not only the fruit of the spirit, they are the fruit of the righteous, they are the tree of life, the source of life as humans are designed to live it.

Proverbs 15:4 gives a specific example, a way to concretize the fruit of the tree of life—a way to recognize it: It says, "a gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit." All of those good things that make up the fruit of the righteous are evidenced in the speech of the righteous.

Proverbs 13:12 brings all of these together, saying "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life." Many people live with hope deferred, and it makes human hearts sick. This world is a dark and broken place, but hope is not lost. The thing we most long for will be fulfilled in the holy city. It will bring healing to sick hearts, and there will be no more sin, no more sorrow, no more frustration or darkness, but we will all live in the light of Christ's glory and grace.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified long ago. He died on a tree of death in order that we might have full access one day to the tree of life. In the meantime, we will embrace the Spirit of wisdom and hold fast to her. We will seek to bear the fruit of righteousness, living a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control. And the world will know we are Christians by our love, and by our gentle speech that echoes the melody not yet heard but longed for by every human heart. To those with ears to hear we will be the fragrance of life, the scent of the flower not yet found. We bear good news from a country none of us has yet visited. But if we bear Christ's righteousness, one day we will enter that holy city. And our desire will be fulfilled by the tree of life.

Chapter 2

Life and its Value in the Old Testament

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

What is life and what is its value according to the Bible? In this short section we briefly compile common biblical language as the basic information we can use to theologically reflect in more depth.

The Psalmist asks, “What is man that you are mindful of him, Lord?”¹ The psalmist doesn’t have an answer.² It remains an open question to this day with continual disagreement by people who honor the revelation of God in the Bible, and in the wider world. No one can define herself, at least not with any amount of accuracy! And so it is with our species, we struggle in vain to answer such a deep question as, “What is our species and what makes its lives worthwhile?” As we will see, the Old Testament’s understanding of the human being is complex, culturally influenced, and rather foreign to most of the views of people today.

Let’s briefly look at a few key terms, keeping in mind that meaning comes largely from context and not from dictionary definitions, and that English words like “heart, mind, soul, spirit” do not neatly or exactly correspond to Hebrew equivalents:

Tselem, Demuth (תְּצֵלֶם, דְּמוּת)

- “Image and likeness”
- Occurs only in Genesis 1–9.
- Refers to a relationship with God that involves reflection of divine character.
- This concept is discussed at length in a later chapter.

Nephesh Chayyah (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה)

- Used of all living creatures, including humans
- Creatures created on the fifth and sixth day (Genesis 1:20, 21, 24).
- Genesis 2:7 describes the creation of man out of dust, breathed-into by God, and thus becomes a “living creature.”
- The covenant of God with Noah is also a covenant with every nephesh chayyah (Genesis 9).

Nephesh (נֶפֶשׁ)

- Often translated as “soul” or “life”
- Contained in or associated with blood in the prohibition against eating animals with the lifeblood (Genesis 9:4).

¹ Psalm 8:4.

² The way of framing this question and much that follows in this section is thanks to Gordon McConville, *Being Human in God’s World: an Old Testament Theology of Humanity*, (Baker Academic, 2016).

- Belongs to God who requires a reckoning/accounting of it in Genesis 9:5 for both animals and humans.
- Used in Hebrew also to refer to a whole person (e.g. Genesis 14:21).
- Sometimes used of dead people (e.g. Leviticus 19:28, 21:1).
- Used poetically to refer to people: "myself" is literally "my soul" just as "herself" is "her soul."
- Where the appetites lie: a "hungry soul" stands for hunger, a "weary soul" is thirsty, "in nephesh" can mean "greed."
- Where the emotions lie: desire, abhorrence, sorrow, hatred, refreshment/cheer, compassion, patience/impatience are all described with the nephesh.
- Sometimes the physical throat or neck (Psalm 105:18, Jonah 2:5).
- Rarely, but sometimes used for thinking.
- Emotions (more often than *ruach* or *lebab*)

***Ruach* (רוח)**

- Usually translated "spirit" "breath" and "wind"
- *Ruach Elohim* is used in Genesis 1:2 for the "Spirit of God" hovering over the face of the deep.
- Genesis 6:3 quotes God saying "my *ruach* will not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." Here *ruach* is contrasted with *basar* (flesh).
- *Ruach chayim* is "breath of life" and is used to designate living things in general (see Genesis 6:17).
- Used of wind in general.
- Can be used by itself to indicate life in Genesis 26:35.
- Used of God's Spirit influencing a person's conduct to prophesy, to wisdom, to just judgment, etc. Also to feats of strength like those of Samson.
- Used of God's Spirit being upon kings Saul and David.
- Describes a personal quality like Joshua's "spirit of wisdom" in Numbers 27:18. Or a prophet's power like the spirit of Elijah resting upon Elisha (see 2 Kings 2:9).
- Evil/bad spirits influence people, and are even sent by God himself (e.g. Judges 9:23, 1 Samuel 16:14).
- Courage (more often than *nephesh* or *lebab*)

***Dam* (דם)**

- Blood as a physical substance
- Contains life (e.g. Genesis 9:4).
- Shed blood "cries out" to God (e.g. Genesis 4:10).
- Shed blood cannot be atoned for except by blood. Bloodguilt cannot be paid off with anything else. See Leviticus 17:11.
- Bloodguilt is a kind of mortal sin/crime that deserves and requires vengeance. Life for life.

***Leb/Lebab* (לֵב)**

- The heart as a physical organ.

- The inner person or inner life as contrasted with external body parts, external speech.
- The core of the self that includes the emotional, rational, and willing faculties.
- The mind, knowledge, thinking, memory
- The conscience
- The moral character of a person.
- Used in reference to the whole self.

***Kilyot* (כִּלְיוֹת)**

- The kidneys as a physical organ.
- The most sensitive or deep part of a person.
- The place of emotions.
- The whole self.

***Basar* (בָּשָׂר)**

- Physical flesh
- The one main aspect of human life that is specifically not shared with or images God.
- The flesh of animals, humans
- Family, blood relatives
- “All flesh” referring to all living things.
- Flesh with blood is alive, without is dead (Gen 9:4).

What do we make of this list of human qualities and words that go with them? Firstly, just as with English and other languages, we don’t have a firm boundary for these kinds of words to describe oneself. English translations are not reliable ways to find where these words are used, because translating them is so difficult. OT scholar Gordon McConville points out Psalm 73 as a great example of how the words for heart and kidneys get translated in a wide variety of ways in English versions.

English also has a lot of crossover between our similar words. We can both have a change of heart and a change of mind, and both of these mean roughly that our will or desire has changed. In English, rationality belongs to the mind, higher feelings to the heart, more basic feelings to the guts and loins, and a sense of whole self-ness only in the soul. We are also confused in English whether there is a difference between the soul and the spirit, as they have quite a lot of overlap. English has also more recently replaced the older English/Germanic “ghost” as the disembodied self with the Latin idea of spirit (thus we have “Holy Ghost” and “Holy Spirit”). So also in Hebrew, we find that this language is not used scientifically or systematically.

Secondly, the Hebrew understanding of the self is thoroughly integrated and *relational*. Although science and natural philosophy (like Plato and Aristotle) have tried to segment the body into distinct spheres of action, the Old Testament shows an understanding of an integrated person. McConville reveals this point well with Psalm 51:10–12:

Create in me a clean *leb*, O God, and put a new and right *ruach* within my middle. Do not cast me away from your presence and do not take the *ruach* of your holiness from

me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing *ruach*.

McConville comments,

The prayer that God should not take his “holy spirit” from him exploits the semantic potential of the term in order to portray the life of the psalmist as having a close relationship with the life of God. God’s “holy spirit” here is not the Third Person of the Trinity, but means rather that it is the nature of God to be holy. The prayer of the Psalmist, therefore, is that he too should have a “holy spirit,” that it should also be his character to be holy. The prayer sheds a clear light on the way in which the human is known in the Old Testament, not as a self-existent composite of faculties or parts, but in the context of seeking and worshipping God. The life of the human is always contingent on the dynamic relationship with God.³

Thirdly, the Old Testament assigns all of these traits to both individuals and to a people group as a whole, again indicating an integrated, community life that understood individuals as inescapably part of a people. The notion of individual rights would, of course, be as foreign to a person in the Old Testament as it was to all generations prior to the Renaissance when the concept was invented.

Being human in the Old Testament is not given a clear philosophical answer, but it is understood in a basic *relational* way, rather than an *essential* or *substantive* way. If a biblical author were to answer the question, “What does it mean to be human?” he might answer exactly as Jesus did with “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴

Thus, if we want to understand the *value* of human life in the Old Testament, we have to move away from thinking only in terms of individual rights. While the early command to not murder is based on the irreplaceability of the life of someone made in the image of God (see Genesis 9), that image is itself a relational concept whose meaning derives from God. Life only makes sense *coram deo*, before the face of God, as Luther put it. Thus, it is in the rejection of God that murder is normalized and compounded within the lineage of Cain.

So, while life can end through the shedding of blood, the blood itself cries out to God about this injustice, almost in a picture of the soul of Abel pleading before God as we see pictured with the martyrs in Revelation 6:9–11. It’s not so much the physical blood itself that cries out, it’s the fact that the blood carries the soul with it, and bleeding someone out (exsanguination) is draining the life/soul/*nephesh* from its body. This is why the Torah (and the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:20, 29) frequently condemns the eating of meat with blood in it. One must not eat a life. In the same way, a life can be ended when a person’s spirit or breath is taken away. Life and the self are contained in the breath too, a point we’ll see clearly in Jesus’ death in the New Testament. For, it is by breath that God breathes life into the *nephesh chayyim*.

³ *Being Human in God’s World*, 52.

⁴ Jesus of course is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 in Matthew 22:37–39; Mark 12:29–31.

From the Old Testament we also see that many aspects of life are shared between humans and the animals. Both blood and breath suggested to the Hebrew people that a creature had a full life, if of a different kind, and that all life belonged ultimately to God. The Torah commands, for example, that people cannot eat animal flesh until it has been presented before the altar of God.⁵

The picture that emerges from the Old Testament is that life is given meaning and value by its belonging to God and its connection to God. Life is not a thing in and of itself. There is no such thing as “life” disconnected from the actual blood, breath, soul, spirit, heart, kidneys. Life is not abstract, it is the life or soul of this or that person or creature.

As we’ll see a little later, the concept of the image of God also means that an assault on a life is also an act of blasphemy in that attacking an image of a god is to attack the god, just as burning a flag is more than burning a piece of cloth, but an act of deliberate insult and devaluation of what the flag represents.

Finally, because life belongs to God, the Old Testament believes that human life, intimately connected with the flesh, heart, and kidneys of a person, is embodied. Death and *Sheol* are understood as the grave, abyss, darkness, a ravenous force that eats flesh. “Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and never satisfied are the eyes of men.”⁶ But “you will not abandon my *nephesh* to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”⁷ There is hope that God is present even with the dead in Sheol.⁸ This means that there is a hope of a redemption of the body and an enduring life of the soul even in the death of the flesh. So, Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones⁹ strikes a ringing chord on the heartstrings of the Old Testament authors who longed for a day when God would breathe new life into the desolate Israel. Resurrection, although not universally held by Jews in the exile or into Jesus’ day,¹⁰ was certainly a hope that fit well within the Old Testament’s understanding of what life is and where it gets its value. When God speaks and breathes, the dry bones come to life.

⁵ Leviticus 17:3–4.

⁶ Proverbs 27:20.

⁷ Psalm 16:10.

⁸ Psalm 139:8.

⁹ Ezekiel 37.

¹⁰ The Sadducees denied the resurrection, while the Pharisees believed in it. See Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:6–8. It is notable that the Sadducees were much more enculturated into the Greek world and philosophy so that they might not have wanted the resurrection of the dead, but the liberation of the soul from the prison of the flesh.

Chapter 3

Life and its Value in the New Testament

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

The composition of the human body in the New Testament only slightly differs from that of the Old Testament as the following brief word study will show. Again, words have meaning in their context and not according to what a dictionary says.

Psyche (ψυχή)

- A person's life (e.g. Matthew 2:20; 6:25)
- The soul in opposition to the body, a life that transcends earthly existence (e.g. Matthew 10:28, Hebrews 6:19)
- A living creature (Revelation 16:3)
- The inner human life with emotions, thoughts, desires
- Both the material and eternal life (Matthew 10:39)
- The thinking faculty/mind (Acts 14:2)
- The feeling/passionate motivating faculty or "heart" (Ephesians 6:6)
- Doing something with effort (Colossians 3:23)

Pneuma (πνεῦμα)

- The Holy Spirit and Spirit of God or Christ
- Wind, blowing (Hebrews 1:7)
- Breath, breathing (2 Thessalonians 2:8)
- Breath that gives life (Matthew 27:50; Luke 8:55; James 2:26)
- That which lives on after death (Luke 23:46; Hebrews 12:23; 1 Peter 3:18)
- Part of the human personality
 - Used with body (*sarx*) it refers to the immaterial part (2 Corinthians 7:1; Colossians 2:5)
 - Different from the *psyche* in Hebrews 4:12; Philippians 1:27.
- Seat of insight, feeling, will (1 Corinthians 2:11; Matthew 26:41)
- Noncorporeal person/being
 - God (John 4:24)
 - Spirit beings (Hebrews 1:14, Revelation 1:4 etc.)
 - Evil/unclean spirits (Matthew 12:43, etc.)
 - "different spirit" that needs testing (2 Corinthians 11:4; 1 Corinthians 12:10)

Pneuma is often translated as "Spirit." But to call this a translation into English is misleading, since spirit is just a Latin word meaning roughly the same thing as the Greek *pneuma*. Latin also gives us many words that refer to breathing from the verb *spiro*: inspire is to breathe

in or into, expire is to breath out or give up one's breath in death. The non-Latin English equivalent is "ghost" which derives from Germanic languages like German Geist.

Sarx (σάρξ)

- Flesh of animals and humans (1 Corinthians 15:39)
- The whole physical body (Ephesians 5:29)
- The whole body as specially dominated by sin (Romans 7:18; Galatians 5:19)
- A person or people in general (Luke 3:6)
- Natural generation (Galatians 4:23)
- Jesus' physical nature (Romans 8:3)
- "Worldly standards" (1 Corinthians 1:26; Colossians 3:22)

Soma (σῶμα)

- Body of a human or animal
- A corpse
- The living body
- "Bodies" as slaves (Revelation 18:13)
- The substance of something as opposed to the shadow (Colossians 2:17)
- A unified group of people, a body-politic, the "body of Christ" as the Church (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:13, 26)

Haima (αἷμα)

- Blood
- Blood as constituting the life, usually in echoing OT use (Luke 11:50; Romans 3:15)
- Blood as sacrificial medium (Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 9:12)
- The color red indicating disaster

Hydor (ὕδωρ)

- Water
- Live giving medium, Jesus as "living water" (John 4:10)
- Mainly in Johannine usage, water is combined with blood to indicate the union of life and death, of baptism and communion, etc.

Eikon (εἰκών)

- Likeness
- Living image
- Form, appearance
- Images as idols

See discussion in the chapter on the Image of God for Christ as the image/eikon of God.

Kardia (καρδία)

- Heart as the seat of physical, spiritual, and mental life.
- Source of thinking, feeling, willing
- The whole inner life
- The will or “mind” (Luke 21:14; 2 Corinthians 9:7)
- The moral faculty (James 4:8; Matthew 5:8)
- Love (Mark 12:30 and parallels; 2 Thessalonians 3:5)
- Dwelling place of the Spirit/Christ (Romans 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:22, etc.)

Splagchnon (σπλάγχνον)

- Inward parts of the body, guts, entrails, bowels
- Seat of the emotions
 - Merciful ‘heart’ (Luke 1:78)
 - Sympathy/compassion (Colossians 3:12; Philippians 2:1)
 - Philemon 12, 20 often translated “heart”
- Feeling of love or affection (Philippians 1:8)

This list was not exhaustive in terms of describing the nature, meaning, and value of what it means to be human in the New Testament. What it does show is that, as with the Old Testament, the NT doesn’t have a clear and distinctly defined anthropology, if we’re hoping for either a physical or metaphysical description of the human being. Historically, Christians have debated whether the human is composed of two parts: body and soul, or three parts: body, soul, and spirit. As we can see, we could lengthen the list to include the flesh, guts, and heart! Unlike the philosophers of ancient Greece, the Bible has no desire to describe with any accuracy the composition of the body.

This lack of scientific rigor is important for our discussion of the meaning and value of life. We might reasonably conclude that the whole Bible views the human person as an integrated thing, not as a composition of parts. If the guts are where we feel our emotions, even godly emotions like compassion that we should “put on,”¹ then how could we imagine that the *sarx* or *soma* were inherently evil, a prison for the soul to escape? The meaning of human life is not to be found in dividing the self into parts to set against one another. Rather, it will be found in Christ, the *pneuma* become *sarx*, who is the very *eikon* of God, and into whose *eikon* we can be made... if we share in his death and resurrection, the point to which we now turn.

¹ Colossians 3:12.

Chapter 4

The Cruciform and Aionic Life

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind of the things of God, but on the things of man." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done." Matthew 16:21-27

If we move beyond the language the NT uses to describe the make up of the human life, and to what it says about life in relation to Christ, there is much more to say. For, the NT isn't so much a book about being human, but being *in Christ* and *in the Spirit*. The NT uses the word *aion* (αἰών) and the adjective *aionios* (αἰώνιος) for what is usually rendered "eternal" in English. But this can be a little deceptive if we mean only "unending" by "eternal." The *aion* is more properly an "age" as we have in eon in English. The *aion* is about the *quality* of a time, and is often used to describe the age of a specific ruler. The NT sees these ages as overlapping, so that the life-abundant *aion* of the rule of God has entered into mortal time. The Christian lives both in the *aion* (or the kingdom) of God, while still living in the kingdoms of this world. So in the list below I've used *aion* rather than "eternal" to make this meaning clear:

The following is not a complete, but is a thorough list of points the NT makes about life.

- The way to life is hard and narrow (Matthew 7:14)
- There is an *aion* of life. (Matthew 19:29, 25:46 and parallels)
- *Aionic* life is something to "enter" based on righteousness (Matthew 18:8-9, 19:16)
- Jesus is "the life" and in him is life (John)
- *Aionic* life by faithfulness/faith (John 3)
- *Aionic* life by Jesus the living water (John 4)
- *Aionic* life comes by avoiding judgment (John 5:24)
- Life is in the Father (John 5:29)
- Jesus is the bread of life whose flesh must be eaten and blood drank for *aionic* life/resurrection (John 6)

- The Spirit gives life, the flesh is no help (John 6:63).
- Jesus is the light of life (John 8:12)
- Jesus came to have abundant life (John 10:10)
- Those who love this life lose it, those who hate this life will keep it for eternal life (John 12:25)
- The commandments of God are *aionic* life (John 12:50)
- Jesus the way, truth, life (John 14:6)
- Jesus given authority to give life (John 17:2–3)
- Jesus the Author of life killed (Acts 3:15)
- The gospel of life goes to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46–48)
- God gives everything needed for life in this world (Acts 17:25)
- We are reconciled to God by the death of the Son, and we are saved by his life (Romans 5:10)
- Life in Adam vs. life in Christ (Romans 5:17–21)
- We were buried with Jesus by baptism into death, so we can be raised with Christ (Romans 6:4)
- Sin leads to death, *aionic* life is a gift, but the fruit of salvation is sanctification (Romans 6:22)
- Spirit of life frees from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2–10)
- Nothing can separate us from life in Christ (Romans 8:38)
- Christ is hope for resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:19)
- We carry in the body the death of Jesus, so the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:10).
- This life a “tent” but we don’t want to be disembodied spirits, but have the mortal clothed with life (2 Corinthians 5:4).
- *Aionic* life is something given by the Spirit, not by the flesh, and so we must “sow to the Spirit” (Galatians 6:8)
- Sinners unable to understand because they are alienated from the life of God (Ephesians 4:18)
- Paul wants Christ to be honored in his body, whether in life or death. (Philippians 1:20)
- The “word of life” is something to hold onto (Philippians 2:16)
- There is a “book of life” in which names are written who belong to *aionic* life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12–15, 21:27)
- Christ brings the resurrection of the dead (Colossians 3:4)
- Bodily training is good, but better is godliness which is of value here and in *aionic* life (1 Timothy 4:8)
- *Aionic* life is to be taken hold of, and fought for (1 Timothy 6:12)
- The rich should be rich in good works to store up treasure for the future (1 Timothy 6:17–19)
- *Aionic* life promised by God before the ages began (Titus 1:2)
- *Aionic* life is inherited (Titus 3:7)
- Life is a mist, fleeting (James 4:14)

- Jesus is the word of life made manifest (1 John 1:1–2)
- Jesus promised *aionic* life (1 John 2:25)
- Love is life, lack of love is death and murder (1 John 3:14–15)
- God gave *aionic* life which is in his Son. Love the Son for *aionic* life (1 John 5:11–13)
- Jesus is the true God and *aionic* life (1 John 5:20)
- Crown of life (Revelation 2:10)
- The book of life was written before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8)

From this long list we can conclude a number of points, and summarize the NT teaching on life. God is the source of both mortal life and *aionic* life. Death is a result of alienation from God. God has promised to restore *aionic* life through Jesus. Those who follow Jesus become coheirs with him of *aionic* life. But access to *aionic* life is through the righteousness of Christ that is gained only by union with him, which comes by dying with him. Thus, there is no *aionic* life without death to a loyalty to this life, which is often characterized by a life lacking soul or spirit. The spiritual life is not fleshless, but more-alive-than-life flesh. Paul therefore calls Christians to present their bodies as “living sacrifices” which is a “spiritual” act of worship.¹ Likewise, Jesus calls his followers to forsake their lives in order to find life, seeking first his kingdom and righteousness, depending on God alone, who freely and abundantly provides provision for life and life eternal.

The NT doesn’t have much of a picture of “what it means to be human,” rather it is a book about discipleship. It often devalues the life of the human being as a mortal life. The “natural” person is seen as someone who “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God”² and so lives for something less than life. Nor does the NT offer much by way of a method to provide value to human beings who choose to reject or ignore the person of Jesus. While Jesus himself does say that humans are of more value than the sparrows, which God sees (i.e. with care), this is the same Jesus who claims *to be the life*.³

It is impossible to read any part of the NT and avoid the conclusion that it makes exclusivist claims about the meaning and value of human life, and that it sees life apart from God as of a reduced value. The NT seems fundamentally at odds with any secular vision of humanity, human value, and the meaning of life in a secular world in which all claims of value must be publicly available and rooted in material sources.

¹ Romans 12:1.

² 1 Corinthians 2:14.

³ Matthew 6:26; Luke 12:7, 12:24.

Foundations II

Theological Foundations

Chapter 5

History of Life and its Value

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

What is the history of how people in the Western tradition have viewed life? This chapter shows that the story is a little more complicated than we might initially think, and it also shows that the church has faced an uphill battle in the struggle for the value of human life during most of its existence.

Understanding how people in the past viewed life and its value gives us a better perspective on our own time. Typically, we work in “subtraction stories” or two-point narratives. We know our own time and context, and we choose another period of history to compare it against, usually finding that things have either gotten better or worse, depending on whether we lean left or right politically.

But two-point narratives, like any two points, can only ever produce a straight line. That line can go up for progressives, down for conservatives, or be flat for skeptics, but it remains a straight line. Adding other points to our story helps us create a more complete shape to the development of ideas, and it helps us see that we don’t necessarily live at the verge of apocalypse or the threshold of perfection.¹

To create a better narrative, it is important to look not just at our normal theological sources, but those outside of the church. Some legal history will help us understand how people in a society understood the meaning and value of life. The definitions and legal consequences of murder and related offences reveal much about how a community understands life.

Old Testament

Although we’ve already discussed how the Old Testament understood the shape of human existence and life, we haven’t yet looked at what happens when it is ended in murder. We begin with the Old Testament and the laws pertaining to murder and prenatal manslaughter found in Exodus 21:12–25. These laws will serve to show the value of different human lives throughout time. The caveat is that the OT unifies civil law, moral code, and theological rationale in ways that will not again happen in this brief history.

Exodus 21 concludes with the *lex talionis*, the “law of the tooth.” While we might call this a basic retributive theory of justice, more needs to be said, since retribution is so denigrated in

¹ This is based on a theory I call “narrative geometry” in which the shape of stories depends on the points we plot along the way.

modern judicial belief. The core idea of retribution is not bloodthirst, but incommunicable value. Economists call the opposite of this concept, “fiduciarity,” or the idea that people can exchange one thing for another thing of a different kind by means of a third thing—usually money. Most ancient cultures did not have a single exchange value, like money. Indeed, money wasn’t invented until the 600’s BC, and along with that development came a revolution in theories of justice that the Old Testament simply doesn’t know. The Torah doesn’t allow for fiduciary compensation in cases of bodily harm, unlike modern insurance. The Torah sees this as a denigration of the value of an eye, a tooth, a life, if they could be exchanged for some other thing. When a man is injured in a fight but doesn’t die, his adversary must compensate his lost work in Exodus 21:19. This isn’t a fiduciary compensation for his injuries, but an in-kind compensation for a loss of labor (and thus likely food). Curiously, we might think, the Torah says that if a master knocks out a slave’s tooth, the slave goes free. It’s not that the tooth is of equal value to the price of a slave’s freedom, it’s that the tooth is irreplaceable and part of the wholeness of the person. The master who violates that wholeness cannot repay it and is in the slave’s debt such that the debt that created the slavery must be cancelled.

The Torah is also quite unique in that it values the life of a slave as a *human* life and not as a *slave* life. The murder of a slave is a murder. It is not, as will happen later under Roman law, the right *abusus* of one’s private property. Slavery in the Torah doesn’t include the ownership of a life. And so, we see that the Torah does not define murder and its compensation based on social rank, in contrast to later European tribal ways.

We also see that the Torah views the unborn life as fully human, since prenatal manslaughter is a capital offense. The *lex talionis* means that the unborn life is of similar value to the life of the grown adult who killed the child.

A quick survey of the OT shows that it does not contain any stories that normalize infanticide, but nearly all of its stories surrounding infanticide show the great value and desire to preserve the life of children. This is notable for how it contrasts with ancient Greek literature, as we’ll see shortly. Although some have argued that the Greek climate and its scarcity of arable land led to its infanticidal practices, the land of Israel was not significantly more fertile and Israelites would have faced similar pressures of scarcity in providing for their children. Nevertheless, even Solomon’s famous judgment with the two prostitutes fighting over a child shows that even the most socially undesirable children were highly valued.² The child was not just valued by the mother, even though she’d have no chance of giving her son or daughter a good future, but valued enough by the society at large to bring such a trial before the king. This will strongly contrast with what we see later in our history.

We see that the OT values the lives of those who are economically unproductive. Not only are there dozens of teachings about the value of foreigners and strangers, widows and orphans, the whole book of Ruth offers a picture of the Jewish valuing of the life of a foreigner. The logic of the OT on this point is that the Jews were themselves once wanderers, strangers,

² 1 Kings 3:16–28.

and even slaves. The memory of this experience was to be recited at least yearly at the Passover and integrated into the identity of the people.

We will save talk about Sabbath day, year, and Jubilee for a later chapter, but each of these commands show the importance of creating and preserving a healthy community without long-term debts that lead to the devaluation of life, as well as creating and preserving a healthy environment in which humans and all other creatures can thrive together.

And a last note about the OT is that it offers numerous places that show that human life is not the only life that is of value. God's concluding speech at the end of Job shows that God delights in creatures other than humans and would do so even though we have no knowledge or control over them. The concluding line of Jonah shows that God cares for the enemies of Israel in Nineveh, but also for their cows too. The edges and corners of agricultural fields are not to be harvested, nor are the farmers allowed to glean (pick up the fallen seeds). These are to be left for the poor, the stranger, and for wild animals.³

The OT prophets, however, show that for all of this excellent teaching in Torah, the people didn't seem to obey it very much. The oppression of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner seems to have been fairly widespread from the witness of the prophets. This establishes something we'll see continue in the church—while it has maintained a high value of life, it seems that even in a supposedly Christian culture, people regularly treat each other in horrific ways and often have legal protection for doing so. Even king David, the man after God's own heart, devalued the life and person of Bathsheba, treating her as an object for his passion, and devalued the life of his faithful soldier, Uriah, her husband, by having him die in battle to cover his adultery. David may not have sought an abortion, but he still sought a death to cover his sin.⁴

The Israelites and Judahites were conquered by Assyria and Babylon, later to be ruled by Persia. Let us skip over these empires since their influence on our modern culture is relatively small in comparison with Greece, which conquered Persia.

Hellenism: The Spread of Greece to the World

The period beginning with Alexander the Great and lasting through the early days of the Roman Empire are characterized by the rapid and wide spread of a version of Greek culture. It was not the same as the classical Greece we know through philosophers and playwrights, but a culturally appropriating imperial Greece that intentionally subsumed various beliefs of the people they conquered. Consider that Cleopatra, for as paradigmatically "Egyptian" as she was, and the last Pharaoh, was from a Greek lineage that usurped native Egyptian power. She, like Alexander before her, intentionally took on the trappings of the traditional rulers and religions of a people, while also imposing many Greek values on them.

³ See Leviticus 23.

⁴ See 2 Samuel 11.

So it was with the Jewish people who faced incredible challenges in this period to adapt to Greek life. Jews split into factions revolving, in part, around how much they were willing to acculturate to Greek ways of life, with the Sadducees going the furthest, the Pharisees resisting moderately and often passively, and other groups like Zealots and Essenes resisting with either fight or flight.

The Greeks valued human life on a clear scale of merit and birthright. Slaves, many leading teachers taught, were not fully human, and neither were foreigners, whom they called “barbarians.” The Greeks also devalued people with disabilities. At various times they practiced a ritual of purification, called the *pharmakos*,⁵ that involved using a single individual, often a beggar or cripple, to expiate the sins of the people or purge them of a plague. The ritual involved stoning the victim or driving him off a cliff. Were those disabilities revealed upon birth, the child would more than likely be abandoned. In Sparta, it was not even up to the parents whether a child could be kept, it was up to the will of the town council which inspected the child for strength and weighed its merit likely on a variety of practical considerations. It wasn’t just that Spartans were always afraid of running short of food, though. It’s that they devoted their lives to war, and they had little interest in weak people. The Spartans had an entire subjugated people group, the Helots, whom they kept as slaves. Part of their military training for youths might involve playing pranks on the Helots, stealing from them, or even secretly killing one. The Helots vastly outnumbered the Spartans, and part of the constant war-training was intended to keep the slaves enslaved.

Athens, though less warlike and lacking an authoritarian government that systematically killed infants, was only somewhat better. Some estimates are that at its high point, up to two thirds of the population of Athens was enslaved. Most of the philosophers like Aristotle, held that the slaves weren’t fully human, but there were some exceptions. Athenian aristocrats (usually men) lived and loved the high life. They generally avoided adultery for fear of producing illegitimate offspring but practiced serial pederasty—homosexual relations of older men with teenage boys or young adult men. Where the Old Testament required stoning both the man and the woman caught in adultery, no aristocratic male in Greek culture was in fear of his life for his sexual adventures, though a woman certainly had much to fear. The Athenian aristocracy thus also had strong motivation to practice abortion and infanticide, which they did. Any society built on owning and inheriting private property will criminalize adultery (usually for women) and create significant motivation to abort a child conceived illegitimately. Greek literature is filled with stories of infanticide in which we see it taken for granted. The famous story of Oedipus begins with attempted infanticide, which is not condemned, but seen as a normal and rational response to the circumstances. Their Olympic and other games show us the value Greeks had for life in that they valued virility, sexuality, and victory. The games were performed naked and not simply for aid in freedom of movement. Every culture has had games of a sort, Greeks are among the few we know of who intentionally chose to be naked during them. The very word “gymnastics” and “gymnasium” are related to “gymnos” or “naked.” So, the value of human life was highly

⁵ *Pharmakos* can be both the poison and the cure, and it is the source of our modern word “pharmacy.”

focused on youth and sexuality, and these values had the knock-on effect of devaluing the lives of those who could not live up to those standards to the point of normalizing the murder of the undesirable. Those societies that worship at the altars of phallic idols, as the Greeks and Romans did, would inevitably produce unwanted children.

This is the culture that conquered Persia who had ruled the people of the Old Testament. The Greeks desecrated the temple in Jerusalem, forced images into their holy places, and forced their gymnasia to be built in Jerusalem. This was a culture-clash of epic proportions, and the epic to read about it is found in the books of Maccabees and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*.

The Roman Empire

In the endless succession of empires, Greek political power dwindled as Rome arose. The Jews had thrown off the yoke of Greek oppression on their own, under the Maccabean leadership. But as it wavered due to in-fighting, later generations invited Roman aid which turned quickly into Roman dominion.

The Roman Empire was, above all, an organized society marked by legal structures. Among its most profound and long-lasting impacts was its institutional framework that still shapes much of European nations and those colonized by Europe.

In comparison with the declining remnants of Alexander's Greek empires, Rome was profoundly conservative, especially under Caesar Augustus, who reigned during Jesus' birth. Figures like the famous orator Cato the Elder upheld conservative family values as the bedrock of Roman society. Augustus seemed to agree and passed reforms prioritizing the family and childbearing. But much of this seems to be, with historical hindsight, so much hot air. Historians argue about how effective Augustan reforms were, and it was noted even in his own time that he didn't obey his own laws regarding the family.

For, it wasn't really the *family* that lay at the heart of Rome—even if the emperor styled himself the *paterfamilias* (father of the household) of Rome—it was the *father* as property owner that lay at its heart. There's a world of difference between the rigid controlling patriarchy of Rome and the family in which husbands are to "love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."⁶ Roman patriarchy was the foundation of Roman law. The *paterfamilias* was really the sole citizen of the household and everyone who was within that household was his property, including adult male sons and their families. Private property is a Roman legal concept that we tend to assume is the historical norm but is actually a Roman development and a Roman legacy. *Proprietas* is something that uniquely belongs to an individual. In Rome, property was defined as something one had the right to *usus*, *fructus*, *et abusus*. That is, one could use the property without altering it, one had the right to the produce or profit from it, and one had the right to exploit it, abuse it, alienate it, or sell it. This comprised the Roman notion of *dominium* or dominion. A *paterfamilias* held dominion rights over his whole family, land, and slaves.

⁶ Ephesians 5:25.

Unsurprisingly, in a society where fatherhood was seen as dominion, women, children, slaves, and foreigners suffered as the whole goal was to bring more under dominion. This also meant that Rome ended up providing incredible amounts of food welfare to those who had no property or provision of their own. So, the Roman writer Juvenal wrote about the constant need for “bread and circuses” as a reason for Roman imperial weakness at the end of the first century AD. One of the earliest pieces of Roman writing is Cato’s *De agri cultura*, or *On Agriculture*, which lays out how to run a family farm. He advises reducing food rations for sickly slaves, optimum ways to exploit slave labor, just as one would expect of an owner of human property.

Thus, life in Rome was subservient to the concept of property and the *paterfamilias*. Jesus’ statement “call no man father on earth” is not an encouragement for children to disrespect their parents, but a call to resistance against Roman family structures and the Roman emperor himself.⁷

The good life for a Roman was to find one’s place in the social hierarchy, try to advance if possible, and to acquire property. Roman retirement for its soldiers was often a reward of property confiscated from defeated enemies. This property meant the right to rents and would be a secure source of income to live an aristocratic life without work.⁸

Rome was built on the blood and appropriated land of conquered peoples. And in order to keep the masses of people with no property happy in their lives of labor that may or may not have had any hope of social advancement, Rome provided a significant amount of sport and blood sport. While Romans games were more family friendly than those of Greece on the sexuality front, as Romans wore clothes, many of their games revolved around death or at least the risk of death for animals and humans. Rome was bloodthirsty, and it built an efficiently run administrative empire to manage the fruit of this thirst.

Legally speaking, with Rome we find one of our first legal definitions of when life begins—at birth, not at conception. Thus, abortion was not criminalized in Rome. A child had to enter *in rerum naturum* or the world of things, and the mother’s womb was not considered such. This means Rome also did not prosecute prenatal manslaughter as murder in the way the Torah had outlined. Of course, if a woman aborted an heir of an important man, she might have hell and her life to pay at the hands of her husband-master.⁹ In any case, it was a family affair... an attitude we’ll see in Europe into the Renaissance. This law defining the start of human existence at birth comes from the time of Justinian (r. 527–565 AD), which is well after Rome was Christianized, a point we’ll return to in the Middle Ages. The church either wasn’t speaking to the issue publicly, or even in this time where it was supposedly empowered, it lacked the power to transform this definition.

⁷ Matthew 23:9.

⁸ Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard reveals a rather Roman understanding of property. The absentee landlord, the owner, is being usurped by workers turned squatters.

⁹ Some nuance is needed on this point. At various points in time, Roman women were given the right to divorce their husbands and the right to possess property, but this was more the exception than the rule.

New Testament and The Kingdom of God

The New Testament is separated from the Old by a world reshaped by Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The meaning and value of life derived from the Old Testament had undergone significant trials. But what is remarkable is how steadfast the Jews were in maintaining their traditions.

The New Testament, of course, does not communicate law in the way the OT does. This is partly theological and partly contextual. Jesus and his followers simply didn't have the social power to do anything about criminality. The Jews in Jesus' day did not possess the legal right to prosecute capital offenses but had to appeal to the Roman judiciary system. This is why Jesus had to go before so many different courts during his trials, and why Pilate had to ultimately sign the death warrant, even though he didn't want to. That being said, the New Testament does contain a few murders and attempted murders by Jews of other Jews without regard for Roman justice. Consider the woman caught in adultery in John 8, the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7, or the nearly fatal stoning of Paul in Acts 14. It is likely that Roman control over Jewish areas was always a little tenuous.

Regardless, the claims of Rome to supreme justice in capital cases signals a major transition from the Old Testament. The people of God are now subjects to pagans and they do not have the right to live out their faith. They now have to recontextualize their faith, sometimes by rebellion, sometimes by spiritualizing or compartmentalizing their faith, and sometimes by abandoning much of it by acculturation.

We see from the attempted murders of Jesus, and Paul, and the real murder of Stephen, that the Jewish people believed that the Torah was binding whether Rome liked it or not. They believed stoning blasphemers and adulterers was the right thing to do, when there were two or more eyewitnesses.¹⁰ What is Jesus doing by stopping a judicial execution with the woman caught in adultery? Participating with Roman ideas of justice, or reducing the severity of adultery? Neither, of course. He has a stricter teaching on adultery than even the OT did.¹¹ Perhaps Jesus recognized the futility of exercising the criminal justice of the Torah under Roman law. More likely Jesus was transforming a civil duty into a call to discipleship. Rather than stoning an adulteress, Jesus encourages those present to transform their own lives before judging. Indeed, this is a core theme of his teaching in the gospel: do not judge.¹² What this means for human life is that Jesus reshapes it away from "how do we create a civil society with laws and judicial systems" and toward "how do we become again the image of God as the people of God who can reveal the kingdom of God to the world subject to the power of the evil one?" This meant that Jesus

¹⁰ See Leviticus 24:16 and 20:10. Only, the man as well as the woman should have been stoned in John 8 according to Leviticus 20:10.

¹¹ Matthew 5:28.

¹² Matthew 7.

seems to be working against clear Torah requirements, since he believed that they were given to create disciples of God, rather than a stable, civil society.

Life, therefore, was not anyone's to take, since justice belongs to God alone in Jesus' teaching. Jesus, in his teaching about judgment, is teaching his followers to not engage in the process of evaluation, or assigning value. We do not have the legal right to assign the value of another person's life, especially since our own judicial lenses are blinded by the planks in our own eyes.

What about the socially undesirable groups of people who, in our time, face extermination in abortion, euthanasia, and eugenics? The New Testament doesn't say much directly to this topic in ways we might hope. But there are some important things to consider. The story of the man born blind in John 9 shows that Jesus did not believe disability is connected to human sin.

The story of Zacchaeus¹³ also shows us that Jesus valued the life of the enemy and the traitor, in ways similar to that of Elisha with Naaman the Syrian general.¹⁴ Zacchaeus was not simply a cheating tax collector, he was colluding with foreign oppressors. Imagine Jesus going to a Ukrainian village under Russian occupation where there have been documented cases of torture and other war crimes. Jesus goes to a Ukrainian who is working with a Russian provisional government, and asks to go to his house to hang out. We would understand the rage of the Ukrainian villagers. But Jesus didn't justify Zacchaeus in his sin, he got him to repent and be reconciled and forgiven by his fellow villagers. Jesus, in a sense, rescued a colluder by giving him strength to resist both his own greed and his desire to be on the side of the apparent "winners" regardless of the relational cost. Jesus restored Zacchaeus to his proper primary allegiance.

Jesus also welcomed the children to him and commended them as models of those who will inherit the kingdom.¹⁵ The "little children" (*paidia*) could have been anyone from an infant to a 7 or 8 year old. These were children "brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray." This suggests that these may have been children at a particularly vulnerable age, i.e. under 2 or 3, since they were brought in a way that suggests being carried or led by parents. Jesus is here proclaiming that his kingdom belongs to the weak and vulnerable. In context, the next story in Matthew is the rich young man, clearly given as a counter-example to the little children. The rich young man has everything he needs, including his own righteousness. Jesus tells him to become vulnerable and weak, dependent on others as a disciple of Jesus' band, who took nothing with them.¹⁶ What this shows is that Jesus thinks that we cannot value people based on their worldly success or treasure. While there is no direct command against abortion or

¹³ Luke 19.

¹⁴ 2 Kings 5.

¹⁵ Matthew 19:13–15.

¹⁶ See Mark 6:8; Luke 9:3.

infanticide in this, it would be impossible to square with Jesus' teachings that we imagine him commending people for aborting or abandoning the little ones to whom his kingdom belongs.

So, Jesus values the lives of the sinner, the disabled, the traitor, and the little child in a way that deeply challenges his contemporaries, and ourselves. For, it's not just that Jesus restricts his followers from ending the lives of the vulnerable before they've begun, it's that he also denigrates the values we hold up in our wider society of success, of self-sufficiency, of self-righteousness, of strict judicial conformity. Jesus is willing to break the law, as it were, by showing that no one of us has the right to condemn one another, sinners as we all are.

Thus, value of life in Jesus' teaching is contained in the exact same place it was in the Old Testament: the greatest commandments of loving God and one's neighbor. It is the life lived before God that has value. This is *abundant life*, for it is life drawn from its source. The woman at the well drew water from a hallowed well, but she still thirsted. Jesus promised a source of life better than Jacob's well, a source of endlessly satisfying living water in himself. So also, to the people who hungered after they saw he could feed them miraculous bread, he taught them that he was the source of life, the bread of heaven. He did not simply mean that he was "spiritual" bread and water, in opposition to a material sustenance. Jesus isn't "soul food" but not "food"! He meant that his kingdom reign would bring about the abundance which Isaiah promised as well.¹⁷ "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things [food, drink, clothing] will be given to you as well."¹⁸

Jesus thus reveals or unmask the source of our fears that lead to devaluing and even ending the lives of others—scarcity. The fear of hunger, of thirst, of not being able to provide a decent life for children, of not being able to care for a disabled child, all of these fears are exposed in Jesus' ministry for the life-denying belief that God has created a world of competition and scarcity. This is the human world where scarcity breeds scarcity through greed and waste. It is a world in which a community life-together before God as fellow creatures among God's creation is divided and conquered by the likes of the Roman Empire which comes with a message of fear, scarcity, greed, and advancement through conquest. As we'll see, our world today bears most of the signs of Rome, and not those of the Kingdom of God.

Roman and Medieval Europe

One of the earliest Christian sources after the New Testament, the *Didache* explicitly condemns the infanticide, abortion, and pederasty that was normalized in Greco-Roman culture. It says in Chapter 2, "You shall not commit pederasty... you shall not murder a child by abortion,

¹⁷ Isaiah 55:1–2.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:25–33.

nor kill that which is born." And later in Chapter 5, "The way of death is this:... murderers of children, destroyers of the handiwork of God."¹⁹

Pope John Paul II notes how widespread and longstanding the tradition against abortion is in the church:

Among the Greek ecclesiastical writers, Athenagoras [ca. 133–190], records that Christians consider as murderesses women who have recourse to abortifacient medicines, because children, even if they are still in their mother's womb, "are already under the protection of Divine Providence." Among the Latin authors, Tertullian [ca. 155–220] affirms: "It is anticipated murder to prevent someone from being born; it makes little difference whether one kills a soul already born or puts it to death at birth. He who will one day be a man is a man already."²⁰

The church, from its earliest days, has viewed the life of children, born or unborn, as well as other vulnerable people, as fully human. This is a teaching from which *the church* has not departed until recent generations. As we'll see, however, it was not true of Christian Europe in practice.

Early Christianity was pious, rigorous, and viewed sex with suspicion. Many of the patristic writers took on board Jesus' teaching that there is no marriage in the resurrection. And they held up Paul's teaching in the Bible to avoid marriage if possible.²¹ Saintliness and sexual purity went hand in hand, and that tended to mean rigorous abstinence, even total segregation of men from women. From stories of the earliest desert fathers like St. Anthony, tormented by demonic and sexual temptations, to the writings of Augustine who saw the call of Christ as a call to continence, to Eastern fathers like Gregory of Nyssa reconsidering what it means to be human beyond our gender or sexual differences in the resurrection, the patristic period was, to modern sensibilities, prudish. If their teachings were widely accepted, one would expect two things: a devaluation of this earthly life and its pleasures, and a reduction of the birthrate, which would reduce pressure on infanticides and abortions. What social impact beyond their monastic cloisters did this kind of teaching have? That is very hard to ascertain, but it is a vital question. For, if we read only the writings of the saints, we get a very one-sided picture of medieval Europe. From the legal history we can at least see that the church of the early Middle Ages had strikingly little political power to transform the perspective of kings and the powerful. It is tempting to believe that Constantine Christianized Rome and thus Europe overnight, but such was hardly the case. We saw that under Justinian I, a Christian emperor, that birth was defined as the legal beginning of human life. We have little evidence that this notion was challenged until the 1100's.

So, while the saints clearly valued the life of the soul and its purity, and Christian churches worked to help the "least of these" including widows, orphans, and others who were socially devalued, it does not seem that the church made significant legal inroads. Was this by lack of

¹⁹ Didache, accessed at <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>.

²⁰ Quoted from John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html

²¹ See Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:35; 1 Corinthians 7.

will, lack of ability, or a different strategy? A definitive answer is impossible, but we can venture an educated guess from the rest of the story of the Middle Ages.

Other early evidence about life and its value comes from medieval penitentials, a class of books written anonymously by monks or priests who developed manuals for priests who heard the sacrament of confession. These were a form of standard practices for proscribing penance for specific kinds of sins. They were very popular with regular priests since they compiled best practices. Among these are questions of what to do with confessions of abortion or infanticide. The basic takeaway from these penitentials is that life was of great value and ending the life of any innocent was a mortal sin. But they did not tend to have much legal impact on mainland Europe.

The lands of Celtic Christianity, on the other hand, do show evidence of profound Christian influence on the protection of life. For example, the *Law of Adomnan* (697), initiated by Adomnan the ninth abbot of Iona, contains legal codes for the protection of the innocent in times of war. But what is shown by this law and some similar ones in Europe is that although it sought to value life, it did so in a particular honor-based manner that allowed for the substitution of fines rather than strict retribution. This is seen throughout Germanic Europe with their notion of *wergild*, or schedules of fines describing how much money must be paid to the family of a murdered person based on that person's social rank. The murder of a king, for example, would be impossible to pay, but that of a slave would be far more affordable. These laws are examples of "civil law" rather than "criminal law." In civil law, offenses are compensated for financially, unlike in criminal law where capital punishment was possible. Celtic Christianity was always something of an outlier that Rome tried to subjugate to itself. And in this case, perhaps for the worse in terms of the church's ability to influence secular legal codes.

The passion and rigor of the saints was not observed in the regular ranks of the church of Roman Europe. Prostitution was widely tolerated in the Middle Ages, with the Council of Konstanz (1414–18) including officially sanctioned brothels.²² Along with the toleration of prostitution had to come either widespread practice of abortions or the development of a class of poor women with illegitimate children who were without hope of property.

Change would come partly through the church's own influence and through some of its most radical monks, like St. Dominic (1170–1221) and St. Francis (1181–1226) whose orders aimed to address many of the abuses within the church and within the wider society they saw, mainly beginning with the love of wealth that was leading to oppression of others and devaluation of the lives of the poor, thus echoing biblical prophets like Amos. Francis was known for nursing lepers, for example. The fact that we know this suggests that it was seen as exceptional. The same reforming spirit would eventually, in the Renaissance and Reformation, lead to significant legal reforms.

Church canon law began to consider the status of the unborn and when life begins in the interest of the protection of life. Canon law first described abortion as *crimen* or a legal crime

²² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap, 2007), 107.

(and not just a sin) in the late 12th century. In 1140, the legal theorist Gratian wrote that a fetus was not human until recognizably so with limbs, shape, and a soul, either 40 or 80 days into pregnancy, depending on whether it was a boy or a girl. Abortion was first criminalized in the 12th century in Bologna, Italy and was widely seen as homicide by 1250 in Roman Europe. That said, there are no records of a criminal trial for abortion until 1490 in Venice.

During this period, England remained an exception. English common law changed its earlier position on fetal existence by a return to the Roman law of Justinian. From 1307 through the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, English law held that infants had to be born into the nature of things, *in rerum natura*. Infanticide seems to have been practiced and rarely prosecuted because juries didn't want to convict. So legal historian Müller writes,

There is reason to believe that ordinary men and women frequently felt resentful toward court interference with their procreative choices and often rejected it as an unwarranted intrusion into family life.²³

As a further example of this he quotes from a town council meeting,

In Germany (Moravia) around 1353 a panel of towns people said of infanticide that a woman who "did away with her baby was not to be punished at all, for 'having delivered the child and owning it rightfully, she can suppress and kill it at will.'" ²⁴

Thus in Christianized Europe there remained something of the Roman legal notion of dominion in which the family had the rights of property (*usus, fructus, abusus*) over their children.

So, medieval Europe, at least the Romanized parts, seem to have retained the Roman love of privacy and private property in the household, while also retaining the Roman understanding that life begins at birth. At the same time, the church through its saints, monks, and lower priests, and eventually canon theologians, were arguing that life begins at conception or the moment of ensoulment (which is conception), and that these lives should be protected, or at least that those who harm them should do serious penance for their mortal sin of homicide.

Müller suggests that it wasn't the church's efforts alone that led to the criminalization of abortion in the Renaissance, but the transformation of justice from passive complaint-based ad hoc traditions, to a rigorous legal systematization that involved systems of inquiry, inquisition, and investigation.

After all, if the accusation of murder requires witnesses and a dead body, these would hardly be forthcoming in the case of a woman aborting a young fetus of her own will, or of the will of a whole family. It would take state-based investigations to effectively criminalize an act that rarely had a complaint.

This means we're left with something of a conundrum from this brief history of medieval Europe. If Müller is right that systematic and investigative justice was the larger factor, the

²³ Wolfgang P. Müller, *The Criminalization of Abortion in the West*, (Cornell University Press: 2012), 15.

²⁴ *Criminalization of Abortion in the West*, 15.

criminalization of abortion is as much a victory for a large, controlling, anti-privacy state, as it was for the church. And it reveals how the influence of the church was perhaps not as impactful and widespread as we might have assumed in the Middle Ages. While the church has always been about the care and protection of the innocent and unborn, Christendom was not. So, the question of criminality is indeed a (relatively) modern one. Is it the one the church should be asking? The issue divides into two directions. One: theologically speaking what kind of sin is abortion? Two: if it is a criminal offence equivalent to infanticide what is the church's role in enforcing or demanding the enforcement of a particular understanding of criminality within the state? This is a political theological question, for it asks what role the church should play. Should canon law lead modern state criminal legal policy? Certainly, this is antithetical to the US Constitution. How then can the church provide and protect the unborn?

Medieval saints, some of whom enjoyed secular power like Adomnan of Iona, and others who were rogue-operators until the church officially sanctioned their work like St. Dominic or Francis, all alike were passionate about the "least of these" and worked in their own contexts to do what they could.

What we see from this history as well is that the same movements that criminalized abortion are the ones that systematized theology. Law and theology developed together. What does this mean for theology going forward without lawyers asking the same questions and engaging with us in dialogues like those enjoyed by Adomnan or John Calvin?

In other words, the modern issue of the protection of life has become an issue of strategy for those who, like the vast majority of Christian witnesses prior, have seen abortion and infanticide, not to mention euthanasia, as sin. It raises the question of how we can publicly state and defend our definition of sin within a state institution that does not recognize the category of "sin" only "crime."

Reformation to Secularism

By the 1500s secular imperial authorities in Europe prosecuted abortion regularly based on an earlier developed doctrine of creationism. Creationism holds that God creates the individual soul of a person at the moment of conception. Protestant theologians argued strongly for creationism at the moment of conception. The traditional theological basis for life and its value comes from the soul and God its creator, not from "life" as an abstraction. Thus, it follows that the move to arguments against abortion as the ending of a life are not technically rooted in solid theological tradition. Rather, they too represent a secularization of a theological argument. For, the soul has no place in the secular public square. It has been totally redefined by fields like psychology. The "soul" is now understood, if at all, to simply be the brain. Thus, our modern debates about life revolve around capacities, abilities, the moment of particular physiological changes, all of which define something as "human" and thus of value to protect.

But we'll get back to the soul in another chapter. For now, we simply need to finish this history. While the history of prosecution of acts like abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, varies

from the Reformation until now, it seems evident that the recent and rapid move to decriminalize abortion has less to do with the return to a kind of privacy that the people of the Middle Ages enjoyed when there were no strong states with investigative branches. Rather, the move to decriminalize abortion has everything to do with a return to the old Roman understanding of property and the beginning of life. The private property of the individual is a foundational doctrine of modern Western legal codes. The legal right to abortion is construed as the legal right to terminate a non-human defined, once again, as the Romans did 1500 years ago, and the English in the Tudor period, as when someone enters into the “real world” or *in rerum natura*.

And we can also see a return to some particularly aristocratic features of both Greek and Roman cultures. We again enjoy some forms of human blood sport, if only in film or video game form. Ancient Christian theologians would be horrified that Christians observe, play, and are entertained by simulated killing, rape, and torture. After all, desert fathers like St. Anthony were plagued by dreams in which they were tempted sexually. If the dream is a demonic temptation to avoid, what is the computer simulation, but a purposefully pursued dream where fantasies are lived out? That we live to please ourselves by expressing power over others by devaluing their lives (i.e. killing them), indicates that we are not among “the least of these” who are suffering these very violations, but are viewing them from the safe distance of an audience in a gladiatorial arena.²⁵

Greeks and Romans worshipped gods of virility. There are countless archaeological artifacts of phallic idols, not to mention the widespread pornography of a city like Pompeii. The incredibly widespread use of pornography today may constitute a modern counterpart to this kind of phallus worship, that itself results in a devaluation of women and children. It is a worship of the thing and what it can do for oneself rather than of what it does in fulfillment of the divine command to procreate. This leads, inevitably and in spite of modern contraception, to unwanted pregnancies, in which the men have little ongoing responsibility and can treat lightly the choices of a woman about her future. We have to recognize that sexual liberality is itself a feature, not of patriarchy, but of a kind of paternal irresponsibility that historically only belonged to the rich.

The Old Testament with its inexpressibly high value of life, and the New Testament with its command to go beyond justice to love one’s enemies in the love of God is the call of the church. But we have to observe that there has always been a gulf between the teaching of theologians and the lived reality of the laity. At times, the church has sought the state’s intervention to criminalize and prosecute abortion and infanticide, at other times, it was retained as sin, but the church did not seek to use secular judiciary methods of prosecution, keeping to forms of discipleship (penitence).

Going forward, the church must decide on the relevance and value of its strategic possibilities for protection of the vulnerable and how that accords with its primary mission of being the people of God as ambassadors of the kingdom of God.

²⁵ This isn’t a holier-than-thou moment. I have played and been entertained by my fair share of violent video games, especially during my teenage years.

Chapter 6

Christian Orthodox Foundations

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Creation Out of Nothing

The first, and perhaps most obvious, place to look for the definition of life and its value is in the doctrine of creation. Christian orthodoxy has upheld *creatio ex nihilo* as a foundational belief, and for good reason. The nothingness out of which God created means that God created all value. There was no-thing that was good prior to the creation (since God isn't a thing). There is no other source for good things than God. All value must ultimately begin in God and rest in God. Thus, whatever value life has, it must ultimately stem from God and his declaration of its goodness. So, we see in the creation account of Genesis 1 that God declares the goodness both of elements of the creation, and of the whole integrated into a community of life lived in his presence.

This means that any value that humans try to observe or create is either in imitation of God and thus participation in his character of love, or it is in rebellion against God. James thus says "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."¹ Every good thing, that is everything of value is a *gift*. Value is a gift, not something that lies within things themselves. Paul says, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."² But not everything that exists in the world now is created by God, and it raises the question of how our rebellion in sin tries to create alternate goods independently of God. We do not create *ex nihilo*, nor do we participate in God's creation. We *make* things by altering creation.³ We make value by *making* a name for ourselves.⁴ This doesn't simply mean gaining fame by impressive achievements, but it's an act of defining ourselves and evaluating ourselves. To this Christian orthodoxy says that true value comes out of nothing, not out of anything that is made.

What is life? It is a good gift of God and it has value as a *gift* in a relationship with God. It is part of the whole of God's creation which is *very good*, even as it has been subjected to the reign of sin, evil, and death. So, the value of life is found also in the recovery of its very goodness, in God's rescue or salvation, and his reconciliation of all things to himself in *new creation*.⁵

¹ James 1:17.

² 1 Timothy 4:4.

³ The Old Testament rigorously distinguishes between creating (*bara*, בָּרָא) and making (*asah*, עָשָׂה). Only God creates.

⁴ Genesis 11:4.

⁵ Colossians 1:20.

The Image of God and the Only Begotten

What is the image of God upon which so much Christian thinking about human value rests?

If we want to know what it means to be human and what value our lives have, we can either turn to the creation itself or to Christ, to creation or to eschatology. Genesis 9 protects human life by reference to the notion that all people are made in the image of God. This is affirmed by ECO's Essential Tenets. Paul, however, says that only Jesus is the exact image of God, and that we are predestined to become like Jesus, the image. So which is it, are all humans the image of God, or will we become the image? Is the image lost and recovered? And just what is the image?

There is perhaps no more misunderstood concept in the Bible. It is such a convenient idea to connect some aspect of humanity to God in ways that we can utilize for ethics to either justify who we already are, or encourage us to be more like. So the image of God has often been described in terms of specific human attributes or functions like creativity, rationality, relationality, etc. The thinking goes that we can be more fully human by being like God, by using our creativity, for example. This line of reasoning is sometimes used to justify or commend working in secular spaces as a divine calling.

But modern biblical scholars have arrived at "a new consensus" that the image of God refers to people in their entirety, not in one or other aspect or function.⁶ The image of God is about connection to God and reflection of God in a holistic way. It is not about what humans can or cannot do, nor does it tell us about the essence of "what it means to be human."

The reason biblical theologians have disagreed with the image-as-aspect is because of cultural context. In the Ancient Near East, the image of God was not a concept unique to Israel or the Bible. However, it was only given to kings or pharaohs outside of Israel.⁷ The radical teaching of Genesis is that all humans bear God's image. An image is similar to an idol. So, some scholars have pointed out that *we are God's idols* and *God's icons*.⁸ This is the reason for prohibiting the making of images of God or idols. Idolatry is a form of refusal of our responsibility, and a misidentification of who God is by associating him with other creatures.

And yet, there are limits to what the image could mean. First of all, the image must be a reflection of God in some way, but we know that humans are not like God in many ways.⁹ And the image means there is a special connection with God in some way.

⁶ John Frederic Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny* (Eerdmans: 2015), 80.

⁷ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 50ff.

⁸ Remember that "idol" comes from the Greek word *eidolon* (εἶδωλον) for "image."

⁹ Isaiah 55:8.

In the ancient world, this was how symbols normally worked. Where we sometimes think of signs as empty, or merely pointing to something, ancient people believed that micro-signs participated in a single reality of that to which they pointed. This was how magical thinking worked. The thought was that if someone could influence a small sign of the larger thing, the larger thing would be changed. Symbolizing rain might make it rain. So too with the gods, offering a sacrifice to the image was offering it to the god, really and truly, even if everyone knew that the image wasn't the god. Of course, the Old Testament doesn't follow this line of thinking, and so there's no sense that God himself could be touched by an attack on his images. But it does show that blasphemy of the image of God, debasing human beings, would be *like* an attack on God or God's honor.

But like the kings of the ancient world, the image wasn't just a representation of a god who did nothing. Images were specific representations of the character of that god. Idols present a specific aspect of a god. God has a kind of relationship to the creation, as its king. Thus, understanding the image of God requires us to know the character of God. Genesis 1:26 clearly makes the "image" equivalent to a function of dominion, just as would be expected of a king or emperor. Now, humans do not get to do this because of their rebellion, but it does stand both as part of our created purpose, and our eschatological destiny.¹⁰

But we have to be wary of oversimplifying this image or making the connection part of *being* human. Often conversations about the image of God are limited to what can be gathered from Genesis 1 and 9. After all, the Old Testament doesn't really refer to the concept again after Genesis 9.

Richard Lints suggests that it's not that the concept disappears in the Old Testament, it's that it's transformed into *idolatry*. The language of the image changes, which indicates a larger theological point the Old Testament is making,

This is clear in at least two ways: at the point where the language of the image drops out, the language of idolatry becomes more prominent; and secondly the re-emergence of the language of 'imaging' is most strongly connected to the arrival of Jesus Christ, who is both the restorer of the *image of God* and the one who ultimately breaks the power of the idols by overcoming the temptations of the evil one.¹¹

Thus, a theology of the image of God must take the whole sweep of the biblical narrative into account.

The New Testament has much to say about the topic, and it is clear that Jesus Christ alone *is* the image of God, not humanity as a species.¹² Paul is also clear that the image of God is something to *attain* by maturity. The image of God is a mature form of humanity whose firstfruit

¹⁰ See Revelation 22:5, also the language of inheriting the kingdom in Jesus' and Paul's teaching shows a shared rulership notion, for only kings inherit kingdoms, not subjects.

¹¹ Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, (IVP: 2015), 80.

¹² See 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15.

is Jesus, through whom we can also become mature image-bearers.¹³ Christ, is the exact image of God¹⁴ but we are in the image-likeness. So Kilner observes with Augustine and Aquinas, that there can be different kinds of images.¹⁵ Our call is to be like God, to be specially related to him and to represent him, and we do this by imitation of Christ who is the exact imprint of the image of God, i.e. the same thing (*homoousios*).

Paul describes the gospel of the image in the book of Romans. In Romans 1:23 he describes sinful humans as exchanging the “glory of the immortal God” for “images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” Here he indicates that there is an exchange happening in which humans no longer represent God and reveal his glory, but worship, serve, and become like the images they make for themselves from created things. The catalogue of sins he goes on to describe originate in the rejection of being the image of God. This is contrasted with the “image of his Son” in Romans 8:29 to which followers of Jesus are predestined to be conformed. This process of moving from idolatry to image must come through joining Jesus in his death and resurrection.¹⁶ Paul again talks about the gospel of the image in 1 Corinthians 15. In verse 49, we are said to be born in the image of the “man of dust” but in the resurrection “we shall bear the image of the man of heaven.” So, it seems that for Paul, humans must undergo the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in order to bear his image, which is the image of God.

This way of talking worries some modern writers, like Kilner. He sees that older theologians who freely played with the concept of a broken or effaced image (the list is long and famous) do damage to human dignity, a concept enshrined in many declarations of human rights. Kilner thinks that we must maintain human dignity rooted in the image of God, which is not broken or lost based on either sin or disability. We cannot judge the value of other people based on how well they embody the attributes that make up a functional or attributive definition of “human.” On that count, he is correct. If we misuse the image of God to refer to human attributes, we inevitably make people less human and thus of less value. We must put away any kind of talk of “being more fully human” as though that were some good in itself to attain, or that we could actually become more human if we wanted to. But while we cannot become more human, we can become more Christlike, and thus more like to the exact image of God through discipleship and sanctification. The message of Jesus is fairly simple on this point—we must become what we are not by nature or by birth—like God in Jesus.

¹³ Romans 8:29 talks about predestination in terms of an eventual conformity to the image of God in Christ. Colossians 1:15 sees Christ as the unique image of the invisible God, and Colossians 1 goes on to see the Christ as the head of his body, the church, so that it is through inclusion in his people that we participate in the image of God. In Ephesians 4:13, Paul further describes the church as the people within whom we are made mature humans, which is the measure of Christ.

¹⁴ Hebrews 1:3.

¹⁵ *Dignity and Destiny*, 53.

¹⁶ See Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 126.

So, we come to a major problem in talking about the image of God—can it be lost or effaced, can the image cease pointing to God—and if so, does it thereby lose its value or dignity?¹⁷ Modern democratic thinkers cannot tolerate any thinking that goes in this direction because it undermines the “moral fiction” of inherent human rights upon which democratic orders are built.¹⁸ The problem with this notion of dignity and rights-based thinking, is that it simply isn’t represented in Scripture. The notion of “rights” is unknown in the ancient and medieval world. Whether or not human rights exist cannot be argued from the Bible or from the image of God and we have to be wary of using biblical concepts to justify modern philosophical ideas. Writers like Kilner have to make use of some creative metaphors to try and defend their point. Kilner uses the idea of a blueprint to refer to God and ourselves as houses made in the image of that blueprint. Kilner notes that, no matter how transformed a house is, its blueprint hasn’t changed. We were created in the image of God and that doesn’t change. Certainly. But if a house becomes so dilapidated that it is unlivable, it is no longer a house, but a ruin, and the blueprint is no longer modelled by the actual non-building. Kilner, in seeking to maintain human dignity, ultimately must reject original sin, at least according to the Reformed idea of total depravity. Yes, the blueprint doesn’t change, God doesn’t change, but if sin touches every aspect of our lives, then it seems like we’re no longer using the house as a house. Human life is no longer fulfilling the function of the image of God. A sound house building used to produce or distribute drugs, house modern slaves, or serially abuse family members transforms the building from its intended purpose as a home into a nightmarish mockery of its intention. Nevertheless, because we were *created* in the image of God, and that creation is not undone by our sin, it remains an assault on God’s honor, an act of blasphemy, to misuse humans. That is, to misuse a house, to continue the metaphor, is to insult God who is its creator.

Paul uses a similar line of reasoning with the body of Christ being united to a prostitute in 1 Corinthians 6, when one member of a church is engaged in sexual immorality and the church community is tolerating it. The act was blasphemy against Jesus, because it involved *his* body. In the New Testament, the image of God is taken up in *union with Christ* language. No longer does the NT talk about creation, but about eschatology. The image of God is Jesus and only by being in Christ can we attain likeness to God.

Those who try to retain universal human dignity by the image of God, thus end up creating a way around Christ to God, through a recovery of human nature and natural law. Some have even tried to do this *through* Jesus by seeing Jesus as the source of all humanity and thus the source of the image of God in everyone.¹⁹ C. Kevin Rowe thinks that this was the remarkable teaching of early Christianity, that Jesus was in everyone because Jesus is the image of God and humans are created in God’s image. I’m not qualified enough in Patristic literature to debate the point there, but I do think it is highly problematic from a biblical point of view. Nothing in the

¹⁷ Dignity comes from the Latin *dignitas* which refers to the worth of someone for office-holding. It’s a merit-based, value concept at its core.

¹⁸ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: 1981), 66–67.

¹⁹ C. Kevin Rowe’s *Christianity’s Surprise* (Abingdon: 2020) is one example.

NT justifies the idea that Jesus is *in* everyone because they are human, nor that humanity bears the image of Jesus. Rather, it is clear that Jesus *can be* a second Adam for those adopted into his lineage, his family, his kingdom. One must be *born again*, not just born, to be the image of Jesus.

The Roman Catholic church has also been a stalwart defender of human rights because they practice natural theology and believe that the truth about God to some extent can be known through creation (and thus through human beings). Reformed theology has usually rejected this way of thinking. This way of thinking has a political benefit. It allows us to enter the public square with a common good and common source of knowledge in mind—the human creature. The question will need to be, what is the cost of entering this public square? We have to transform our understanding of sin so that it does not touch our minds and senses to the point that we can believe in a universal, absolute truth accessible, to some degree, without knowledge of God. Sin is merely seen as a hindrance on this quest. To the Reformed perspective, though, sin is a disability. There is no knowledge of God without his own self-revelation, and human nature is a totally untrustworthy source for knowledge of God. We cannot look at humanity and see God or Jesus. It is only by knowing grace that we know sin, and thus only by grace that we know ourselves. It is only by knowing Jesus that we can know humanity and its depravity.

One further point to observe about the image of God is that it generally refers to offspring, at least offspring of a sort. Genesis 5 restates that God made Adam and Eve in his image, and then it goes on to say that Adam fathered a son in his own image and likeness, Seth. But Seth is (at least) the thirdborn child of Adam! What about Cain and Abel? Chapter 4 just described the lineage of Cain the firstborn, beginning with his murder of his younger brother Abel. Chapter 4 shows what people in the image of Cain are like—murderers who, in the seventh generation, have so perfected the character of Cain that Lamech can boast of his sevenfold vengeance. Cain is not a “son” but an illegitimate child of God, since those who are “without discipline are illegitimate children, and not sons.”²⁰ Thus, Cain is to the image of God as a bastard is to a king—someone without future prospects but who is still treated with a measure of grace.

Seth is Abel’s replacement, and a clear rejection of Cain. Seth is the image and likeness of Adam, unlike Cain. Seth will establish a lineage of righteous, Godfearing people. It is only when Seth has a son Enosh, that people begin to “call upon the name of the Lord.”²¹ And the seventh generation in Seth’s lineage is so godly that Enoch is taken up into heaven without death. So, in Seth we see the notion of the image reborn and contrasted with Cain. And from the lineage of Cain until the end of the book of Revelation, the Bible tells a story of two lineages, two likenesses. It does this through genealogy.

Thus, when the NT talks of Jesus as the only true son of God, the “only begotten,” it is clarifying that the children of Seth, Noah, and Abraham are not fully the image and likeness of

²⁰ Hebrews 12:8.

²¹ Genesis 4:26.

God in the same way Jesus is. Jesus is a child of Adam through Seth,²² on the one hand, but also uniquely the Son of God. But we can be called children of God, and thus grow into the image of the Son, which is the true image of God.²³ The Bible thus sees the notion of the image as, in some way, passed on generationally rather than through species-identity. And this makes sense, as it fits the ancient cultural context far better than a biological or philosophical definition of “humanness.” But, if this is the case, it is questionable as to whether the Bible sees the lineage of Cain as properly the image of God, or if it is separating the two lineages into two images based on *character*. Thus, when the flood comes, the lineage of Cain is (seemingly) cut off and destroyed. Nevertheless, it reasserts itself in Noah’s sons Ham and Japheth, especially Ham, who fathers the nations that will destroy Israel (Babylon and Assyria)²⁴ and who culminate the lineage of Cain with the building of Babel—a city that functions as the image of rebellious humanity. This image of Babylon will also be used by the book of Revelation to contrast with the image of God in the heavenly Jerusalem.²⁵

But how does one become part of this people, this lineage? In Jesus’ day the assumption was it was by being of the lineage of Abraham. Jesus challenged this view by saying that true children do the works of their parents. It is by their fruit that you know their lineage.²⁶ How do we do the works of Abraham? Jesus is claiming that he is bringing a new/old way that Abraham represented. To be a child of God requires adoption, the choice of God. But it also requires bearing appropriate fruit.²⁷ It is the work of the Holy Spirit that transforms individuals to make them into children of God who do the works of Abraham, of Jesus, of God. And by being welcomed into this lineage, we are made inheritors of the kingdom of God.

So, put simply, it seems both OT and NT submit the concept of image to lineage and to character. So, while all are *created* in the image of God, because Adam was in the image of God, it seems to matter who their parents are as to what image they bear. Respect comes from the fact God created the whole of “sons of Adam and daughters of Eve,”²⁸ even if most of their offspring are wayward and follow the pattern of Cain, Lamech, and Ham. Jesus doesn’t mince words, calling this lineage of “the devil” saying that it is the will of these people to do their father’s desires.²⁹

²² Luke 3:38. Note also how he is the son of Enoch, who walked with God and did not die but was taken up.

²³ See John 1:12; Romans 9:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 John 3:1, 10. Note especially how John 3:10 contrasts the lineage of children of God and children of the devil based on practice.

²⁴ Genesis 10.

²⁵ See Revelation 18.

²⁶ See John 8, especially verse 39.

²⁷ 1 John 3.

²⁸ To quote CS Lewis’ *Narnia*.

²⁹ John 8:44.

Redemption is the rescue of those who were made in the image of God by returning them to their true lineage. This is to be “born again” or “born from above” by the Spirit.³⁰ This is to put on the new self, being renewed after the image of its creator.³¹ The gospel of Jesus is a return of people to the image of God by redeeming them from a false paternity in the devil. Thus, it is through Jesus that we become the image of God and join a lineage of godly people who do the works of Abraham.

This more full and more integrated biblical theology of the image as family again raises the problem with the image of God as setting the foundation for human value. It is the lineage of the devil, Lamech, and Cain who are the murderers and the lineage of Ham who are sexually immoral. How are they worthy of the respect accorded to the image of God when the Bible suggests that they are the image of rebellion? There is little in the Bible to suggest that the *image* is the source of value for them. Rather, it is the eschatological vision and mission of the church that provides value to rebels. Value is not set by human species, by lineage, or by personal righteousness, but by the fact that God so values us that he laid down his life for his enemies.

In other words, Jesus teaches that we are to love our enemies and seek their good. This radically transforms how we engage in an ethic of life. Instead of respect and dignity, we have love. Instead of honoring some high and noble thing that is really a fiction (rights) standing in for children of rebellion and murder, we “have the mind of Christ” described in Philippians 2.

What this means ethically is that we should expect that the world acts like its father, the devil and Cain. It seeks to build a city shut off from God’s influence where it can make up its own law of good and evil. This lineage exploits the creation for its private pleasure, not wanting to even think about the cost of its existence, or that of future generations. This lineage soothes its conscience with talk of human rights, while denying the humanness of those who seem burdensome.

The image of God in all people is useless in a public square that rejects God-talk as a rule of entry. And it is useless to Christians who might try to find something redeemable in their enemies and love that element in them. Our call, in Christ, is to love our enemies and even give our lives for them. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”³² That is, while we were children of the devil, Jesus died for us. So we are called to live for others, not recognizing a fiction in them, but loving them because Christ loved us.

Thus, it seems to me that Lints is more correct than Kilner or Rowe. The image has been exchanged for idolatry, and humans no longer represent God, but their own creations. We no longer fit our place in God’s creation, nor can we express God’s true dominion. Instead, we lord it over one another, over the creation, all while imitating idols of our own making. While we were created in the image of God, we do not reveal him, and so do not function as an image. It is only

³⁰ See John 3.

³¹ Colossians 3:10.

³² Romans 5:8.

by becoming like Christ that we bear the image of God, and that comes only through death and resurrection *with Christ*.

This means we must, all the more, have the “mind of Christ” by not being “conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind....” It also means that rather than turning to *law* to *protect* the vulnerable, a luxury Christianity only had during a relatively narrow period of time, Jesus teaches us to go on the offensive through *love*.

In sum, the image of God is insufficient grounds for the establishment of human value. The Bible doesn’t give humans value as though it belonged to them, nor does it demand we not kill others out of respect for dignity. It demands that we become like Christ by loving our enemies. The world will not do this and its legal and moral fictions of rights will not overcome the sin rooted in a foundational idolatry.

The Ensouled Human

Historical evidence from most every place and time has shown that humans believe in powers that lie beyond the scope of the body. Call them spirits, souls, gods, angels, demons, ancestors, manitou, the belief in supernatural beings is so incredibly widespread as to almost be universal. The biblical tradition likewise maintains belief in the something beyond the natural world—powers that animate otherwise dead matter.

Although later Christians have debated the exact definition of humans and how they are composed of body and soul, orthodoxy has held that there is such a thing as a deathless soul that is created by God. Long before Plato and Greek philosophy famously discussed how the soul was divided into two, three, or more parts, the Old Testament assumes that humans are integrated souls. The conclusion of the above chapter about “Life and its Value in the Old Testament” was that life in the OT was assumed to be unified—body, soul, spirit, life, heart, mind, kidneys, all had enough crossover meaning that it would be impossible to say where a “soul” begins and ends. Further, the self is thoroughly *relational* in the Old Testament.

The New Testament shares many of the same beliefs as the Old Testament about human composition. But it differs in that it starts to show a more thorough dualism between body and soul or flesh and spirit. This is nowhere as absolute as a Plato would have, however. Jesus makes the eternity of the soul the great value for which one need not fear death.³³ So long as one belongs to God, the body may die, but God will sort it out so that we are not abandoned to death. That is, we will be raised from the dead with Christ. What matters to Jesus is being on God’s side, adopted into the lineage of Christ (Seth, Noah, Abraham, etc.), rather than being in the lineage of Cain and the evil one.

Modern secularism tends to have no place for the soul, or if it does, it is seen as relegated to an immaterial spiritual realm alone. Thus, those who believe in the soul tend to operate with

³³ Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4.

a bifurcated notion of reality in which souls are trapped in the body and seek escape to their proper home in heaven where they will live in a disembodied and free existence forever. Similar notions are found, and made popular, through Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and other eastern metaphysical beliefs. Reincarnation, the cycle of karma, the desired union of the soul with the universe, have become popular (and frequently misunderstood) beliefs in the modern West. These were not new ideas to the Western world when Eastern literature was heavily translated in the 19th century into English, since Plato considered many of them as well. But the East-West encounters of the last few hundred years have led to a renewed popularity of the soul as an eternal being that finds itself trapped. Much of the modern quest for the self, for authenticity, for identity affirmation, has roots in this vision of a true self trapped by the bonds of material reality. Somehow, to find the self is to experience liberation, enlightenment. Though, in contrast with ancient philosophies, the desire is usually social affirmation rather than escape from the flesh to merge with the universe.

The Christian vision of the soul is somewhat different and unique. Christians have believed that the soul is created by God in a fetus. How this happens was debated during the Reformation. Traducianism, often associated with Lutheranism, taught that the soul was created at conception by the act of conception, so that the soul was a product of human reproduction. Creationism is more widely represented in history and in the Reformed tradition, in which it is held that God himself creates the soul at the moment of conception. This was important for debates about how original sin works, whether Jesus had a sinful soul because of his human mother (and thus the immaculate conception), whether sin was contained in male sperm rather than the ovum (so Jesus could be sin-free by being fatherless), etc.

The debates about mechanism aside, the Bible affirms that souls are not eternal, but are created.³⁴ They are destined to eternal life,³⁵ but have not existed eternally. They are unique, and do not move between different hosts. Indeed, bodies are not “hosts” to souls at all, but an integral part of the whole. The soul is created at conception, and is unique to a person. There is no reincarnation, no movement of the soul outside of the body, except into the care of God.

The Christian, therefore, hopes in the resurrection of the body, not in the freedom of the soul. The Christian hopes in the renewal of all creation in which he or she will be part as the image of God in Christ. Thus, the value of life does not lie in the body alone. Those who hope only in this life are to be pitied, according to Paul.³⁶ Perhaps no better, more succinct book has been written about the meaninglessness of even the most mature and wise human fleshly life than the book of Ecclesiastes. Human life is “chasing the wind.” It is filled with vanity. Generations come and go and memories of our lives fade away. What’s the point of it? Ecclesiastes indeed represents the end of wisdom. Where the Proverbs were largely written to a young man entering into a life of leadership or nobility, Ecclesiastes is the lifelong reflections of

³⁴ See Ecclesiastes 11:5; Psalm 139:13–14.

³⁵ Annihilationism is a minor and modern position in Christian history.

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:19.

such a person. If we live for this life alone, we have not understood life. For, what is temporary and fading is of similar value.³⁷ If all we are is this life, our value will inevitably be diminished, and the quality of our life becomes a competitive battle to gain the most notoriety and fame, to achieve the most, so that our memory and value can endure but a bit longer.

At the same time, if we live for some future eternity with scant regard for this life, we also have not understood life and the good news of resurrection. Christian orthodoxy believes in the ascension, that Jesus took on flesh and *never will give it up*. God himself chose to become human and share with us our destiny *for eternity*, not just for the duration of his earthly life.

We cannot separate the resurrection of the body from the coming of the kingdom of God, which “will have no end” according to the Creed. The resurrection comes at the time of the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. And so, the hope of the Bible is for the return of the king, his just judgment, and his defeat of death that holds our bodies in bondage to decay. It is only in resurrection that the soul finds its full expression in the Christlike flesh.

And yet, modern secularism has pushed this view to the realm of private spirituality. We have been stripped of the biblical source of the value of life in relationship to our Creator and Redeemer, in the meaning of the image of God. We are legally prevented from using the grounds of human value in meaningful public conversation for the purpose of legislation. The great temptation is to abandon talk of the soul and find alternate non-spiritual grounds upon which to rest the value of the human: life, ability, capacity, humanness, sentience, whatever other inevitable failure of an ethical model secular ethicists try to identify to maintain the “moral fiction” of inherent human rights.³⁸

A healthy Christian public ethic of life must involve a revival of a biblical understanding of the human as being given life and meaning with God. Finding value outside of God is to deny the image of God and turn to worldly sources of value, which, as we saw, is the heart of idolatry.

Creation and Eschatology

Christian theology must make a foundational choice in how it thinks about ethical issues. Will we focus on what was lost in Eden and attempt to regain that by some method, or do we focus on what is coming in the new creation when heaven and earth are reconciled? The first method tries to ascertain created structures and, by natural law, attempts to conform human behavior to what it ought to be or have been in God’s creation. The second method looks to the way things will be in resurrected and reconciled life, and tries to use human behavior as a sign of hope that points in this direction (if imperfectly). Put another way, is the good archaeological or eschatological? Which direction do we point, to what was lost, or to what is coming?

³⁷ Isaiah 40:7–8.

³⁸ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: 1981), 66–67.

The answer, when put in this way is obvious. The Bible is not a story about the return to Eden, to nakedness without shame. It is a story that revolves around the resurrected king who bears the scars of crucifixion, the slain lamb, who clothes us in robes of white. Our nakedness is not recovered and we do not return to natural law. Our nakedness is covered and we move beyond sin in maturity. Adam and Eve were naïve children. Maturity in Christ is adult.

In conversations about the meaning and value of human life, and what this means, we must resist the urge to appeal to natural theology as a sufficient basis for a general ethic. Christianity offers no good that is not grounded in the command “Be reconciled!”³⁹ And the method of reconciliation is nothing other than union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Eschatological ethics reminds us that our mission is to be ambassadors of the kingdom of God, to reveal its presence to the world, not to tell the world that we can return, without Christ, to some form of collective human thriving and civility by living according to a divine plan. Creation-based ethics that lean heavily on Genesis 1-2 inevitably lead to a form of Pelagianism, the belief that we can save ourselves by good behavior.

The trouble is not simply that natural law is insufficiently good, it’s that the natural law of creation has been effaced by human artifice. The more we live in socially constructed worlds, in concrete, glass, and steel worlds, or in virtual worlds, the less “nature” of God’s creation we encounter. Consider the Psalmist of Psalm 19 laying in the middle of Times Square. “The heavens declare the glory of Coke. The sky above proclaims corporate handiwork. Day to day pours out tweets, night to night reveals advertisement.” It’s only half a joke to say this, for there are no real stars in New York City’s sky, and there is no sky for the smog of Kolkata. To say to the child who has never seen a cow but only a burger (which comprises a depressingly large percentage of the American population), to consider natural law is absurd.

A theological ethic of life must be eschatological and must be about resurrection. Plenty in Church history have worked in this very way, all the way back to Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 130–202 AD) who taught that Christ recapitulates all of human history and gathers it up in himself.

What does an eschatological ethic look like? Rather than offering legal commands, it offers a vision of what could be and provides steps to take to get there. “The kingdom of God is like...” and “The kingdom of heaven belongs to the...” This is how Jesus taught, by making pictures that play upon the desire for justice and the desire for beauty. An eschatological ethic of life has to focus on creating communities in which abundant life, to the extent we can manage it, is offered. Rather than focusing on telling people what not to do, not to abort an infant or euthanize the elderly, the church must create contexts in which the unwanted child and incapacitated person are able to experience life. This doesn’t mean churches can’t fight for social reform to reduce the felt need of abortion or euthanasia. But it does mean the church can be circumspect that those living in the lineage of Cain have no contact with a divinely created natural law to which they can reliably be expected to conform and obey without the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

³⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

Chapter 7

Reformed Theology on Life and Value

GP Wagenfuhr

This chapter offers a quick survey of some Reformed theological themes that influence our discussion of life and its value.

Third Use of the Law

ECO's Essential Tents base their moral teachings on the Ten Commandments in a way that is particular or peculiar to the Reformed tradition. This is the *third use of the law* or *tertium usus legis*. The "first use" of the law restrains sin. "Do not envy" should restrain our envy. The "second use" of the law convicts us of sin and points us to our need of Christ. The third use is normative in that it teaches us how to live. The third use of the law interprets "Do not envy" positively with "cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us."¹

In the case of life, the Reformed tradition has looked to the Ten Commandments, with Jesus' refinements,² and found that the third use of the law calls us to love one another. J. Douma sums up this position well saying that

the sixth commandment penetrates down to the root of all killing, and thereby forbids any wrong attitude of heart. It unmasks not only wrong actions, but wrong attitudes as well. But we must take one more step, for otherwise we would be stopping with the negative. Saying *no* to death means saying *yes* to life. And this *yes* is just as radical as our *no*. We have not arrived if we simply avoid killing or hating our neighbor, for the opposite of these is that we must *love* our neighbor.³

Being anti-death, then is not the same as being pro-life, biblically and theologically speaking, but being pro-love. Pro-love must, however, be qualified by Jesus Christ. The modern "love is love" slogan is an obvious tautology that ultimately renders the word "love" meaningless. If nothing else, modern love could be defined as a willing emotional attachment to someone with some form of affiliation. Perhaps more cannot be said of love today. The love of Jesus Christ is defined as seeking the good of others, including one's enemies, to the extent of laying down one's life for one's friends and even one's enemies.⁴ Thus, the Reformed tradition has wholeheartedly agreed with Jesus' interpretation of the Torah, that the most important command is to love God and love our neighbor, which includes those we normally think of as our enemies. The love of God transcends the boundaries of human affiliations or associations. This is not the same as ignoring the fact that the world is in the power of the evil one, or that

¹ ECO's *Essential Tenets* III.E.10.

² Matthew 5:21–22.

³ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, P&R: 1996), 231.

⁴ Matthew 5:43; Luke 6:27–35; John 15:12–13.

hatred, murder, and self-serving affiliation of similar people for greater social power is the rule of the day.

The third use of the law as an injunction to love our neighbor as ourselves thus circumvents the question of who or what qualifies as “human.” This is the tactic of those who asked Jesus, “who is my neighbor” or Cain, “am I my brother’s keeper?” We constantly look for ways to limit God’s command to love to save the hardship of loving those who hate us or valuing those we think should serve us. This goes so far in Scripture as to transcend the human species itself. The Creator died to rescue his creatures, and not simply human beings.⁵ All creation participates in the new creation.⁶ The question of loving one another should not instinctively move to describe the object of the love but should lead us to seek its source. God is love. We are not. But we are called to be perfected as the image of God⁷ and to love others as he has loved us.⁸

Relational Value

The Reformed tradition, at least parts of it, hold that the value of a life is hidden with God, and is not available to our senses. Thus, we cannot know what value life has in itself.

ECO’s Essential Tenets ground the value of life in the image of God, as Genesis 9:6 does. However, it is not life itself that has the value, it is God. The image, the sign, is deficient when it fails to point to its referent. To be the image of God is not to inherently, as a member of the human species, be given value. Our value rests in the God that we image.

The Reformed confessions speak with one voice on this topic even as they echo the early teachers of Christian theology. We were created for God.⁹ Our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong, body and soul, to God.¹⁰ The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.¹¹ The meaning and value of life is God-given and God-directed, and without God, life is deficient. Indeed, Reformed theology predicts that the world would be filled with a love of death because it loves itself. Augustine spoke of two loves as characterizing the life of the world and the life of God’s people:

We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the

⁵ Colossians 1:20.

⁶ See the “ecotopias” of Isaiah 11 and 65, as Richard Bauckham calls them.

⁷ Romans 8:29.

⁸ John 13:34, 15:12.

⁹ Augustine.

¹⁰ Heidelberg Catechism A.1.

¹¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism A.1.

Heavenly City glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, the latter finds its highest glory in God.¹²

According to Augustine then, sin is a self-direction, and the whole world is built upon a self-love. This is the narcissism so prevalent today. Luther recognized sin in similar striking terms: *homo incurvatus in se*, or “man curved in on himself.” We love ourselves, direct the world to ourselves, and bring everything into a kind of self-orbit in which we see ourselves as the suns of our own solar systems. Sin is not simply a self-centeredness, but a sort of self-gravitation that sucks everything into itself, and like a black hole, consumes all that enters its horizon. Self-love is thus non-relational. It uses other people to attempt to fill the yawning gap that is the self-inflicted chaos of a godless life.¹³

So it is that both Luther and Calvin believed that knowledge of humanity depends on knowledge of God. Any attempt to define the value of life according to the created order rather than according to its relationship with the Creator, is really the path of ignorance. Paul describes this as having “darkened hearts” and “debased minds” that can only be renewed in the love of Christ as a living sacrifice.¹⁴

The value of human life cannot be known without knowing God in Christ, not just as Creator but as Redeemer or Reconciler. This means that the Reformed tradition, along with the Lutheran, cannot really base the value of human life in anything intrinsic to the human. It must reside in the relationship individuals have with God. And that knowledge doesn’t come by rational inquiry, but by grace through faith and the love of God.

Thus, the love of God is the source of all value. It is only in Christ that we can stand up rather than being curved in. Only by the love of God can we face outward, have the Son as the sun of our solar system, and turn from a position of fear of others toward responsibility for others, even for those desperately curved in on themselves. This doesn’t mean that we lack value, that humans are value-less. Rather, it means we constantly move between over-valuing ourselves and devaluing others in pride, or devaluing ourselves and over-valuing others in a servile dependence on others to tell us our value.

This was a radical position for Augustine, and Luther to take, and it remains just as radical today. Because what this means is that our whole message of the gospel must depend entirely on Jesus Christ and rest upon him alone. We have no gospel apart from Jesus, no meaning of life, no flourishing, no truth, and no hope. And that means we don’t really have a positive message to share with the world that does not have Christ uniquely and solely at its heart. All other gospels use God for our benefit and they end up justifying us as we curve in on ourselves, drawing God to orbit around our individual or collective visions of what is good and valuable, either to praise the works of our hands, or to coddle us with affirmations of self-worth.

¹² Augustine, *City of God* (trans. Henry Bettenson; Penguin: 1984), xxxvi.

¹³ See Matt Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin* (Bloomsbury: 2007).

¹⁴ Romans 1, 12.

From the Reformed tradition it is a tacit rejection of the gospel to affirm life as the value of life. Rather, we must affirm the value of life as God's creation for whom he gave himself in love. Practically speaking, this means our church communities must engage in a form of discipleship that trains us in this love of God in very practical ways. Beyond pastoral care or therapy designed at helping people make sense of life or cope with tragedy, and beyond programs designed to achieve some form of success, the church must shape itself and its people to have the maturity to take on responsibility for others. We must become mature enough to stand up straight and tall, and face outwards, with a confidence rooted in Christ, to relate to others outside of ourselves and show them the love of God. Put another way, the only way the church can talk about human value or dignity is to become a community in which the mature love of God is revealed through real relationships with our neighbors.

For the church to stand up tall and face outwards, it must stop defining itself by others and by finding value in other group identities—in nationality and political allegiances, in career and success, or in affirmation in social networks. This means the church must call its own people out of these identities, places in which they find value by association, and to Christ alone. This path will free it to be itself, to be the body of Christ without fear of what the world might think of us. And in this way, we can be communities where people experience the value of becoming the image of God in Christlike relations.

Sola Gratia/Grace Alone and Total Depravity

The Reformed doctrine of *sola gratia* means that we are saved by the grace of God alone, and not by any works of righteousness we can accomplish on our own. What does this have to do with life and its value? Much in every way. For, we are mistaken if we think that *sola gratia* is only about a narrow definition of *salvation*, about going to heaven when we die. *Sola gratia* is about all of life under the reign of sin. Salvation is just as much about the here and now as it is about the hereafter. It is about the work of God in rescuing his people from bondage to the powers of the present evil age.

A parallel doctrine of the Reformation is "total depravity" which states not that we are all as sinful as we could possibly be, but that sin touches every aspect of our human existence.

This means that the meaning and value of human life cannot be defined by what humans can do or accomplish. What we can do is touched indelibly by sin and bars us from the presence of God in whom we find our meaning and value in relationship. The kind of value that humans give to one another and ourselves is touched by sin and by self-saving ideas. We think that to be human is to be creative and that we will save ourselves (from the unintended consequences of previous generations), by yet further creativity. Finally we will become fully human, self-sufficient, and free from the constant threats of war, ecological disaster, economic changes, and political turmoil! This is a form of social-justice Pelagianism that imagines that there is some salvation possible for us by being more fully human. The problem is, the facts just don't agree with the myth. Human creativity keeps making more and bigger problems faster than we can

solve them. Being human in this way has led us to the brink of disaster... just as the doctrine of sin would predict it would. The more we act like ourselves, like our nature, the more we follow the desires of our sinful nature, and the more enslaved we become to a sin-filled nature/environment of our own making. Put another way, we are constantly tempted to build heaven on earth, but to our surprise we keep making it look more like hell.

So, if human life is to have meaning, it must return to God. If human life is to have a future as life with value, it must repent of its sinful ways, of its self-idolatry, be crucified with Christ, and so accept the helplessness and humility of salvation by another.

Foundations III

The Cultural Story of Life and its Value

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Chapter 8

In order to speak good news to the world, we must understand what the world believes. And in the process of studying the world's beliefs on its own terms, we often find those places where the church has been influenced by the world in questionable ways. A conversation between the world and the church thus becomes mutually beneficial both for evangelism and for our own sanctification.

This chapter will ask two basic questions and give some very summary answers. What is life and what is it worth? By analyzing the way our world today answers these questions, we can spot the underlying belief system that is held and why these beliefs seem normal and natural to the people in our contexts.

What is Life?

While we could discuss any number of definitions of life in the modern Western world, the vast majority refer to biological functions and processes. This seems so obvious it would be hard to imagine defining life in any other way but by reference to brain waves, heartbeat, motor functions, etc. For our world today, life refers to those beings whose nature is at least partly determined by biochemical processes. Thus, we could talk about the life of fungi, plants, animals, bacteria, and viruses (to an extent). The life of each of these "kingdoms" in biology is, of course, different, but it is distinct from the molecular passivity of rocks and metals.

The tendency of science is toward the simplest possible definition. While this has explanatory power, we will see that it introduces serious ethical and political problems in a moment. Science, we should come to finally acknowledge in the 21st century, is not purely "discovery" but also a form of simplification and modification. For example geometric shapes do not exist in the natural world. Nothing is *perfectly* spherical, triangular, or square. But they *must* exist for science to do its work. And so, we transform a nearly infinitely complex world into simplified shapes for the purpose of manipulating it, in the process inevitably reducing the complex diversity of God's creation.

The same is true of scientific definitions of life. Some have defined life in terms of energy transfer. Some early ecologists were "cyberneticists" who believed that an "ecosystem" (a term invented by them) was really nothing more than a complex electrical circuit of energy transfer. If you're familiar with concepts like the "circle of life" then you've understood cybernetic ecological system-thinking that simplifies life to energy transfer feedback loops. Like the notion of the circle or sphere, this is a vast oversimplification of life. In reality, there are no "ecosystems" of any kind,

there are innumerable complex interactions. The system of the circle is our simplistic way of explaining it.

Now, for many ancient people who did not know biochemistry and biology, life was generally understood as related to some immaterial property. Basic observation of the world without microscopes suggested to peoples across the world that life could not be contained in the material thing itself, because when someone dies, for example, the body seems exactly the same as when it was alive, at least for a short time. Some vital principle seemed to inhabit things that were able to move of their own accord. This also included, for many peoples, water springs, weather-creating mountains, volcanoes, and other wonders that seemed to defy what was regularly experienced. Thus, we have the idea of the “spirit.” Our word “animal” is simply the Latin word for a being with a soul or spirit (thus making it ironic that many have believed that non-human animals lack souls). The spirit had to be immaterial, because it could seemingly move and influence other things. Spirits might even be able to inhabit different creatures, thus giving rise to the belief in metempsychosis (reincarnation), spirit-possession, or divine incarnations. Some immaterial thing called the “spirit” or “soul” was the principle of life, and the departure of the spirit from the body was death. Ancient peoples, like the medieval, believed that the self was “porous” as Charles Taylor describes it.¹ He contrasts the porous self with the modern “buffered self.” The porous self is permeated by his or her environment and takes on the shape of the environment, including the potential spiritual forces within it. The modern buffered self is shielded from the environment, defined in opposition to it, trying with all its might to rebel against it. This self rejects external influences, believing in a free will and *tabula rasa*, rather than a relational role to inhabit.

We could also see that this belief in the soul or spirit is the grounds and rationale behind notions like the afterlife, heaven, hell, hades, Sheol, the Elysian Fields, and the many other visions of a world specifically designed for disembodied souls. The notion of the spirit comes first, from observation of how life seems to work, and later the question about where it goes when it leaves the body arises. So we see that in the Old Testament, for example, the afterlife of Sheol is not well defined but simply seems to be the underworld where the “departed” go. But in the more imperial societies of the ancient world, like Egypt or China, we see that the afterlife is specifically designed for kings with their servants and slaves accompanying their master into the afterlife to serve him there. In other words, we can often use afterlife beliefs of various peoples to understand how they assigned different value to different lives. The relatively egalitarian Israelites, especially the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes, saw death as a great leveler. But there remained hope in the Old Testament that death was not final. The Old Testament shows a confidence that God will not abandon souls to death, that God values not life in the abstract, but the lives of those he loves. He does not value disembodied souls, but the wholeness of his creatures.

¹ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

So, the Bible doesn't entirely fall into one or other of these ancient or modern camps which tend towards spirits on the one hand and materialism on the other. In the Old Testament, the principle of life is often noted as either breath or blood. Many legal prescriptions in the Torah relate to blood precisely because it is the essence of life. There is ambiguity as to how the Old Testament understands the nature of the spirit as related to breath. For example, Genesis 2:7 specifically chooses not to use the word for spirit *ruach* that was used in Genesis 1:2 for the Spirit of God. It is not God's Spirit that makes creatures alive, according to the Hebrew Bible, but the breath of life. God is not within us, as later gnostics would teach and is a popular idea again today. This breath of life is what animates all "living creatures" (*nephesh chayyim*), and not just humans.

The New Testament doesn't disagree here, but it does give significantly more emphasis to a supernatural realm of spirits, angels, and demons, and their ability to influence people. The New Testament also is more ambiguous about the relationship between spirits and breath. Familiar phrases to us like "give up the ghost" come directly from Jesus' death when he breathed out/*exepneusen* (ἐξέπνευσεν, Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46), or the breath/spirit left him. Our English word "expire" (direct from Latin *ex-spiro*) means the same thing, the opposite being "inspire." When we are inspired, we are breathed-into by a spirit which gives an external motivating force. Jesus' words, "Into your hands I commend my spirit" is a statement of laying down his life before his Father, in terms of stopping breathing.

So, what we find is that although we might expect the Bible to be simply an ancient book that believes in spirits, angels, demons, and supernatural forces that inhabit dead matter to bring it to life, in reality it is a little more complicated and purposefully ambiguous. The Bible is both quite aware that life is contained in blood and breath, but that blood and breath are insufficient descriptions of what it is that gives life. Life is a complex interaction of flesh and spirit in Scripture, and this means that the central Christian notion of incarnation and resurrection makes Christianity distinct from earlier beliefs about life, and from later ones as well. Matter and spirit must be and remain united in a Christian theology of life. The soul without the body is incomplete, and the body without a soul is dead. Human souls cannot "transmigrate" because they belong to their bodies.

The challenge for Christian theology engaging in the modern world, however, is that spirit is not recognized as an equally valid category as matter. For, just as the ancients prioritized the spirit over matter in terms of defining life, moderns generally believe that life can be described entirely without reference to anything immaterial. This has become a *de facto* legal situation within secular governments. That is, because secularism, by definition, treats the secular, immanent, or material world as primary and the spiritual/supernatural world as an optional personal belief, it excludes anything beyond the material for a legal definition of life. If spirit is an optional belief, it is legally excluded as a binding definition of life. No coroner's report would defer to a priest or pastor as to the moment of expiration instead of a doctor who has pronounced the time of death by the cessation of brain function, breathing, or heartbeat. Thus,

political discourse around the definition and value of life must take the form of materialist arguments. Secularism, in this way, is incredibly culturally imperialistic. Rather than celebrating human diversities it denigrates any view that might threaten the belief that the material world is primary, shared by all, and that the spiritual world is not worth really talking about in the public square.

Or, perhaps if not excluded, the spiritual must somehow be included within the material as the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) had argued. Descartes believed that God was necessary to explain the world, but he nevertheless introduced a strong dualism between the thinking mind (soul) and the unthinking material and mechanistic body. This enabled modern science to work with the material world as purposeless and meaningless matter, driving questions of the mind or soul into the realm of religion and philosophy.

Descartes' dualism helped pave the way for materialists to simply do away with half of the world by arguing that the mind was also material. Materialism is a form of simplification of the complexity of life into mechanics and computation. The political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), an English contemporary of Descartes, was an early advocate of a radical materialism that viewed the human mind as essentially a computer. This view was reinforced a century later by an influential French book *L'homme Machine* by Julien de la Mettrie (1747). Thus, a generation before the founding of the United States, this highly controversial view was already circulating among intellectuals in Europe that humans could be understood quite simply as complex biological machines with a computational mind. In order to unlock the secrets of humanity, all that was needed was an understanding of the machine and the mathematical principles of thought.

Another modern version of a similar way of thinking was popularized by Richard Dawkins with his book and concept *The Selfish Gene* (1976) in which he postulated the independent existence of the evolutionary "gene" as the determinative biological concept more basic than species, and by which Dawkins thought he could basically summarize all of biology and even culture. Indeed, he coined the concept of the "meme" and meme-theory as a parallel belief that there are independently existing things called "memes" which are the evolutionary building blocks of all human culture, just as genes are of biological species. Reductionist theories like this attract people who desire and find value in control. As a form of intellectual terrorism (i.e. telling people they are ultimately little more than predetermined outworkings of evolutionary genetic code), it becomes one of many forms of self-aggrandizement in a gnostic kind of way. That is, by knowing the secrets of the universe, the initiated are liberated from the self-deluded herd of humanity and can comfortably mock their ignorance. We might also mention here the "simulation hypothesis" popularized by Elon Musk, though also postulated by Descartes in the 17th century. This is the theory that we are all living in a complex simulation, i.e. the plot device of the film *The Matrix*, and that we have no way of knowing or proving it wrong. Again, it's a gnostic theory of bullying, a bogey-man idea for the initiated to differentiate themselves from others, and so attain a sense of personal value by devaluing others. Interestingly, however,

people like Dawkins seem to believe in consciousness of the “self” as something that experiences life in ways not directly subservient to genetic evolution.

While various scientific and philosophical fields have continually tried to simplify life down to some basic combination of electronics, mechanics, and computer science, the vast majority of people have resisted this obvious and violent oversimplification of human life. Outside of science, there remains a belief that human life is some kind of mixture between body and self. The “self” is an abstract entity existing outside of the material flesh, but able to be manifested in the flesh. Consciousness, the mind, the soul, the spirit, for as much as materialists want to, cannot totally integrate into their theories of life. Thus, there are very few radical deterministic-fatalists who accept that life is just adaptation to the circle of life. Instead, materialism has given birth to a number of attempts to recover the soul using other words. Henri Bergson, an early 20th century French philosopher, spoke of *élan vital*, a life-impetus. Jung, the psychoanalyst, had a similar theory of *libido*, and various thinkers have postulated other words for this human life force that resists the simplifications of evolutionary biology.

Materialism struggles with consciousness and the self. Western society has no struggle with embracing the radical individuality of the self and its utmost importance. Thus, while science might work with Darwinian reductions, and medical ethics are dominated by these theories, social life at large has been significantly more influenced by philosophers like Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and Nietzsche (1844–1900) who embraced the spirit and the self through the concept of *will*. Schopenhauer wrote a book called *The World as Will and Idea*, which inspired Nietzsche in many of his thoughts, particularly his notion of the *Will to Power*. This combination of will and materialism form the essence of life in general and human life in particular for our modern world. This has major implications for how we see value.

Value of Life

This raises the major second part of our question—what is the value of life? Science is incapable of making value judgments or constructing meaning. This goes back to Descartes who divided meaning from matter. Descartes required a supernatural realm for there to be meaning for life and for the world. But what if meaning could be reintroduced into the world of matter and without reference to anyone else? Although it took a few centuries, philosophers began to realize that the concept of God, at least according to Descartes’ logic, was dead. Society found ways to make meaning without reference to a divine realm, and so God was no longer a necessary concept.

Nietzsche proclaimed that, in the absence of God, we have to become creators ourselves. Instead of receiving values from revelation, we have to create our own values. Nietzsche thus envisioned radical and elite individuals becoming godlike by boldly making up value and letting the herd of humanity fall in line. This he called the “will to power.” While few have been as bold and consistent as Nietzsche, his insight has proven true—without God society would make up its

own values. Nietzsche imagined noble individuals having the courage to live without support, without foundations, merely by the force of their own wills. He understood that value can either be *imposed* or *received*, so why not stop living in the myths imposed by others on us? Why not will to power, to conquer, to be the imposer-of-value rather than the receiver-of-value?

Although the Nazis used Nietzsche, and he is often guilty by association, his thought does not necessarily lead to fascism and a will-to-power of a whole nation. Nor is the will-to-power about military conquest. Nietzsche himself imagined this existing in the aesthetic or artistic world rather than the militaristic one. So, Nietzsche's thought is also highly conducive to modern individualist capitalism. Capitalism places all value in material "capital"—things or people that can be utilized for the production of wealth. Under capitalism, all value is reducible to numbers. Qualities are turned into quantities. Time becomes money. Humans become quantifiable resources. And yet, value lies in the power of the "market" and its supply and demand. That is, real people have to exercise their will-to-own in order for anything to have value.

But nothing, not even gold, truly has intrinsic value. Value only exists for people who desire to impose their will-to-power over it. In other words, *desire* or will for material wealth is the source of value for capitalism.

Nietzsche's notion of the will is also seen in liberal democratic theory (the classical theory of rational, representational systems of governance, not the modern Democrat party). Where Nietzsche unapologetically advocated the will-to-power, a power of the noble, elite, and intelligent over the "herd" of the "all-too-human," liberalism seeks to protect the independence of all individual wills to express themselves. But over what do individuals in liberal societies express their wills if not in dominating other people? Over resources or "capital". And what one material resource do all of us possess? A human body.

Unless the will is expressed over something, influencing or forcing it to transform into an image of the self, will is ineffectual and frustrated and there is no meaning. One simple example of this is in tattooing. It is the use of the flesh to express the will, to re-form the body. It has been pointed out by sociologists who study poverty that tattooing is, to some degree, class-specific, because aesthetic modification of the body is the only material property upon which people in poverty can express their wills. Wealthy people have cars, houses, corporations, and other non-bodily outlets for imposing the will-to-power. Ironically, perhaps, the turn toward radical body-modification in transgenderism and cosmetic surgery, could indicate a deep sense that modern people are powerless to express their wills over much of anything. It is only in a world where making an impact has become largely impossible that people turn their attention toward self-crafting. The modern obsession with the finding oneself is the melancholy fruit of a world without wilderness.

Liberal society thus turns ever more to materialism and material forms of value. Rather than seeking spiritual goods, like virtue, education for its own sake, or an appreciation for unmodified beauty, liberal society must transform all of these into resources for the production

of material value. That is, they must be transformed into capital, a point Benjamin Franklin made when he gives his maxim for chastity as “Rarely use venery [sex] but for health and offspring—never to dullness, weakness or the injury of your own or another’s peace or reputation.” To this D.H. Lawrence replied, “Never use venery.” The point is, of course, that sex is not a tool, a technique, a resource to use in moderation to achieve further goods. As with Franklin, in our time sex has become capital, an expression of will and desire to impose a self-image on the body, rather than a fruitful expression of a loving relationship. This is the essence of pornography—the use of sex and human flesh for the expression of one’s will for one’s pleasure. It is also the essence of transgenderism—shaping the body according to the will or mind’s definition of what gender should mean.

Thus, when it comes to the question of the value of human life, we carry with us the logic of the market, the logic of material science, and the belief in will. This combination sufficiently explains and predicts ethical positions on life questions quite accurately, I think. It is a simplistic logic, and so it seems scientific and rational. But we will see that it has its own contradictions. Let’s review some examples of this logic.

Examples of the Logic of Will Expressed in Matter

Euthanasia and Suicide: Life matters while it is productive of value. If life is no longer capable of producing value, or of self-willing, it no longer gets defined as properly human. Those who cannot exercise their will in statistically normal ways should be euthanized *for their own good and that of society*, so the logic goes. Life has no intrinsic value, it has capital value. That is, life has value if it can be used as a resource for the expression of the will. If the will is incapacitated and cannot find expression in material forms, life seems to be over. Likewise, if there is “nothing to live for” then suicide becomes a major option. And this is one of the darker sides of this way of thinking—it makes suicide reasonable. For, if someone’s will is frustrated, if someone feels so “trapped” or dominated by others that one cannot express him or herself, then the final act of will is the will-over-life in the act of self-death. Unwilling one’s life is thus the ultimate form of self-expression. It makes life and the body a resource to exploit even in its end.

Marriage and Divorce: Consider the logic of marriage and divorce. This isn’t usually considered a matter of life and death, but we see a materialist conception of life and expression of the self by will in marriage. I might venture so far as to say this is the source of most conflict in marriage. “What am I getting out of this?” is a question that many ask in their heart of hearts after the honeymoon period is long over. Marriages that are built on a relationship of a mutual desire that the other person could benefit oneself may likely end in divorce when situations, desires, and the people themselves change over the course of time. Thus, teaching about marriage as the approved space for sexual desire to be expressed can lead to marital breakdown when sexual desire wanes. This kind of love is a sandy foundation for a lifelong covenanted relationship. And it should not surprise us, then, that marriage itself is radically being transformed

and is in decline. Why restrict marriage to heterosexual monogamy? How does that benefit the will or desire of anyone? Why restrict sexual activity to marriage if sex itself is to be “used” as Benjamin Franklin put it? Again, following the logic of liberal political theory, so long as one person’s will is not overpowering another’s, why restrict anything? Liberal political theory can never comprehend goods that go against the will, thus leading to a perpetual adolescent mentality in which people demand their rights and liberties to express themselves, rather than seeking the good of another above oneself, a necessary precondition for lifelong marriage.

Abortion and Reproductive Technology: Consider the logic of abortion according to this merging of materialist view of life and will. Undesired infants may indeed be “life,” but they are not yet considered *human* life because *human* is defined by the will and ability to express oneself in statistically normative ways. At some point a threshold is crossed that begins human life and ends human life, even though biological life might begin sooner and last longer than human life. It is the will that gives value to life and makes that life human. So, if a couple desires a child, they will express their wills using whatever resources (or capital) they deem reasonable to create the value that is a child, including experimental and morally questionable technologies. There are many thinkers who have argued in very similar ways, perhaps most famously Peter Singer (1946–) who has advocated for surrogacy, the equalization of animal rights with humans, euthanizing the disabled.

This combination of life and will also helps us understand positions like veganism and animal rights advocacy. Where animals do not have the will of humans, liberal political theory suggests that they should be given protective rights so that they can express the will they do possess in freedom. Although one might expect this logic to apply to the unborn human infant who has some measure of will and the potential for fully human willing, the unborn are treated as part of the woman’s body for the sake of allowing the woman to express her will over the unborn without incurring the moral hazard of will-denying or rights-taking that abortion would otherwise represent.

Logical Breakdown

Abortion shows the breakdown of the logic of this system. For, like liberal political theory itself, it is somewhat arbitrary where the lines get drawn. Where slaves did not count as fully human in Benjamin Franklin’s day, the unborn do not today. Where slaves lived by the will of their master who used them as human resources or labor capital, the unborn live or die by the will of the mother who uses the unborn as a human resource to create (or protect) value for her. But there are no *rational* grounds on which to evaluate the different claims of rights and liberties. How could we determine who has a superior will? Humans have a superior will to animals, which is why animals need protection. Adult humans have superior wills to the unborn and so the adults need protection from the unborn? The only sense that one can make of this logic is that the unborn represent a potential attack on the will of the adult and might, in the case of rape, be a

constant reminder of a violation of will. The fault in this logic is that it treats an unborn child as a predator and the adult as the victim or prey in an inconsistent way with our approaches to animal rights.

The problem with the liberal appropriation of Nietzsche's notion of the will-to-power is that it tries to take away the *power* aspect of it. In reality, there is no will unless it is the will to *power-over* someone or something else. Self-expression requires someone or something to be im-pressed with the image of the self. Will requires turning people and things into resources, it requires some kind of submission. The strong dominate the weak and use the weak as the medium on which they can impose the will. But this is a cowardly strength because unlike the predatory wolf, the modern will hides itself behind all sorts of masks of "identities" that have to be expressed.

Ultimately, the logical problem with the materialist will is that it is too weak to truly express itself as Nietzsche imagined, and too cowardly to take full responsibility for itself and its actions in the face of other people who might fight back. What Nietzsche envisaged was the triumph of the free spirit who has moved from dutifully obeying "thou-shalt" demands of society like a camel bearing heavy burdens, to crushing these demands like a lion, to inventing new values with the innocent creativity of a child.² But liberal society has tried to do this collectively. It has tried to be a lion destroying the old rules of morality, and tried to be a child, as with the hippies or LGBTQ movement, together. But this process done together does not lead to a childlike freedom of the spirit, but a childlike imitation and rivalry where each demand "Mine!" over things we all decide we want together. The problem, for Nietzsche, is that children are masters at learning value by imitation. "Mimetic rivalry" is the term René Girard (1923–2015) used to describe this process in which we learn how to value the things that our peers value. This makes scarcity and competition the source of value, and we enter a spiral of imitation. In other words, children don't invent values, they engage in a sort of dance that creates value together... a dance that almost always ends in fights and tears.

To keep this dance of socially constructed value from descending into childishness in the worst sense, our society invented concepts of rights and liberties, social contracts, and market competition. Our society "killed" God, so we had to invent a new father-figure in the state. "Rights" only make sense in response to a fear of total war, only in a godless world. So, the war of wills is managed by complex but arbitrary systems whose logical coherence is maintained by a kind of group-think justice, or "emotivism". Thus, rather than radical individuals expressing themselves, we end up with a society in which parties band together to wage culture wars for rival conceptions of justice, none of which can ever truly be rational or objective.

For, will is pure subjectivity, and it is by sharing this subjectivity across a large swath of society that we are able to imagine that it is objective and neutral, demanding our erstwhile

² See Nietzsche's "Three Metamorphoses" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

enemies respect our rights. We shouldn't be surprised, then, that the social bedrock of modern secular states, the belief in the social contract and the "consent of the people" come alike from Thomas Hobbes, that early materialist who believed that humans were computational machines. Hobbes believed that without the social management of governments, everything would be a war of all against all. And so it remains today, the war of all against all is sublimated to a war of party against party whose mutually assured destruction brings them to the negotiating table to hammer out a tenuous social contract. The great problem of modern liberal society is that attempting to be collective adults, we become a playground without adult supervision, forming gangs of bullies who constantly try to invent and change the rules of the game to win, while trusting and hoping in a father-figure state to intervene to stop any fights before they go too far.

Theology Confronting the Materialist Will

It is here that our conversation can turn to theology. For, only by categorizing both our materialism and our addiction to the concept of will as sinful and evil and offering the good news of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and discipleship in Jesus Christ, can there be an antidote to these fundamental errors of human reason. Nietzsche's vision has a beauty to it that entices us and calls us to be adults. Nietzsche's vision is the closest I know of to the temptation of the serpent in Eden. The bait—godlike maturity in determining good and evil for ourselves. The switch—humans can never be gods and we humiliate ourselves in the process of trying, sinking into the "mimetic rivalry" that is so obvious in children.

Against the belief that life is material, we have the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus to show that God himself became flesh and remains flesh. Against the belief in self-expression by will, Jesus *laid down his will and life* for the sake of *reconciling all things to himself*. Jesus did not consider life as a resource to exploit for the accomplishment of his desires. Jesus died in the prime of life when "he had so much to live for," i.e. so much value he could have created. Jesus could have healed more people, could have gone to Rome and confronted Caesar, could have exercised his will to make the world a better place. He could have empowered the Jewish people, or at least advocated for their being treated as a free people to will their own way. Instead, we have this earliest of Christian hymns about Jesus in Philippians 2, that Jesus set aside both his will and his life for the sake of all of creation. This wasn't a form of suicide, which instrumentalizes death as one last expression of will. It was Jesus' submission of his life to his enemies' will, for their own good, a good they could never foresee or comprehend.

And of course, we have the greatest commandments that Jesus reiterates from the Torah—love God and love our neighbors (and enemies) as we *love ourselves*. Love is not the same thing as valuing someone else. We can value someone for what value they create in our own lives. The materialist will instrumentalizes love. But the gospel of Jesus make love the end in itself.

The love of God transforms the desire of the will to express oneself into a desire to help others. Love is other-focused, will is self-focused. Any society built on a philosophy of self-

expression will necessarily result in a kind of cold war that we see in our culture wars. But, of course, no society can be built on requiring people to love one another. This is the point of the church, the body of Christ, the people of God. Only by being in Christ can we love one another as Christ has loved us and, in that way, create communities that have radically different foundations to those of the world.

In response to looking starkly at the world we live in I think we should look in the mirror to see how much of this world's non-logic has made us in its image. It is natural that we, who are born, raised, and educated constantly in the materialist-will world for generations would believe and think in ways similar to the world, even if we have been long-time Christians. So we need to ask ourselves:

- Where do we end up treating other people as resources to create value for ourselves by expressing our wills over them?
- Do we treat sex as something we "use" to create value for ourselves?
- Do we have or choose not to have children based on an expression of *desire*?
- Do we "love" as an expression of will or desire, or according to how Paul defines it in 1 Corinthians 13 and elsewhere?

As we begin to think about public engagement, we have to also look at our tactics. One typical way Christians have confronted the world is with statements like "life is sacred." While this may work within the church, it is not a *legally* valid argument. First, what does "sacred" mean? Technically, it is the opposite of "secular" and in the context of our conversation, it means that we are attaching an ultimate value unassailable by materiality to life. We're trying to use supernatural concepts to give value. But we've already seen that secularism becomes materialist by default. Thus, to the materialist, "life is sacred" is nonsense. "Life is useful" is their motto. A secular world is, by definition, antithetical to any concept of the sacred. Materialists demand a materialist answer to the value question.

Secondly, the problem with the materialist will is not that it devalues life, but that it instrumentalizes it. Sometimes it vastly overvalues life by instrumentalizing everything else for the benefit of a few lives. The world today turns life into a function, a resource, something that must be used to create value. Life is the greatest resource any of us have according to the world's logic.

The ultimate issue is not really about *life* at all. It's about *love*. While we must disagree with viewing life as purely material on theological grounds, the argument for the soul or spirit isn't going to go very far or convince many people today. **A true theology of life is a theology that transforms the question about the value of life into a call to love.** Rather than highlighting our liberal political freedom to do whatever we want as free citizens of a free society, we highlight the high calling of the love of God and the maturity to use freedom to take on responsibility rather than avoid it. For, freedom is often just another word for not being responsible.

Maturity in Christ is taking on the burdens of others, taking on responsibility for the well-being of those we don't have to. "Who is my neighbor?" The Good Samaritan is the neighbor who takes responsibility instead of exercising his right to be free from a relationship that would not create value for himself. Christ transforms our desires, our sense of rights and entitlements, into a self-giving love. Our proper response to a world of will is to become once again the church and represent with the whole of our lives the love of God.

To return to Nietzsche and his "three metamorphoses" of the soul, we find that Christlike maturity was never to be found in that camel whose burden was the morality which Nietzsche saw as so terrible in the Christianity of his experience. Rather, Nietzsche was closer to the mark than he perhaps realized, and closer to Paul than he would like to have acknowledged. We can and should become lions who reject the "thou-shalts" of our world, and we can become free spirited children, but we can only do so under the adult direction of God himself who guides us on to maturity. The difference here is that we do not celebrate or value *life*, we *love* God and *love* our neighbor as ourselves. This is only possible if we receive value not from imitation of others (mimetic rivalry), but by becoming children at the feet of Jesus who leads us as a shepherd to the kind of maturity that moves beyond law³ and beyond obedience to a radical freedom of perfect love.

Privacy

But what about the arguments related to privacy? After all, an oft used slogan of the pro-choice movement is "My body, my choice." While we can see that this is a clear example of the will (choice) imposing itself on the body, just as the model above describes, it also involves two uses of "my" designating propriety or individual sovereignty. The will of the individual has a unique right to modify the flesh of the individual, and no one has a right to interfere with this expression of will over the flesh.

Privacy is often described as the family or the individual against the state or other institution. This is certainly the case in the United States Constitution, but also other declarations of human rights. This understanding of the individual against a threatening world comes from the Enlightenment lineage of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who envisaged a "state of nature" in which individuals are "born free." Of course, no individual is born free. Children have parents and the history of human society is a history of competition between institutions. Much of the history of the state is not a fight with individuals, but a fight against the tribe or the family. This means that where the aforementioned scholar Wolfgang Müller⁴ assumes that families prioritized privacy as a concern in resisting the systematic and inquisitive justice of states, what was really at stake was not privacy but authority.

³ Galatians 3:24–25.

⁴ See the chapter on "History of Life and its Value."

Privacy is a modern notion that stems from the near total dominance of the state and corporations over all aspects of human life. Privacy is what we can fence off and protect from those who seek to exploit and control us. But privacy, like all rights, is granted by those who already have power. When you set up the privacy settings of a computer or smartphone, you are only given options the manufacturer has programmed in. For those of us who are not lawyers, we accept terms and conditions usually without reading or understanding them, and yet these set the terms of our privacy. And corporations—let alone the information gathering organizations of modern states—historically have a poor track record in respecting their word. None of us can hope to fight the NSA, CIA, or FBI, let alone Facebook or TikTok. We have no idea what information they have.

Our modern demand for privacy is thus an already settled issue. It doesn't really exist, even if we can maintain some illusion of it. As an illustration, some of my neighbors have internet connected security cameras, and one came to my house and left a note that their cameras picked up teenagers testing to see if car doors were unlocked, and they could see them on my property. I was less disturbed by the teenagers looking for an easy score than I was by my neighbors having constant video access to the front of my house and my windows. Whenever I take out my trash, my neighbor's security camera whistles at me. I am constantly surveilled not only by the state and corporations, but by my neighbors. Privacy is a myth in a society built on surveillance as noted by philosophers like Michel Foucault⁵ and more recently Byung-Chul Han.⁶ Furthermore, those who advocate for "My body, my choice" are rarely radical libertarians who want to re-legalize tobacco and repeal seatbelt and motorcycle helmet laws.

The right to privacy can never be guaranteed by those whose control over me is entirely dependent on information about me. So, anthropologist James C. Scott talks about how states "see" and are historically built upon gathering information or making people "legible."⁷

Privacy is a red herring, a distraction from the core issues. No government has a strong interest in tracking abortions or those who perform them, just as the medieval peasants of Moravia had no interest in finding out whether their neighbors committed infanticide. This information is of little financial or influence benefit. The cost of prosecutions, convictions, incarcerations, far outweigh the benefits of a reduced load on welfare and foster systems. The real heart of the issue is that the state has no interest in what it considers non-beings for the sake of taxation and control. The unborn do not exist to the state, just as they did not in the Roman Empire or Tudor England. They have not entered *in rerum natura* and can neither be controlled nor exploited. Put another way, life must be useful and exploitable to the state for it to care about it. If left-leaning politicians want to pretend that the state cares about privacy, abortion is a convenient win, creating political capital and trust.

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (trans. Alan Sheridan), 1977.

⁶ See Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy* (trans. Daniel Steuer, Polity: 2022). Also Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Stanford Briefs: 2015).

⁷ See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, Yale: 2020.

Conclusion

So, the cultural story of life is summarized in this way: we believe *life* is entirely composed of matter and energy, but we believe life is only *valuable* insofar as it is *useful* in creating further value. This means life is “capital” or instrumental in the creation of value. And since “God is dead” to our culture, it means we have to make up our own values for ourselves. But we don’t do this as individuals, no matter how much we imagine we are unique. We create value by mimetic rivalry, by chasing the desires of others. Because the modern world is so regimented and controlled by systems and technologies, our actual range of value-creation in self-expression is increasingly limited, often to virtual realities or our physical flesh alone.

This ultimately means our society imagines itself to be godlike when we are children on a playground pretending to be superheroes, fenced in by innumerable controls and surveillance devices that ensure our playground fights and culture cold wars don’t heat up too much. So we masquerade, trying on new identities, new costumes, and new values.

Life is valuable to our culture, but only if it can be used as a form of self-expression and protected from being too imposed upon by others. Life is not sacred, it is useful. And so, we shouldn’t be surprised that many lives are used, and the logic of ethical decision-making revolves around usefulness.

Part 2: Implications

Chapter 9

Theologically Engaging the World

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

When we combine the conversation between the Bible, theology, history, and the cultural story of life and its value, what conclusions can we draw that could guide how we engage in the world today?

The Bible is clear that humans are integrated, relational beings who can only find their meaning in being the image of God, which means being in a kind of relationship with him in which they reflect God's character. While we may want to retain the language of the image of God to protect the *dignity* of human *life*, we saw that this was not a biblical understanding if by "life" we mean what our modern world means by it. The biblical image of the person cannot exist without the soul, without a vision of eternity in the presence of God, who *is life*. And yet, this isn't some kind of disembodied soul. God himself, who is Spirit, took on flesh and became a man (incarnation), was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again in the flesh (resurrection). He ascended into heaven as an ensouled human being where he sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead, as a human king, and his kingdom will have no end.

For us to ground a theology of human life in the image of God according to Genesis 1–9 alone is deficient theologically because it excludes the discussion of Christ, who is the exact image of God. It also largely excludes sin and its consequences upon humanity, and it misses out on eschatology. One clear implication of the above conversations is that our theology of life has often been very thin if it's only been about the protection of the innocent. That is of great value! But it is an *outcome* of our theology and our life-together in the church.

Put another way, if our gospel of life is anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia, anti-suicide, etc., our gospel has become a morality and a political doctrine, not a unified word-body of abundant and *aionic* life. But if our gospel about life is reduced to moral and political position statements, we will engage only in moral and political action without much of a compelling and embodied message of the goodness of the life given meaning in the presence of God.

In addition, traditional theologies of human meaning and value rooted in a premodern understanding of the soul have been challenged by modern secularism, which has no place for discussion of the soul, eternal life, or "spiritual" matters—as though flesh and spirit could be disentangled easily and completely. The secular world has imbibed a Greek philosophical vision of the soul, through Descartes and others, who believed it was an entity entirely separable from the body. The church, by and large, has gone along with this reasoning. Much or most of the laity, not to mention the wider world, believes that Christianity is a religion about the afterlife of the soul going either to a paradisaal heaven or a grotesquely tortuous hell.

And because of this, Christianity has become merely a religion or spirituality, sequestered from the material life of people and their social groups. So the church has preached a *spiritual* kingdom of God that resides mostly in the realm of feeling, private experience, or personal health and private material blessing. Part of this spiritualization of Christianity was a defense mechanism, a kind of damage control, by the enlightened liberal defenders of Christianity like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1864).¹ If Christianity could be made acceptable to the cultured elite, it might retain enough social power and credibility to continue to influence the moral vision of a secular Europe and its former colonies, so the thinking went.

This logic continues in our day in liberal Christian theological circles, who try to retain some credibility to the faith by continually restricting its reach to areas the wider culture views as safe containers for religion and spirituality. Private feeling and experience, as well as personal identity-crafting, are these safe spaces that don't threaten the ever-growing rights of individuals, or the power of governments and corporations to extract maximum capital value from their citizens, employees, and customers.

But this plan, to protect Christianity by a strategic withdrawal from claims about human flesh and the whole social life, is ultimately craven. For, it means that Christianity arrives at moral debates with a, "Look at me, I'm still relevant, and I've changed my mind to agree with you now!" kind of attitude. The bottom line is, the secular world and its citizens have neither want or need of Christianity to craft or discover authentic selfhood. To such a world, as Nietzsche pointed out, God is dead. Jesus is simply unnecessary for the visions of social justice outlined in declarations of human rights, which place the meaning and value of human existence in material thriving or development.

Put another way, a Christianity that exists to justify sin, not call sinners to repentance, is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace."² Cheap grace is easy to throw away and the God who provides cheap grace isn't worthy of worship or belief.

This form of Christianity is also the kind of moral cowardice that the most educated cultured despisers of Christianity, like Nietzsche or Marx, saw as keeping people in their chains of oppression. How so in the case of discussions about the ethics of human life? The "slave morality" as Nietzsche would call it, of Christianity focused on a future justice only. It promised all sorts of good things to those who patiently endure suffering, as though it were God who was disciplining them. Nietzsche and Marx saw through this and said, in effect, "God isn't disciplining you; you're being oppressed by the rich and powerful who use your religion to make you not question their authority or impact their profits." The outcome of this in Industrial Revolution England was the radical cheapening of human lives, the family, and especially women and children. The abandonment of religion, Marx believed, would not be any real loss, because it would be the loss of chains that bind the oppressed. He was not wrong about the weak forms of

¹ Schleiermacher is famously considered the father of theological liberalism. He attempted to make Christianity acceptable to a secularizing world that doubted miracles and the supernatural by making it mostly about a feeling and moral attitude.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*.

Christianity that only preach morality, an afterlife, or personal help. He was wrong, of course, about what Jesus Christ was actually claiming to do! And so the revolutions that followed Marx's beliefs substituted a cultural Christianity for a secular religion of the state and human ideologies that were responsible for the cheapening of human life on an almost unimaginable scale.

Yet, in our time a similar logic continues. As long as Christianity in particular is encouraged to be about private spirituality, "Your personal relationship with Jesus" (as vital as that is) and not about the formation of a different people group, a different lineage of Seth, Noah, Abraham, in Jesus Christ, then Christianity will support the rule of those who cheapen human life, who make human life all about competition, about scarcity, about fear and insecurity. Until the church develops communities that live and move and have their being as the *body* of Christ in the kingdom of God as present (and yet to come in fullness), the church will have nothing more than hand-wringing and political coalition strategies for the protection of human life.

This leaves the church with a strategic conundrum—how do we protect the lives of the innocent and vulnerable if we don't have the power to make and enforce laws? We saw in the chapter on history that the church has almost never had the power we imagine that it has. Some of the legal high points, like with Adomnan of Iona in Ireland, the law still only managed to turn murder of innocents into a civil violation payable by fines related to a person's social standing.

The power of the church has never been rooted in public influence. The gospel of Jesus just isn't very effective in that way. The power of the church comes from the Holy Spirit to preach the "word of life" that is Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. For the church to offer another gospel that makes Jesus optional is to deny the source and goal of all life.

Strategically speaking, entering political coalitions in a secular society will require us to abandon our foundational beliefs about the source, goal, and meaning of life. Even if this leads to temporary political victories, in the long run it is a pyrrhic victory³ as the next generation sees through any self-deception to see what we really value, and pursue that as well. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."⁴

So what can we do if not pursue political power to restrain the sin of murder so evident around us? Firstly, we must focus on the "author of life" who is the "author and perfecter of our faith" namely Jesus Christ.⁵ Secondly, we must be his *body* as the church that reveals what it looks like when and where God is king. This means we will reveal to the world how good it is to live in the abundance of the kingdom of God. We have to become a community of life-in-Christ that reveals the gospel of resurrection life.

This gospel must involve the whole person, just as the image of God in Christ does. That means it must penetrate to every aspect of our thinking. We must "take every thought captive

³ This means that the cost of victory is so high that it ends up being a defeat.

⁴ Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:34.

⁵ Acts 3:15; Hebrews 12:2.

for Christ.”⁶ This is the call of discipleship. It is only by being crucified with Christ that we have abundant life. There is no Christianity without the cross of Jesus, and no discipleship without your own cross. There is no life in Christ without sharing in his sufferings.⁷

This means that we must boldly proclaim the gospel of the abundant life found in Jesus Christ, and reveal it in our own flesh and the body of our church communities. This gospel isn’t just about personal moral transformation, about the finding of meaning and value in your own life (“your best life now” as Joel Osteen puts it)—it’s about the kingdom of the resurrected *God-man* Jesus Christ invading a “culture of death” engaged in a “conspiracy against life.”⁸

How does the church do this? By revealing God as his image-bearers, who are being made mature in the image of God in Christ, and doing so together in ways that create a plausible alternative to the culture of death. In other words, if the church doesn’t create a robust “culture of life” in the full sense of that word “culture,” it will remain subservient and will inevitably acquiesce to the power of the present evil age.

This is nothing short of a call to a revolution in the church. But it is a call for the church to be the church, and not to try and be anything else.⁹ The church should not try and be a social club, a home for the development and flourishing of a wider identity group (republican, democrat, nationalist, LGBTQ, etc.), nor a center for personal spiritual development. The church has, over time, become a “tertiary institution.”¹⁰ It is sequestered and compartmentalized into the field of recreation within wider society. If we spend our time, money, training, and other resources to develop the quality of our recreational ministry by offering a more engaging worship experience, for example, we have done almost nothing to address the heart of the problem. For the problem is not simply that individual people have chosen to devalue life as a personal form of sin. It’s that they are victims of a “conspiracy against life” that is rooted in a rejection of the source of life—Jesus Christ. How do we defeat a conspiracy and swim against the tide of a growing world-culture?

The answer has to be on multiple fronts.

We must **train new generations of leaders** who understand the church as a community of abundant life wherein people can experience a foretaste of visions like Isaiah 55, and see the truth of Matthew 6:33. Acts 2 has one example of how this did happen in a space and time.

We also must work for **the transformation of *institutions* into Jesus-shaped *communities of discipleship***. Institutions are not bad in and of themselves, but they are tools to serve people. Often tools outlast their creators and their descendants end up serving the needs of the

⁶ 2 Corinthians 10:5.

⁷ Philippians 3:10–11.

⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*. See the next chapter on “The Value of Life in a ‘Culture of Death’” for more on these points.

⁹ This is a point Stanley Hauerwas has made consistently in his writings on the church.

¹⁰ See my chapter “Where is the Church?” in *The Church: ECO Theology and Resources* (2022).

institution rather than the institution serving the people. When this happens, it's time for a change. The tools need to be refashioned. But, what if an institution has become hollow? What if there is no community or *life* within it? If a church vanishes by the loss of its building, its lead pastor, or its organizational structure, it has become hollowed out. That is, if people now so identify with the institution that they are not being led to Jesus and to discipleship of Jesus in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, they have become brand-loyal consumers. But this doesn't mean the heart has gone out of the people or that there's no hope for church institutions like this. It means that an institutional revolution is necessary, one that goes down to its roots, so that it can form people loyal to Jesus who are discipled by this institutional church, and loyal to the particular local body that gathers together. Perhaps the focus on abundant life in Christ and his resurrection can provide the needed impetus to transform a tired institution.

We also need **grassroots efforts of the laity** who gather Christians in their homes, who meet together regularly for prayer, who devote their lives to one another and the experiencing of an abundant life-together. This is what it means to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."¹¹

In order to preserve and protect life, we must celebrate and point to the author of life. Anything more pragmatic is doomed to acculturation or irrelevance.

¹¹ Galatians 6:2.

Chapter 10 *The Gospel of Life: A Roman Catholic Cautionary Theology for Evangelicals*

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*) from 1995 uses Scripture to establish several points on which Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have been in strong agreement. It is a beautifully written and informative document well worth reading to this day. Notably, this was a prophetic call by the Roman Catholic Church to a world in need of repentance and transformation. But 30 years on, and seemingly having made little impact on the world or even the Catholic Church itself, it begs the question of documents like this very book you are reading... where's the fruit? This chapter briefly looks at the encyclical and addresses the heart of its problem—a strategic error that most churches continue to commit.

Evangelium Vitae does not introduce any significantly new ideas, but mostly restates historically well-established positions. The Pope reiterates the council of Vatican II (1965) which says,

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.”¹

What John Paul II had noted in the 30 years after this had been written in 1965, was that a new cultural climate is developing and taking hold, which gives crimes against life a new and—if possible—even more sinister character, giving rise to further grave concern: broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom, and on this basis they claim not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the State, so that these things can be done with total freedom and indeed with the free assistance of health-care systems.²

In the now 30 years since John Paul II wrote those words, society has settled into this new, more sinister mode of life that justifies human destruction with personal freedoms. He called the culture of the 1990's a “culture of death” characterized by “a war of the powerful against the weak” and a kind of “conspiracy against life.”³ This conspiracy takes the form of a “perverse idea

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.

² *Evangelium Vitae*, 4.

³ *Evangelium Vitae*, 12.

of freedom" that "exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service to them." And this ultimately leads to the culture of death "becoming the freedom of 'the strong' against the weak who have no choice but to submit." John Paul II saw this kind of freedom as the spirit of Cain which asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?"⁴

Yes, every man is his "brother's keeper," because God entrusts us to one another. And it is also in view of this entrusting that God gives everyone freedom, a freedom which possesses an *inherently relational dimension*... If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself.⁵

Ultimately, John Paul II is pointing out that our very definition of freedom is distorted, and our culture of death is rooted in our affirmation of individual freedoms. The Pope's solution to the culture of death is a culture of life that must be grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. And while Reformed Evangelicals might want to say, "Yes, Amen!" to this teaching, it is here that we must pause and see where the Pope's *Gospel of Life* commits a fundamental strategic error that we ourselves have also committed:

The Gospel of life is not for believers alone: it is for everyone. The issue of life and its defence and promotion is not a concern of Christians alone. Although faith provides special light and strength, this question arises in every human conscience which seeks the truth and which cares about the future of humanity. Life certainly has a sacred and religious value, but in no way is that value a concern only of believers. The value at stake is one which every human being can grasp by light of reason; thus it necessarily concerns everyone.... The Gospel of life is for the whole of human society. To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good.... There can be no true democracy without a recognition of every person's dignity and without respect for his or her rights. Nor can there be true peace unless life is defended and promoted.⁶

Again, although this is language we can imagine reading in any Presbyterian or Evangelical publication, it commits the error of talking about *life* and using God and Jesus to give value to human lives themselves, rather than submitting life to God. Put another way, the Pope is talking about how God gives value to the human species rather than how God has called all humans to become "living sacrifices" to him.⁷ For the Pope, human life is understandable by reason, and a reasonable common good can be found by the protection of life. And yet, in the last 30 years, the arguments for abortion in the name of the common good, human dignity and rights have led even historically Catholic countries like Ireland to choose by popular vote to legalize abortion. The world just doesn't agree with the Catholic church's rationality, and appeals

⁴ Genesis 4:9.

⁵ *Evangelium Vitae*, 19, emphasis original.

⁶ *Evangelium Vitae*, 101.

⁷ See Romans 12:1.

to reason have failed. So, is it a strategic blunder to appeal to a common good and a common rational faculty? Is the modern world simply irrational? Or is the good news of life that the church has consistently taught for over 2,000 years actually been “foolishness to the Greeks?” Appeals to the wisdom of the world are appeals to fools. As the Psalms say,

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

They are corrupt and do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.⁸

To submit the church’s teaching to the reasonableness of those who claim there is no God is to cast our pearls before swine. To call a wicked and perverse generation, not to repent and submit to God, but “think harder and I’m sure you’ll see how this is a common good proposition,” is a lost cause. The minds of the world are darkened by sin.⁹ The whole world lies in the power of the evil one.¹⁰ The call, then, is not “come let us reason”¹¹ but “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!”¹² The strategic blunder of our churches after Christendom has been to appeal to reasonableness and try to retain our aura of respectability. John the Baptist was not respectable and did not appeal to the powers for reasonableness. He preached hope to the grassroots and openly called out the sins of specific leaders.

And yet, John Paul II doesn’t really follow through on bringing good news to all people through reason. Thankfully, he is more biblical than that. Throughout *Evangelium Vitae*, he points out the very heart of sin,

When he denies or neglects his fundamental relationship to God, man think he is his own rule and measure, with the right to demand that society should guarantee him the ways and means of deciding what to do with his life in full and complete autonomy.¹³

So, the Pope is inconsistent. While appealing to the common good and to reason, he also acknowledges that those who deny God make up their own values. This fundamental contradiction is widespread within our own public theologies. We try to participate in the secular world on its terms, while also preaching a gospel that requires a fundamental submission of life and its value to God.

But beyond the strategic error of casting pearls before swine and appealing to the reason of fools, what is the theological error of *Evangelium Vitae*? It is the question—*where is value*? Does value reside in the *life* of the human individual because he or she is part of the human species (made in the image of God)? Or does value reside in *God* alone, who alone is the true creator and evaluator (judge) of value? It is tempting to say the first as we have an understandable

⁸ Psalm 14:1; 53:1.

⁹ Romans 1:21.

¹⁰ 1 John 5:19.

¹¹ Isaiah 1:18, note that this is a call to the covenant people of God to return to him.

¹² Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15.

¹³ *Evangelium Vitae*, 64.

desire for the gospel to be universally applicable, and not just be a message for professing Christians. But this ends up playing right into the hands of the secular world trapped in a “conspiracy against life.” For, if value resides in us because of who we are, then any modification of how we define who or what we are, changes our value. Our culture of death becomes a battleground of definitions of what counts as “fully human” as various groups try to justify eliminating “subhuman” groups, like the unborn, the severely disabled, enemy people groups, or even those who see their own lives as lacking value.

Thus, John Paul II defends human life with thoroughly modern terms derived from the same philosophical systems that gave us the nearly religious devotion to personal liberty.¹⁴ When we speak, like John Paul II, of life as “sacred” and “inviolable,” we subtly adopt the secularized language of our time, while seemingly maintaining religious terms, because we give value to *life* rather than submitting life to God.

Practically speaking, we can see that for all the talk about human rights and respecting the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” these very rights can become a pretext for death *because the strong are the ones determining the status and value of the weak*. The evaluators of “what it means to be human” set themselves up as judges. Taking the place of God is not rooted first in Cain’s murder of Abel, but in Adam and Eve’s decision to evaluate/judge for themselves what is good and evil. The very act of the “Fall” (really an active “rebellion”) is the root of our modern culture of death because none of us is trustworthy to set the value of another’s life by defining “what it means to be human.” The results of this attitude in our time are clear. We speak of problems to be solved like “homelessness” in which groups of people are evaluated by other groups—and found wanting. We establish programs to alleviate the problem of homelessness because of the degrading conditions and economic problems it imposes on a city whose focus is its own material prosperity. “Common good” discussions rarely involve consulting those living without homes themselves. Rather than seeking to free individuals for whom Christ died, to an abundant life with him and his people, our world views the homeless as a categorical problem to solve.

The same can be said of arguments for euthanasia or “medically assisted dying.” Because value lies in the individual life, when that life seems degraded, impaired, or marked by suffering, the evaluative calculus appears to judge whether that life is worthy of continuation.

If value lies in *life*, then life can be *evaluated*. Evaluation only works by identifying both a high value and its consequent lack. That is, by holding up the goodness, capabilities, and potential of human life, we necessarily see those cases where these are impeded as problematic, threatening, and we evaluate them as “bad” or “evil” and so devalue them.

But if value belongs to God alone, we have no choice as followers of Jesus but to follow him in presenting ourselves as living sacrifices, and even laying down our lives for others. Life, for the Christian, is thus not something we hold up as valuable to protect from all external threats,

¹⁴ Indeed, in the French Revolution, liberty was itself set up as a false goddess, with the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris being refashioned into a temple to liberty.

it is something we are given to give for others in Christ. This logic makes no sense to the world at large who denies the existence of God. But such a world is bound to fall prey to what John Paul II called a “conspiracy of death” in which everyone is a potential enemy.

The Roman Catholic Church and its subsequent Popes have issued further statements about important topics, many of which are excellent in their own way. But nearly 30 years after *Evangelium Vitae*, where is the fruit? The Roman Catholic Church is not seen as a place that is characterized by the valuing of the lives of vulnerable individuals. It has tried to cover up its pederast priests to protect its public reputation. And its traditional stances outlined in *Evangelium Vitae* against contraception and the central place of the reproductive family (i.e. heterosexual monogamy) in human society are under constant assault from without and within. Nor has the “culture of death” receded in the face a renewed assault of the church against the gates of Hades. The point isn’t to blame John Paul II or even much of the laudable work in *Evangelium Vitae*. Obviously the issues with the Roman Catholic Church are manifold and complex, and it’s no use to belittle another church to build ourselves up.

But what can be learned from *Evangelium Vitae* 30 years on? The world just isn’t listening to prophetic words, whether delivered with vinegar or with honey. And the Roman Catholic Church isn’t listening to its own leadership. Public Roman Catholic figures in America, like President Biden, or comedian Stephen Colbert, publicly affirm anti-Catholic positions directly repudiated in *Evangelium Vitae*, i.e. like abortion.

Why would the world and the church itself not listen to words of wisdom? Why does the “good news” of the “perverse freedom” of individual autonomy capture the hearts and minds of our society at every level? What must the church do?

Maybe it’s because our words feel like empty rhetoric without any substance. Maybe it’s because churches aren’t seen as communities of life. Or maybe it’s because we need such words to be spoken by a St. Francis or a St. Dominic, or someone like Jesus who evidences the cost of discipleship in their own lives in radical ways. Maybe it’s a little of all of these things. I’ll leave it to you to discern the health of your own church community. But it’s still helpful to remember that, although the church has consistently taught its message of life, even highly Christianized cultures routinely ignored the church’s teaching. Maybe the real conclusion is simply that the church must be the church, a community of abundant life that reveals the kingdom of God. Statements like *Evangelium Vitae* are not useless, even if they have not changed the world. But if we put our hope in statements, in public pontificating (pun intended) or political action, rather than in a focused effort of discipleship, we will end up disappointed with little to show for our efforts.

Chapter 11

Sabbath Theology on the Meaning and Value of Life

In 2023 ECO released a major work of theology that has taken a team four years to complete, directed around renarrating the Bible through the lens of the Sabbath. This chapter briefly considers how that document can inform this discussion about the meaning and value of human life.

Sabbath, in the Bible, does not simply refer to the day, year, and year of Jubilee practices outlined in the Torah, though these are the most obvious aspects of it. These practices were designed to be participatory signs revealing what it looks like when and where God is king. Sabbath describes the seventh day of creation where the whole community of God's creation was called "very good." Just as heaven is the dwelling *place* of God, Sabbath is the dwelling *time* of God. So, Sabbath is also present at the end of the Bible, as the hope to which the people of God are looking—that God would be present with his people, ruling over all creation with justice, and making all things new.

This speaks to a theology of life in many ways. Jesus described his kingdom as one of abundant life. The visions of the return of God as king are all characterized by visions of abundance, free provision, lack of predation and aggression, and the thriving of the weak and humble alongside the strong—i.e. the lion, wolf, and leopard laying down with the lamb, kid, calf, and a little child leading them.¹

But beyond these eschatological visions, there are profound theological points, as well as practical visions to cultivate a Sabbath-vision and imagination that can reform the way we think about Christian faith in our world today. Let's consider the basis of life—food.

The Sabbath promises an abundant life without scarcity and where life is not defined by work. Sabbath is about grace, about the gift of God. Jesus invites us into God's rest when he says, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."²

Meaning and value in life come by rest in the presence of God, not by work and production. In creation and in new creation, God promises abundant provision without work. Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they?... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all of these things will be added to you."³ Jesus promises that God will feed his people, just as he demonstrates in feeding the multitudes, or in supplying fish for his disciples when they couldn't catch any, and in the manna in the wilderness.

¹ Isaiah 11:6.

² Matthew 11:29–30.

³ Matthew 6:26, 33.

Sabbath shows that the work-reward logic built into human civilization is a lie. This isn't a command to laziness, of course. We are to carry one another's burdens, after all.⁴ And the lazy who don't help shouldn't get to eat with those who do work.⁵

But, we shouldn't miss that Jesus' teaching about the source of life and provision in God and not in agriculture is probably as radical as we fear it is. "Look at the birds of the air" is not a cute greeting-card image, or the cue for a sentimental hymn, it is a critique of the very foundations of ancient and modern beliefs about the nature of reality. There is nothing more basic than food and water for survival. Jesus says, "don't worry about it, instead seek God's kingdom and all of that stuff will be given to you." Not worry about it? Don't we spend almost every minute of our lives working to provide for our families, preparing food, eating it, worrying about eating too much and worrying about exercise to get to a healthy weight? But to that Jesus says, "Yes, don't worry about it. Trust that God will provide without your having to work and worry."

This sounds insane to us. And yet, from a very long term civilizational perspective, he's not wrong about the possibilities. We have this notion that hunter-gatherers lived a hand-to-mouth existence, constantly worrying about where the next meal would come from. Anthropology based on skeletal remains tells a vastly different story. They worked less, had a more egalitarian society both in terms of social class and gender roles, were healthier, lived longer, had significantly less disease. Ninety-five percent of the history of *homo sapiens* was spent in a pre-agricultural non-urban environment.⁶

There are, even today, large stands of wild wheat in Anatolia from which, as Jack Harlan famously showed, one could gather enough grain with a flint sickle in three weeks to feed a family for a year.⁷

Imagine that... Three weeks of work for a year of sustenance! The surprising findings of anthropologists in recent years has been a growing notion that many of the supposedly iron laws of our civilization were never necessary—and were rarely chosen willingly. Who would willingly trade three weeks of work for 50 weeks of 40+ hours? Almost no one, anthropologists like Scott have argued. "It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the centrality of bondage, of one form or another, in the development of the state until very recently."⁸

To this Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest... My yoke is easy and my burden is light" says Jesus right before he proclaims himself "Lord of the Sabbath."⁹

⁴ Galatians 6:2.

⁵ 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

⁶ For these arguments and much more see James C. Scott, *Against the Grain* (Yale University Press: 2018).

⁷ Scott is here referencing Jack Harlan, *Crops and Man* 2nd ed. (American Society of Agronomy: 1992) in *Against the Grain*, 11.

⁸ Scott, *Against the Grain*, 155.

⁹ Matthew 11:28, 30, 12:8.

Our world is built upon industrialized processes in every field. Without constant, restless exploitation of the earth and its resources, the human population will be endangered more than it already is. Global food insecurity is rife, even more so with the Russian war in Ukraine. To not harvest one out of every seven years, as the Torah commands,¹⁰ is obviously not going to happen in our world today. Cutting food production by 1/7th seems insane. Consider that it sounded just as insane in the days of Leviticus, perhaps more so without global networks of distribution. More insane, however, is that about 31% of all food produced around the world is wasted.¹¹ Rather than imagining a rigorous dedication to the Sabbath year command, the Sabbath should cultivate our imaginations. Imagine that nearly one-third of the hard labor involved in agriculture, one-third of the soil depletion, of deforestation, etc. is caused by nothing but waste.

The Sabbath asks us to imagine what would happen if we limited ourselves with self-control, if we carried one another's burdens, if we sought the kingdom of God more than feeding our cravings, and if we sought to create communities of abundant provision that crossed over between producers and consumers rather than segmenting them into rural and urban containers, with pipelines of resources flowing into, but not out of, the city.

The Sabbath isn't a command saying to our world today exactly what it said in ancient Israel. Rather, it's a vision of what it looks like when and where God is king. It is our responsibility as communities of the people of God to reveal God's kingdom to the world as his ambassadors. How can we say to the world, "Taste and see that the Lord is good"?

Biblical scholar Ellen Davis says that about one quarter of the population of the United States lives in a colony. She says,

North American farmland functions in most places almost exclusively as a source of wealth flowing out of local communities.... Today most small towns in America's grain belt are severely underpopulated. Many are virtually ghost towns.... Most farmers who have managed to stay on the land do so as renters or low-paid employees of the multinational corporations; the term "bioserf" has been coined to describe their situation.¹²

We, in ECO, have some churches in these "American colonies." We have Commissioned Lay Pastors working farms and preaching the good news. We have brothers and sisters facing communities rife with suicide, opioid addiction, loss of a way of life... and much of that suffering for farming simply gets wasted. Imagine a suburban church of upper middle-class commuters partnering with a regionally local rural church. What could the church do to challenge this trend?

¹⁰ Leviticus 25.

¹¹ "Around 14 percent of the world's food valued at \$400 billion per year continues to be lost in the supply chain after it is harvested and before it reaches retail, while a further 17 percent—approximately 931 million tonnes of food—ends up being wasted in retail and by consumers. Much of this food waste takes place in households." FAO of the UN. <https://www.fao.org/platform-food-loss-waste/background/food-is-never-waste-coalition/en>

¹² Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 105.

How could we form micro-economies of fairness, justice, and rest, that show the world it doesn't have to be this way?

In the book of Acts, Paul led a fundraising campaign for famine relief among Christians around the ancient Roman world to support the church in Jerusalem. Consider how disorganized the churches were in his day, how few ways to communicate, how difficult it would be to actually transport coined money or foodstuffs across the land without getting robbed. Consider further that Paul was collecting money from Gentile Christians in many cases, to give to Jewish Christians. And yet, churches gave. This is just one simple example of how Paul believed in the church of Jesus Christ to combat what seemed like the obvious challenges of his day.

We might start by supplying our bread for the Lord's Supper from local farmers and bakers rather than industrial packages of faceless, nameless producers. We could restore the tradition of harvest celebrations, yes even in suburban and urban churches, where farmers as valued in the same way veterans are on patriotic days. We could spend time between industries, learning about the working conditions of those around us. For more ideas check out books like *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community and the Land* or *Food and Faith* by Norman Wirzba.

The New Theology Document is a call, not to some rigorous obedience, but to rediscover the gospel of Jesus Christ and reveal to the world communities that are signs of the kingdom of God present on earth. There are countless practical ways to do this that will depend on your context. And it doesn't have to be "political." It doesn't have to be motivated by some ideology. It doesn't need the government's help or approval. It doesn't always even need money. How might you and your church show the abundant life of the kingdom of God today by giving rest to the weary?

Part 3: Applications

Chapter 12

Theological Statement on Human Life

ECO's Polity and Theology

Editor's note: This document was commissioned by the Synod Executive Council of ECO in Spring of 2022. It has been approved and distributed. This document is reprinted here in the wider context of discussions around a theology to create a community of life. Unlike all the other content of this book which remains the intellectual work of individuals offered as an aid for the readers, this statement represents an official denominational statement.

Approved by the Synod Executive Council 7/1/2022

Pastoral Letter

In light of the decision by SCOTUS to overturn the 1973 Roe v Wade decision legalizing abortion nationally, ECO affirms the purpose of each human life to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We embrace the gospel of love from God, through grace in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We view one another as people made in the image of God, loved with a love that is "not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious" and that furthermore, that "God's love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living." (*Essential Tenets*, III.A)

We affirm the importance of our life together as communities dedicated to saturating our world with the transforming power of Jesus Christ. As such we seek to provide places where it is safe to speak candidly from a diversity of perspectives, honoring one another and protecting as particularly precious those who suffer from the abuse of others through rape or incest. We uphold the importance and concerns of women and girls dealing with unexpected or crisis pregnancies, and also affirm our deep concern for the unborn. We lament especially with those who have lost children for medical reasons.

We offer God's comfort to those in any trouble with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor 1:4) We maintain our commitment to be a community devoted to the cultivation and flourishing of healthy families. We commit to being churches that welcome and love everyone regardless of background or physical condition or marital status. We offer support consonant with God's love, grace, and forgiveness, as well as for practical needs including emotional support, because to refuse to do so would violate God's commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We grieve with those who suffer with the challenges of unwanted pregnancy, and understand that these situations are often inextricably interwoven with other very important

issues like poverty, lack of education, poor medical care, physical vulnerabilities, generational trauma, the absence of family support and many other factors that the Church is called to address with compassion and conviction for the sake of our witness to Christ. We affirm our desire for everyone made in the image of God to enjoy life in God's presence.

We welcome women and men facing childbearing decisions in the absence of access to adequate medical care or family support. We acknowledge that there are no easy answers or quick fixes to the difficulties of pregnancy and childbirth in a world that is hostile to unwed parents, in a nation with the highest maternal mortality rate of any developed country. We seek to allay fear and promote peace.

We also grieve the death of the unborn. Whether or not their death was intentional or unintentional, an image bearer of God has died. We grieve that the vulnerable are often unable to speak for themselves or assert their own right to life and seek to protect the vulnerable from those who threaten their lives and livelihoods.

We pledge our willingness to listen with open and humble hearts and to refrain from judgmental or polarizing rhetoric that denies the power of God's love for sinners, because none of us is without sin (Rom 3:23). We offer grace abounding to all who would receive our ministry, withholding nothing, for in Christ we have received everything and offer it to others in a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace and love.

Polity Foundations

ECO believes that ministry occurs in local churches, not by denominational statements. The conception and birth of human life is inextricably personal, and our ministry is to women, men, children, and families for whom issues of abortion are present and real, as well as to the communities involved in the lives of these. ECO believes that the truth of our shared belief must be contextualized in pastorally appropriate ways.

ECO is a Christian denomination that is guided and governed by its *Constitution*. The beliefs of ECO are stated clearly in its *Essential Tenets*, which form part of the *Constitution*. All pastors, elders, and deacons are required to "receive, adopt, and be bound by the *Essential Tenets* of ECO." ECO does not permit its officers to "scruple" or take exception to parts of this document.

The *Essential Tenets* of ECO are grounded in the truth of the Christian Bible, and the Reformed tradition, of which ECO is a part. ECO holds that this document is a short summary of what all orthodox Christians believe, and what ECO as a Reformed denomination in particular believes.

Theology

The *Essential Tenets* use the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) as a moral guide, upholding our Reformed Tradition's "third use of the law" which states that God's law is useful not just in limiting and condemning moral faults, but to also guide upright human behavior.

The sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13), “Do not murder” is elaborated by our *Essential Tenets*, in part, by the phrase “We hold one another accountable to... recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death” (*Essential Tenets* III.E.6). This sentence combines the commandment of Exodus 20:13 with the prohibition of murder from Genesis 9:5-6, which states that God requires an account of all human life taken, for humans are made to bear God’s image, that is, to be representations of God.

So, while acknowledging that human life should not be taken by other humans, ECO also upholds that human life is given great value by its function of representing God. This function of bearing God’s image cannot be reduced to human capacities that are gained and lost at various points of human life. Rather, the Bible links this image to all people regardless of their state of development, decline, or social status.

ECO upholds the central Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead through the work of Jesus Christ, and that life will triumph over death. We believe that Christians are to be a people who actively represent, reveal, and hope for the reign of God at which time death will be defeated. (See 1 Corinthians 15).

Our *Essential Tenets* state that “Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ’s priestly, mediatorial work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God’s blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world” (*Essential Tenets*, III.D). This means that ECO holds that, while we condemn and mourn the destruction of any human life, we are called to actively work to oppose this destruction, pray for all involved in this destruction, mediate between different parties as we are able, and to prepare our communities to be places of life that bless others.

Therefore

ECO holds that human life begins at conception. To artificially end the life of a conceived fetus (abortion) is the shedding of human blood and dishonoring the image of God.

ECO holds that human life ends at natural death.

ECO holds that humans do not have a God-given right to end human life.

ECO holds that Christians are to actively work to reveal the coming reign of God’s kingship by valuing life and abstaining from dealing death.

ECO holds that all officers of ECO hold one another accountable to affirm the image of God in all human life from conception to natural death. We hold that this is an essential tenet of our shared belief, and that, while not all Christians in the world may agree on this or other points, we stand united by sharing this high value of all human life.

ECO holds that its churches should be communities of flourishing that pray for the world and create contexts in which human life can thrive, and that its communities will do this in ways appropriate to their various contexts.

Chapter 13

Abortion: A Hypothetical Ordination Question

Editor's Note: In order to address the complex topic of abortion in a pastorally and theologically sensitive way, we have decided to present this as a hypothetical situation like ordination exam questions. ECO's ordination exam questions are typically written in a similar way to the theological method of this book: start with a question as presented; work from foundational principles, acknowledging the voices of the world too that feed into the conversation; hold an honest conversation submitting to the authority of God and his word; and develop a practical action plan—foundations, implications, applications.

Question and grading written by Rev. Emily Hamilton

Answer written by Rev. Jocelyn Smolik.

You are the pastor of a mid-size suburban church. An established covenant partner in her late 20s reaches out to you and asks to meet and discuss some trouble she's having. She comes to your office, and she shares with you through tears that she has recently experienced a sexual assault and has discovered she's pregnant. She says she doesn't know what to do. Her initial reaction is to choose not to have the baby. "But is it right not to want a baby, even in these circumstances? And if I have an abortion, will God send me to hell for murder?" she asks you. She adds that she is very worried about how her church family will react no matter what she chooses. "If I get an abortion, the people at church will hate me, and if I go through with the pregnancy, people at church will judge me for having a baby when I'm not married. I feel like I'm trapped and no matter what I do, people in the church will reject me." What theological commitments do we hold that might shape your time and counsel? How will you respond to this young, hurting woman? What will be your words in the moment and what practical steps might you take following this conversation? Make sure your answer includes at least one reference from each of ECO's core guiding documents, i.e., the Bible, ECO Essential Tenets, and ECO Confessional Standards.

Answer:

The first priority upon hearing this story is not only to *communicate* care to this covenant partner, but to make sure that she *experiences* care in the form of listening, sympathy, empathy and support. It is important to carefully and appropriately ask about general details of her situation in order to ensure that she has received—and is receiving—the medical and legal attention she needs. This initial step is to make sure she feels safe in sharing her story, and that she is pursuing the proper responses to the sexual assault she has experienced.

Because it seems obvious from her conversation that she has significant spiritual questions and struggles initiated by what has happened, I would need to judge the

appropriateness of answering those questions in this particular dialogue. If it seems proper to explore responses to her questions, I would do so, but the right time for this exchange may come at a later date in a follow-up conversation.

When I discuss her questions, I might begin by saying something like this:

"I am so truly sorry for what has happened to you. It isn't right, you have experienced an evil thing, and it is completely ok and normal to feel all the things you are feeling. My heart breaks to hear your story and I can't imagine how difficult this has been. I can also understand that it is so fearful to look into the future. I want you to know that whatever happens, I will be here with you, and this church will offer you all of the support, presence and care we possibly can. No matter how the situation turns out, you are part of this church community and I will work to make sure that you feel loved, supported and cared for in the ways that are best for you.

I hear in your words that you are feeling guilty, because the idea of carrying this child is so painful for you. I hear you saying that you feel ashamed for not wanting the baby, even though you think you should. I totally understand that. It is all so hard and difficult and confusing.

But because you and I are followers of Jesus, we get to hold on to two great truths. The first is that God is completely in control. He is 'infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible and ineffable'... which means God acts with 'gracious sovereignty and providence'. (Essential Tenets II.A). The second great truth is that even though God is in control, He NEVER intends the kind of evil, brokenness and pain you are experiencing. We affirm that though God created the world good, it has been broken by human sinfulness and 'the present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will.' (Essential Tenets III.A)

The decision about what to do in response to your pregnancy has to be so difficult. I want to you know that whatever you decide, God's love is always toward you and for you—that will never change. When it comes time to think through this in more detail we can help you do that. As followers of Jesus, we know that we don't have the same kind of authority over human life that God does. God determines the times and places of each individual human life (Acts 17:26) and His providence means that He alone has the 'every present power...by which He upholds heaven and earth together with all creatures by his own hand' (Heidelberg A.27). As you think through what you are going to do in this moment, I want to remind you that God has a kind of loving, all-knowing power over life that we humans can never have; and it will be wise to acknowledge that God alone has the right to control life and death. Humans don't have the authority to end human life. My counsel to you, as a pastor who cares about you *and* your child, is that you might choose not to have an abortion. At the same time, here's what I want you to know: we love you and will be here for you no matter what. And God loves you and will be with you no matter what.

But, most importantly I want to remind you of the hope we have in Jesus. It may not seem like it right now, but God is good and faithful; and He has promised to redeem all broken things. The great hope we look for is that one day, God in Christ is going to set all things right. There is a sure future, 'when suffering and death will pass away and God will live among His people.'

(Essential Tenets III.B). God sees the hurt and harm that has happened to you and He CALLS it evil and wrong and one day He will act justly to bring an end to all evil. Because YOU belong to His covenant family through the gracious work of Christ and the faith you profess in Him, you share in the hope of this future. I know it seems like a far-off—maybe even hollow—hope now. But this is a hope for people who suffer, because one day ‘He will cast all his enemies and mine (yours, ours) into everlasting condemnation. But he shall take me (you, us), together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory.’ (Heidelberg A. 52)

I hope that it brings you comfort to know you aren’t alone in believing these things. And when it feels like things are too hard, and you can’t believe them anymore, you are surrounded by a covenant community who will believe them for you. You are part of the new covenant in Christ ‘which God himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another.’ (Essential Tenets III.C). When you became a member of this church, you became part of a family who has promised to—and INTENDS to—walk alongside you no matter what comes. After all, this is what God has called us to do! Specifically, we are to ‘Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you(we) will fulfill the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2) Please don’t fear the reaction you will get at church. I am quite certain that some people may say some things that aren’t as supportive or kind as you need. There will be awkward conversations because people—even at their best—are often awkward. But when that happens, you can tell me, and I will help you—I even want you to tell me when I am not being as gentle and supportive as I intend to be. The community of faith is also called to the work of “relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities” (Westminster XXVIII.2). I want to help this church community sacrificially bear the weight of seeing things through with you and walking alongside you; our guiding purpose will be to care for you, support you and be in your corner.”

As far as practical steps, I would want to ask this covenant partner about who her core friends/supporters are in the church. I would work with her to identify a small team of believers who will be her go-to people throughout the process of discerning next steps. And hopefully these people will be the ones who will help care for her during her pregnancy and whatever follows after. I would probably say something like: “Let’s pick one or two people in the church to be your advocates with me, and when you can’t find the energy or strength to trust the goodness of God, we will do it for and with you every step of the way.”

“Grader” Response from Emily Hamilton

Strengths:

1. You do a great job situating your theological response inside a context of care. You treat your covenant partner in light of the reality that she is a survivor of violence. You are wise to discern how and when to bring up the spiritual questions of your covenant partner after you have thoroughly addressed her medical, legal, and emotional needs. This demonstrates that you support her full personhood as well as her child’s. Your

counsel that she not seek abortion is enfolded in great care for your covenant partner's personhood and her child's personhood. One is not more important than nor pitted against the other—they are equally affirmed and respected.

2. You do an excellent job naming that what has happened to her is wrong. Lamenting the brokenness of the situation and evil done to her will likely be an important step for her own healing; it's also a gift of our ECO theological heritage that we affirm the full impact of human sin. There is no pretending or minimizing to be done here.
3. Your response is based on a robust ecclesiology; you affirm it is the role of the church to support this woman, hold hope for her, and provide for her practical needs for the long-haul. It is clear that your commitment and care for her personhood and the personhood of her child will extend into a future beyond just the potential birth of her child.
4. Well done reframing her fears about hell around a broader scope of hope in God's redemption of all things—including her present pain and suffering.

Recommendation for improvement:

1. You call her attention to three important theological truths: God's sovereignty, God's justice, and an eschatological vision of God's redemption of all things. These are all important. I might consider leading with the eschatological vision (along with your emphasis on God's justice) and then moving into a discussion of God's sovereignty and authority over human life. This would more overtly root your counsel that she not end her pregnancy (clearly a very difficult, sacrificial choice) inside God's own promises, commitment, and self-giving love—the resources she will most need in order to sustain such a choice.
2. Another helpful scripture reference that could inform your response is Romans 8:38-39. This covenant partner is worried that she can make a choice that would irrevocably separate her from God; Romans 8 reminds her of the promise that *nothing* can separate her from God's love.
3. Your practical steps are wonderful, especially your emphasis in forming a community of care around this woman. I also suggest that you take this moment as an opportunity to explore where your congregation could support whole-life initiatives within your community more broadly. How could your church support better educational opportunities for marginalized communities, adequate access to nutrition, stable employment for moms and dads, foster care resourcing, and affordable housing? While those might not be the most urgent needs of your covenant partner, they may be factors in her decision to have an abortion or not. Without a coherent pro-life ethic that encompasses whole lifespans and affirms the dignity of all persons, your counsel to this woman to not have an abortion under circumstances of such violence may appear selective at best and hypocritical at worst. It may be beyond the scope of this response to evaluate your church's local mission and outreach strategy, but understanding the connection between your covenant partner's situation and larger societal brokenness is important for the witness of your congregation both to her and the community.

Chapter 14

The Anthropology of the Ascension

Rev. Dr. Eric Laverentz

The book *Mission at Nuremburg* tells the story of a Lutheran pastor from St. Louis who was charged with being a chaplain to the Nazi defendants at the Nuremburg War Crimes tribunal. Pastor Henry Gerecke ministered to the highest living members of Nazi Party as their crimes against humanity were revealed to the world. According to Gerecke at least two of the men confessed their sin and sought God's forgiveness. This existential development did not impact their earthly sentence in any way. They were hung alongside the other war criminals in a cold drizzling rain between 1:00 and 3:00 AM on October 16, 1946.

Their 10 bodies were cremated along with the body of Hermann Goring who had committed suicide the day before and placed in eleven aluminum cylinders sixteen inches tall and six inches around. A group of US Army officers carried the cylinders to banks of a stream behind a nearby villa, "...where they smashed the aluminum cylinders with axes and stomped them with their boot heels. The waters of the Contwentsbach carried the Nazis' ashes to the Isar River which took them to the Danube, and then to the sea."¹

What happened to those ashes scattered to the sea nearly eight decades ago? Or perhaps a better question is what will happen those ashes—the ashes of the repentant who sought Jesus in their final weeks and days, and the unrepentant who sought no forgiveness or grace for their incredible sin?

Do their spirits linger on? Are their ashes forever dispersed to the great deep, dissolved like the contents of kool aid packet in an Olympic pool? There is great confusion among even Christians about what happens to our body when we die but the witness of Scripture is clear—the body and spirit are not eternally separated, the body is of utmost importance and the resurrection of our bodies is breathlessly anticipated. Daniel 12:2–3 speaks to this: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

This idea of the eternal nature of the body flies in the face of most anthropologies, particularly in the West where the Platonic dualism of a soul that can exist without the body has tended to dominate. However, the consistent Biblical message that body and spirit are ontologically equal is shocking even to Christians. I cannot tell you the number of times I have spoken with a church member who has spread the cremated remains of a loved one over some special place so their spirit may dwell there eternally. My own grandfather had his ashes shot out of a grapeshot cannon across their small acreage in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the narrative was "Now Bucky can enjoy his land forever." But I questioned the wisdom of

¹ Tim Townsend, *Mission at Nuremburg* (Harper Collins: 2014), 289.

trapping him ethereally on that seven-acre plot of land for all eternity—perpetually a dweller on the threshold.

Fortunately, I am not concerned about it because the firm anthropology taught in Scripture.

The clearest way to unpack this anthropology is to look through the lens of Jesus Christ, who is our forerunner,² firstfruit,³ and the picture of what is to come with our bodies.

First, we look to Jesus' resurrection where the Bible ensures we understand that Jesus is physically resurrected, not just in spirit. All four Gospels report that Jesus' tomb is empty. His body was lifeless and was raised to life again. John's Gospel, written during the rise of Gnosticism which denigrated the importance of the body, goes to the greatest lengths to describe Jesus' resurrected and renewed body. Mary Magdalene upon arriving at Jesus' tomb, found the stone rolled away, ducked her head to look in to see the linen burial wrappings discarded and the face covering folded up in place by itself. But there was, however, no body. Rather than being elated, Mary was distressed. She said to the angels in Joseph's tomb: "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid Him."⁴ Mary immediately turned around and encountered the risen Jesus at first mistaking him for the gardener.

John tells us that Jesus also encouraged physical contact. Quite memorably, the apostle Thomas said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."⁵ Eight days later Jesus appeared in a locked room with the disciples and told Thomas to put his fingers in the nail holes of his hands and his hand in his side. Thomas immediately confessed, "My Lord and my God."⁶ John 21 tells us that Jesus cooked fish on the beach alongside the Sea of Galilee for Peter and six others and served it to them along with some bread. These are not the descriptions of a living, disembodied spirit but a flesh and blood, resurrected human being.

Second, Jesus ascended to the Father in his flesh and rules the cosmos as a flesh blood human being. On the top of the Mount of Olives just east of Jerusalem is the Church of the Pater Noster. This is built upon the traditional location of Jesus' ascension according to Acts 1. The Holy Land is, of course, filled with churches and chapels dedicated to nearly every event mentioned in the Gospels. What is noteworthy about the Church of the Pater Noster is that it was one of three sites sought out by the devout mother of Constantine to identify and build a church in celebration of Jesus. Helena sought out three caves: the birth cave in Bethlehem, the empty tomb in Jerusalem, and a cave on the Mount of Olives where it was believed Jesus often taught and the site of His ascension. This speaks to the importance of the Ascension to early

² Hebrews 6:10.

³ 1 Corinthians 15:20.

⁴ John 20:13.

⁵ John 20:25.

⁶ John 20:28.

Christians. This event was on par with the greatest of our two Christian holidays—Christmas and Easter. Today, I would be surprised if one in 20 Christians could name the day of Ascension. The Ascension marks an incredible event. A flesh and blood human being, whose body has been made new and elevated, rules over the cosmos. He is charged with ruling over all dominions, rulers and authorities and holding all things together according to Colossians 1:17.

The Ascension of Jesus in the flesh also completes the course of returning humanity to the Father's side and restores humanity to our rightful place of dominion over Creation. Jesus, our flesh and blood representative and federal head, reigns on our behalf. In the renewed and elevated body of Jesus, God and His creation are eternally united. The Scottish theologian William Milligan describes this portentous event:

The resurrection of our Lord was not the completion of His glory. His glorification then began...He had previously for three and thirty years confined Himself. He received that 'spiritual body' and entered upon that state of existence 'in spirit' in which alone it was possible for Him perfectly to reconcile and unite the material and the spiritual—man and nature on one hand and God on the other.⁷

Do not be thrown by Milligan's description of a 'spiritual body.' By the phrase, explained elsewhere, he means the renewed physical body of Jesus unencumbered by the decay of time and even the physical laws of creation. This is unlike the resurrected body of Lazarus, for example, which later succumbed to death. This 'spiritual body' is the kind of body we can expect to also receive.

Third, Jesus' resurrected and renewed physical body is the firstfruit of the renewal of all creation. Revelation prophesies that Jesus will descend from the throne of Heaven—collapsing the space between Heaven and Earth. And as Jesus descends, He will cry out, "Behold I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5). That phrase 'all things new' is filled with staggering promise for this broken, failing world. When my wife and I were forced to euthanize our beloved dog Wilhelmina, who we had together before kids, I clutched her in the vet's office as she breathed her last repeating over and over those very words, "All things new." I claimed it as promise for her—a faultless victim caught up in the death and decay of human sin.

In 1 Corinthians Paul gives another view of this great day of the reunion between Heaven and Earth that affirms the resurrection and renewal of our physical bodies:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we all be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality.⁸

So, to answer our question. Shockingly, if what we are told about the Nazis tried and convicted at Nuremburg is true, two of those men, whose disembodied parts float imperceptibly in the sea, can anticipate the joining together again and the renewal of their incinerated,

⁷ William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord* (Macmillan and Company, London, 1892) p.1.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:51–54

scattered corpus. Their perishable, mortal frames are destined for imperishable immortality. As are we who are united with Jesus in His death and resurrection.

Such is the astonishing grace and power of our God.

Chapter 15

Christians and the Metaverse

Rev. Dr. Eric Laverentz

Because the Church is a human creation, the Church has always been impacted by technology. Roman roads helped facilitate the spread of the Gospel during the first few centuries after Jesus. The Reformation which was aided by the printing press. Martin Luther's writings spread like dandelion seeds in a stiff wind because he "...spent his life in and out of print shops, observing and directing. He had very firm views on how his books should look."¹ Microphones, telephones, cars, copy machines, television, computers have all impacted the Church.

The judgment for the Church, when it comes to using technology, is the question of the Tower of Babel. Genesis tells us the men at Babel employed the use of bitumen, also known as asphalt, in its construction. Technology nearly always has ethical implications, so we must consider its potential for misuse in the hands of sinful human beings. In the case of the Tower of Babel, humanity was using technology for its own glorification, "to make a name for ourselves." (Genesis 11:4) This is the key question for all technology use in the Church, "To what end?"

Some have said we are in the midst of a 500-year shift in communication, the greatest since Gutenberg. The preeminence of the internet, ubiquity of smart phones, the ability to communicate anywhere with anyone and have the sum total of human information readily available in our pocket has changed our culture and is even re-wiring our brains. Ironically, despite its opportunity, churches are usually among the slowest to adapt technology to their purposes. The COVID-19 pandemic changed that rapidly with regard to 'virtual' worship. Immediately before the pandemic, according to a March 2020 Lifeway survey, only 22% of Protestant churches livestreamed their entire service. Following the pandemic 97% of churches livestream their services.² This nearly 450% expansion of livestreaming was born of necessity but few stopped to consider the Babel question. Now that livestreaming is here to stay, we are forced to retrofit the theology to fit the technology and establish guardrails to make ensure its edifying character for the Body of Christ. Similar questions swirl around social media and the metaverse where many churches invest heavily.

The technology we are describing allows congregations, with minimal expense, to present information and personalities without being physically present. It is not unusual for even small and medium-sized congregations to have livestream viewers peppered across the globe. In the past this kind of influence was reserved for all but the largest or most specialized ministries. Today, however, it is common. I am acquainted with a pastor who leads a congregation which is

¹ Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther* (Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2015) p. xiii.

² Aaron Earls, "Online Services Expanded Reach of Churches During the Pandemic," Lifeway Newsroom, October 14, 2021 found at news.lifeway.com

only on-line. Every day he reads and teaches upon Scripture for an hour. He has more than 100,000 followers spread across every time zone. Some pastors hold Bible studies and teach lessons and build churches in the open world game Minecraft. In 2022, our Oklahoma-based services were watched in nearly all 50 states, the District of Columbia plus 14 countries. Most of those people will never set foot in our sanctuary and we have no way of following up unless they let us know they are joining us—which rarely happens in the anonymity of the on-line world.

The All American and Heisman Candidate Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o was famously and cruelly 'catfished' by a young man roughly his age who posed as a woman named Lennay Kekua. They met on Facebook. Te'o, and "Lennay" exchanged thousands of texts and talked for hundreds of hours on the phone. And although he never met Lennay, Te'o fell in love and came to regard her as his girlfriend. Finally, the young man posing as Lennay, Ronaiah Tuiasosopo, became convinced that he needed to end the relationship. He faked Lennay's death from leukemia devastating Te'o. Lennay's death was a national news story because Te'o dedicated his play to her memory as well as the memory of his grandmother. Tuiasosopo claims to have loved Te'o and wanted to help him become the best person he could be. Yet the relationship, because there was no incarnate presence, was grounded in a lie.

Although this is an extreme example, we must concede that any relationship which is not incarnational (by which I mean fully present in the flesh) cannot be fully grounded in truth and truth is perquisite to discipleship. The relationship is necessarily manipulated and massaged by technology. We still see through a glass darkly, not face to face.

Because any excarnate relationship necessarily falls short of authenticity, on-line worship or Christian presence in the metaverse may be a starting point, but it cannot be an end point. Bodily presence is important. If it were not, Jesus' Incarnation would not be necessary. We are made for community. We are made to be present with other people. There is a union that occurs when people gather cheek to jowl that cannot be replicated. And we are refined by the process of giving and receiving grace that comes from being yoked with other fallible human beings. This has not only been modeled for us because God has indissolubly linked Himself to His sinful and broken creatures. Or as Karl Barth put it: "It is God's deity, which rightly understood, includes his humanity."³

The Word of God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. God chose a context in which to live—first century AD Palestine, as a Jewish male, a subject of the Roman Empire. God chose a face, a height, hair and eye color, shoe size, intelligence level, hometown, parents, and family. These were all not universally positive. Nazareth was not well regarded as a town and Jesus' own family stood outside His adopted home in Capernaum seeking to seize and drag Him back to Nazareth telling anyone who would listen, "He is out of his mind." There is also no evidence of His family, outside of Jesus' mother, being present during the week of His passion.

Jesus' decision to seek a community and a family (most notably Peter and Andrew's household) in Capernaum speaks volumes to the importance of bodily presence among fellow

³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, tr. Thomas Wieser (John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1960) p.46.

human beings. Jesus lived in a time when rabbis traveled from town to town and synagogue to synagogue making their living as expert teachers of the law. Often these rabbis had disciples who they called to themselves. But the community Jesus sought went beyond that. Not only did Jesus have these disciples, he also made a home with Peter and Andrew but was apparently close with a number of other families as well—the Bethany household of Mary, Martha and Lazarus and perhaps the household of John Mark and his mother Mary where the Last Supper was held.

Jesus' decisions and other scriptural witness suggests that the Christian life cannot sustain long term growth, flourishing, and fruit-bearing apart from being physically present with other believers. Of course, Jesus' stated *modus operandi* was simple, "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." (John 5:19) The Triune God is a God of community—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And through the incarnate Word we are caught up in that community in body, mind and spirit. If God's deity includes His humanity, then a flesh and blood human being is a part of the community of the Trinity. Through Jesus Christ, every human being, wherever and whenever they are incarnated, is elevated. Through Jesus Christ our particular and personal incarnation, however imperfect and broken, takes on something of the holy. We dare not escape, abandon or dissolve this Divine placement through our own virtual creation—where we play god. Our particular incarnation creates the conditions of our cry for grace.

So how do we see the metaverse and on-line world? The best paradigm is for us to consider that community an 'unreached people group.' The metaverse or even merely the on-line world has its own vocabulary, culture, habits, and practices which are distinct from incarnational community. This is not to say the metaverse is not real. It certainly is real despite its disembodiment. It is populated (mostly) with real people. Behind carefully manicured profile pictures, avatars and Fortnite skins are real flesh and blood human beings, perhaps in some inglorious, yet no doubt God ordained state. Because the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost it is so important that we press on to the real person, not the one they want us to see. The 'Babel question' proves important here. If evangelism is our goal, the on-line and the metaverse may prove a useful tool. For discipleship, there must be an incarnational presence. We may begin in a virtual world, but we cannot end there because growing into the fullness of the image of Christ demands truth.

Chapter 16

Capital Punishment

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Of all moral questions related to life and death, capital punishment has a particularly broad range of questions that need to be asked and it has historically had a wide range of responses from Christians. Depending on how we frame the conversation, we are involving vastly different arguments. This chapter surveys some of the conversations that need to feed into this complex debate.

Bible

The Bible has texts that both support and criticize the root notion of vengeance. The Old Testament very clearly upholds and even commands capital punishment for a variety of crimes, many that are shocking to us. Capital punishment is first established in Genesis 9:6, which uses the logic of retributive justice to demand blood be shed for blood. Other examples of capital crimes in the OT are found listed in Exodus 21–22, which includes children who curse their parents, people who commit sexually immoral acts, and more. Profaning the Sabbath is also a capital offense in Exodus 31 and 35. Yes, working on the Sabbath is a capital offense, which is one of the reasons Jesus was brought up on charges.

And this leads us to the New Testament. Jesus seems to profane the Sabbath but claimed that he is Lord of the Sabbath. To Jews of his day it was understandable why, based on the law found in Exodus, he should be killed. He seemed to be saying he was God and that he could do whatever he wanted in contradiction with Torah. But Jesus also challenged the basis for capital punishment in the Sermon on the Mount, the *lex talionis* (law of the tooth) found in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 19:21. “You have heard it said, ‘Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.’ but I tell you do not resist the one who is evil...”¹ By contrasting the *lex talionis* with non-resistance, he is certainly raising some significant questions about retributive justice.

Now, there are many interpretative strategies for minimizing either the OT or Jesus’ teaching here in order to support one or another side of an argument. But that method tends to lead to insoluble arguments. For what is really at stake here is not as much the exact interpretation of these passages, or the place of criminal law in the Torah for today, but a question of political theology and the relation of the church to the state.

¹ Matthew 5:38.

Politics and Justice

Christian traditions that were supported by and supported their civil governments have almost invariably supported capital punishment, at least until relatively recently when Western governments have been turning against it. Those Christian traditions that were critical of the state and its claims to be delegated God's authority are also obviously dead-set against capital punishment, which they see as a form of state-sanctioned murder.

The question here is: Has God delegated the power of death to nation-states with which he has not made a covenant? That is, do states have divinely sanctioned authority as part of an order of *creation*? If the answer is "yes" then capital punishment would be supported if the state's vision of justice demanded it. If the answer is "no" then capital punishment must be rejected. As outlined in ECO's book on *Politics*, simply pointing to Romans 13 and assuming the Bible supports the idea of God's delegated authority to human governments as part of the order of creation ignores a significant number of other biblical texts, including others penned by Paul. That proof-text by itself is insufficient and exegetically lazy.

Beyond the political theology of the church, we should also ask the question of justice and what Jesus is doing with it. The *lex talionis* ("law of the tooth") is the most basic form of justice, and the most intuitive. But it can be read in two ways—compensation or equal damage, and the Bible uses both. Does "eye for eye" mean that two people have to lose an eye? This is the logic upheld in the Torah. But if a donkey or ox is killed, equivalent compensation is demanded as *shalam* or restitution. The *lex talionis* gets a bad rap, though, and we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss its simple logic. It upholds the high value of human life and human faculties by refusing to equate an eye, a tooth, or a life with some form of generalized value like money. A life is priceless. Even in a slave-holding world, Exodus commands that even the loss of a tooth by a slave master shall be compensated for by the slave's freedom. In medieval Germanic tribes, by contrast, all lives were valued financially on a sliding scale based on social class in a system called *Wergild*. A murderer need not be killed, but could pay the victim's family compensation, thus preventing (in theory) cycles of violence. The modern rejection of both of these forms of justice is rooted in a belief that justice belongs to the state and not the victim. Criminal offenses are not crimes against persons, but against the "people" represented by the state, and it is the state that receives restitution or deals out punishment. Victims may or may not be entitled to some compensation. In other words, the main way that societies have moved beyond retribution or direct compensation is by taking over justice from the people, and often denying it to actual individuals.

Capital punishment is a form of state-owned retribution, and it is decided upon not based on questions of revenge for the victim's family, but by questions of degree of evil by a neutral judge and jury. In some ways, this is a steep price that victims have to pay, especially if we consider crimes like rape that would demand death in Scripture, but today only compensate victims financially through expensive civil trials. Modern judicial practice in relation to sexual assault is, historically, very liberal and favors the perpetrator rather than the victim. Compensation is almost always financial for moderns, and that in itself transforms personal violations into financial violations. One could say that the only real form of modern crime against

a victim is theft, even if the state still demands some form of vengeance. All that to say, it is questionable whether modern practices of capital punishment embody the judicial principles of the Old Testament.

But what about Jesus' challenge to the *lex talionis*? Is Jesus promoting a different kind of justice, or undermining justice? We might argue that Jesus is advancing restorative justice, that he advocates loving enemies and working to transform them by "going the extra mile." We might argue that Jesus undermines civil and criminal justice when he unequivocally says, "Do not judge"² and enjoins his disciples to settle their affairs outside of court, as Paul also does.³ It's worth also noting Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6, for it seems he is arguing that the church ought to not use the state's judicial systems, ought not submit to the law of the land because it is rooted in unrighteousness. Paul believes the church will judge the world and the angels, and that it ought to settle its own affairs in-house. For the discussion of capital punishment, this would mean that the church should not trust the state's version of justice. This also challenges a simple prioritization of Romans 13 as the single text on the state and criminal justice.

But we might also say that Jesus is teaching private morality not public legality, and thus these teachings are not relevant to states, only to individuals. Of course, this view rests upon a medieval and Reformational view of the kingdom of God as belonging to a separate sphere from the kingdoms of the world.

Discipleship and Mission

Finally, we must consider the purpose of the people of God and the work of God in reconciliation. To understand a big-picture of what God is doing in the world we have to see the following:

- Injustice is rooted in the rejection of God's authority over good and evil (Gen 3, Romans 1).
- God could judge the world, but this would destroy it, as in the flood. He promised not to do this but established a covenant people for the world in Abraham.
- God withholds his judgment and vengeance. Jesus refuses to take on this role in his earthly ministry, postponing it to the day of the Lord, a day of reckoning when accounts are settled.
- Jesus establishes his people to be salt and light, to be good-news speakers, to forgive one another, to be ambassadors of reconciliation, in short, to become like Jesus in character, bearing patiently with the failings of others and loving enemies.
- Jesus sends his people out to make disciples and fills them with the Holy Spirit to do this.
- Jesus promises to return and his people who have been matured through life, death, and resurrection, will not only escape the wrath of God, but will join Jesus in judgment as coheirs of the kingdom of God.

² Matthew 7:1. Paul says the same in Romans 2.

³ Matthew 5:25. Paul echoes this in 1 Corinthians 6.

- The wrath of God will be poured out on all evil, but not yet, and God does not seem to delegate his wrath through people. Indeed, the parable of the wheat and the weeds is a lesson in postponed judgment. God is not sorting the world out yet, and neither shall we (Matthew 13:24–30).

If this summarizes the grand narrative of the Bible, then it reframes the conversation about capital punishment away from “what is just” and toward “how do we accomplish the mission of God and love our enemies?” Once again, however, this narrative is rendered relatively meaningless for nation-states if a sphere sovereignty concept is operative. This political theology allowed Lutheran and Reformed churches to uphold capital punishment for centuries.

Reformed Heritage

The historically Reformed approach to capital punishment might seem simple on an initial study. After all, John Calvin himself participated as part of his role in the Genevan government in the particularly infamous execution of the heretic Michael Servetus (1553). Of course apologists for Calvin state that he was simply doing his duty under the law of the land at the time. Luther himself was also involved in a form of mass capital punishment that was his approval of the German princes violently putting down a peasant revolt. Both Luther and Calvin followed thinkers like William of Ockham who believed that civil governments do not owe their existence or right to rule from the church, but that the two occupy different spheres of life, each with their own jurisdiction. This would mean that the civil government is free to use capital punishment if it believes it to be right, and the church can only offer advice on the matter. Calvin, it has often been pointed out, seems to have acted inconsistently with his own teaching in the death of Servetus, since according to his theory of a twofold kingdom of God, the church does not have judicial authority.

Westminster does not specifically speak to capital punishment, but it does state that the judicial law of Israel is not binding on other states (XXI.4). But these laws are useful as instructors in righteousness (the “third use of the law”). Hence, Westminster neither confirms nor denies the potential for capital punishment. But it does not permit what is clearly an OT judicial law to be used as binding for other states. However, the very high value of human life in the OT should inform us in ways that challenge many other cultures’ view of human life as having value according to a person’s station, gender, social class, etc.

Conclusion

Capital punishment is a rather complex question with few easy answers. At the very least, we might say that the OT judicial law of the *lex talionis* upholds the value of human life, the importance of justice for victims rather than the state, and the inability for us to exchange human life, limb, sexual autonomy, and other matters for money. But we are also confronted with challenging statements by Jesus and Paul—not to judge, to forgive and love our enemies, to go the extra mile, to pray for those who persecute us, to settle our affairs outside of court. How do we submit this question to the mission of the people of God to be ambassadors of a kingdom of reconciliation?

For those who wish to uphold capital punishment, the Reformed tradition lays the groundwork for leaving this judicial question up to the state to determine this based on its own political logic. It also suggests that campaigning for or against it based on Christian principles or biblical arguments would not be sufficient grounds for establishing or banning the practice, given that most arguments for capital punishment are part of the judicial law of Israel that is not binding on others. Though some might debate including Genesis 9 in the judicial law, it would be difficult to argue for it being a moral law, given that vengeance is forbidden in Scripture, and Westminster would include it as part of the “covenant of works” that is not binding on Christians, but still instructive.

Perhaps the best conclusion that Christians of all opinions can agree on is that the Bible’s teaching on capital punishment ought to be read as giving high value to all human life, value that cannot be exchanged for some commodity or material value. Human life is of immaterial value for it is rooted in the image of God. This should give us great pause in any fervent desire for capital punishment being dealt out by the hands of secular authorities who may turn such power on any they deem enemies of the state. We would do well to study the history of the Scottish Covenanters and English Presbyterians during the 17th century, for whom political allegiances proved dangerous, fickle, and eventually led to state-sanctioned deaths.

Chapter 17

Death and Discipleship

Rev. Jocelyn Smolik

Throughout the Middle Ages it was common for churches to feature large-scale scenes of the final judgment on the interior western wall of the building. In these depictions (sometimes called “Doom Paintings”) parishioners would see illustrations of the damned and the saved as they either descended or ascended to their final destinies in Heaven or Hell. The image of Christ was usually depicted in the middle, where He could be seen presiding over the action. The most famous of these doom paintings was Michelangelo’s “The Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel where, in a swirl of action and emotion, the observer is invited to consider the final destiny of her or his own life. These doom paintings served an important didactic function—they were a reminder to the members of the congregation that the contemplation of one’s own destiny is to give meaningful shape to our life here and now. The implicit message: thinking rightly about our future death helps one live rightly in the present world. And although we might have some significant theological quibbles with these doom paintings, we can take a note from them and think about how a Christian understanding of death can help us follow Christ more faithfully. The following list is not meant to be exhaustive, but it is meant to get us started imagining the discipleship benefits of thinking well about death.

“Man is like a breath” —Psalm 144:4

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we receive consistent reminders that human life is fleeting. From the early Eden assertion that “you are dust, and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19) to Isaiah’s repeated chorus that human beings are but grass, the Bible wants us to put human life in its proper scale and context. Humans are creatures; made in God’s image, caretakers of creation, objects of divine love—but creatures nonetheless. This “creatureliness” is most clearly seen in the reality of death. By becoming aware of the fleeting nature of life, we are reminded of our proper place in the universe: unable to sustain even ourselves. And this initial step of discipleship comes in recognizing that we cannot chart our own course in life because we are demonstrably not in charge of our own destinies. We must engage the certainty that—until Christ returns—we will all die. We are but a breath, Psalms tells us; and with that perspective we can follow Jesus for the short life we are given, trusting in Him to accomplish eternal purposes through our limited lives.

“Rejoice that your names are written in heaven” —Luke 10:20

As the seventy-two disciples return from their mission in Luke 10, they are celebrating their great ministry success. Jesus cautions them in this moment: don’t rejoice because you have

had worldly achievement, rejoice that you have a secure eternal destiny. Jesus wants them to see their experience in light of their end. By remembering that we will die, we can discover a healthy identity rooted not in our earthly successes and achievements, but in the confident hope that we belong to Christ forever. As we remember our final eternal reality in the new creation we are reminded that the most consequential thing for a believer's life is that she/he permanently belongs to Christ. This is a wise discipleship instruction: our real joy comes in knowing we are eternally secure with Jesus; that joy is hollow if it is only fixed in human accomplishments. This is an especially important reminder for pastors, who may be tempted to root their value in the success of their ministries. Instead, we can take to heart the message of the Savior: real joy comes in a life that is "hidden with Christ in God."¹

"We are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake" —2 Corinthians 4:11

There is a paradox in Paul's teaching about a vocation of following Christ—life and death can be held together in the journey of a disciple. Consistently Paul explains that we can experience a form of death and dying that is not exclusive of the hope of life. In the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, we see Paul explore this idea. There is something important about the fragility of human disciples carrying the message of the Gospel. "We have this treasure in jars of clay" Paul says.² It is in the very tenuousness of a disciple's physical existence that the power of God becomes highlighted. So, Paul can go on to say that the life of a disciple is one where "outwardly we are wasting away, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day."³ Scripture is pointing disciples to the truth that a life of following Christ is frequently defined by the self-sacrifice that feels like death; yet part of trusting God is to not lose heart. In the experience of the insecurity of mortal life we also see the very power of God to accomplish through us what we know we could not accomplish on our own. "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."⁴ For the follower of Jesus, we can adopt the attitude that death and life are held together in our experience and in our witness to the world.

"To live is Christ and to die is gain" —Philippians 1:21

Finally, in the life of a disciple, the certainty of death is not meant to cause fear or anxiety—quite the opposite, actually. The inevitability of death is meant to bring great comfort to the follower of Jesus. This comfort is perhaps best expressed in Paul's words in the first chapter of Philippians. Paul—communicating from a Roman—knows that his life is in a precarious position; it is not impossible that he will die there in Rome. And yet, rather than express despair,

¹ Colossians 3:3.

² 2 Corinthians 4:7.

³ 2 Corinthians 4:16.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:10.

Paul speaks with a settled confidence. He knows that he has nothing to fear in death—as a matter of fact, his death will bring him into the very presence of Christ. “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far,” he says.⁵ And so he debates with himself the benefits of living or dying. If he lives, he will continue to labor fruitfully for the Kingdom of God, if he dies, he will be with Jesus; therefore Paul can famously say, “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” This is a healthy attitude of all disciples: we can spend ourselves lavishly on living for the kingdom of God, knowing that there is no ultimate fear for us in dying. There is freedom and comfort for the disciple in knowing the promises of Christ transcend death. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”⁶

⁵ Philippians 1:23.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:55.

Chapter 18

Christian Death Rituals

Rev. Jocelyn Smolik

September 19, 2022 provided an unique opportunity for the world to collectively think about the way we respond to the ending of a human life. It was estimated that more than four billion people around the globe watched at least part of Queen Elizabeth II's funeral that day. As the queen's casket was carried through the doors of Westminster Abbey the choir sang in full voice: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."¹

The funeral held for the queen was saturated in symbolism, words, prayers and music that proclaimed a faithful Christian perception of death and life. As this funeral demonstrated, our rituals, words and practices around death tend to helpfully reveal what we believe to be true about life and true about God who is the giver of life and death. Below are three core truths that might help us think about the uniquely Christian understanding of death and life; so that our theology might inform how we help others grieve and mourn, both publicly and privately.

1 – The Wrongness of Death

Often when I talk to a family who has lost a loved one and is planning a funeral, I hear words like: "grandpa would not want us to be sad," or "she would want us to laugh and not cry—we have to focus on the good things". I have discovered that frequently a part of my role as clergy serving a family is to affirm the *rightness* of grief and sorrow. I regularly sense the need to tell families and individuals that tears are welcome and appropriate. We are not called to encounter death as though it were a "natural" part of life. Christ himself wept at the tomb of Lazarus; Paul tells us that death is an enemy.² Death violates the intended purpose of God for humans—our slavery to death and sin is the primary proof of the brokenness of our world.³ Our habits and rituals around the loss of a loved one can serve to reveal or conceal this truth. Many times we must counsel families that it is right to grieve and mourn and cry—and we do these things alongside them as a testimony to God's OWN grief at the brokenness of death. There is an important balance we walk in preparing funerals—the balance between celebrating a life and mourning the loss of that life. We are well served to consider how our words, prayers and counsel help a family encounter the spiritual reality of death. Scripture gives us much allowance for the experience of grief—just not grief without hope.⁴

¹ John 11:25–26.

² 1 Corinthians 15:26.

³ *ECO Essential Tenets*, III.A.

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

2 – The Resurrection of the Body

Another important concept we can consider as we walk with families who lose a loved one is how we proclaim the promise of the resurrection of the body. In the fall of 2022, California approved new legislation that will permit “human composting”. Rather than burial or cremation, this method allows for controlled decomposition of the human body by a funeral service provider. This is another example of how a practice surrounding death reveals something critical about what we believe. Much of the conversation in approving this method had to do with a Platonic assumption that when we die, our bodies no longer have any relevance: that the ultimate end of a human body is one part dead organic material and another part liberated human soul or spirit. Though the promise of resurrection from the dead can overcome any final disposition of human material remains, the way we think about the body after death can reveal theological assumptions. Many times, when talking with grieving families, I encounter an untested framework of a duality between body and soul. The assumption can be that at death, souls have been freed from their unhelpful bodies to now exist in some sort of non-corporeal reality. However, a cornerstone of Christian belief is not simply “life everlasting” but is also “the resurrection of the body”. We confess this every time we say the Apostle’s Creed: not simply that God wishes us to live with him forever, but that we will *bodily* live with him forever. As we disciple families through the end of a life, we can remind them that the Christian conception is not that we are heading to an eternity of being disembodied spirits, but instead we will be *like* Jesus—miraculously, physically, bodily resurrected. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”⁵

3 – The Hope of New Creation

Our words and practices at end of life can point to the Christian conviction that we look for the bodily resurrection of the dead; and *also* to the redeemable goodness of the material world God has made. In my experience, one of the most frequently requested funeral hymns is “How Great Thou Art.” In the final verse of that hymn is a revealing line: “When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation *and take me home*, what joy shall fill my heart”. Though we sing this song as written, I am challenged by these words because they seem to disclose an incompleteness in the eternal expectation we have in Christ. Frequently, the colloquial way grieving believers discuss the Christian hope is that we will one day “go home to be with Jesus”. While this is not necessarily wrong, *it is incomplete* and falls far short of the full resurrection hope that God is setting *all things* right, and we have a future restored creation to look forward to. The hope of new creation is so much more than the hope that we will go to heaven when we die. It is the settled confidence that God’s promise to make the world right—to restore brokenness and

⁵ Romans 6:5.

renew the material world—is the core hope of the follower of Christ. We should be committed to boldly proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of believers and the restoration of all things in our rituals surrounding death. With Peter, we await “the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells.”⁶

The challenge for pastors and church leaders is to allow these three core truths to saturate our practices around death. We can work to shape our words, habits, prayers and services so that they reflect our convictions that death is wrong, that we look for a bodily resurrection and that we hope for the restoration of all things.

⁶ 2 Peter 3:13.

Chapter 19

Disability

Dr. Meredith Riedel

What Does it Mean to be Fully Human and also Disabled?

How should the church think theologically about disability?

Have you ever been in a restaurant or other public place where you intended to spend some time with others and felt assaulted by music that was too loud, or lights that were flashing or flickering (or too dim to read a menu), or the room temperature was boiling hot or freezing cold? An experience like that makes you uncomfortable, and perhaps even a little bit frustrated, because the thing making you so miserable could be easily fixed, or changed, or stopped. In an environment where we experience serious distractions, discomfort or suffering, most of us choose either to leave, or to never return, because others who enjoy such conditions have created space where it is impossible to feel comfortable, or to focus, or perhaps even to do what you wanted to do in that place. In leisure spaces, that is of course the right response.

But what about in the church? Should our worship gatherings also be considered to take place in an optional, leisure-time space? Well no, it's actually something we have been commanded to do in Scripture.¹ And we are exhorted to worship together because it honors God, it encourages us, and it helps us grow in our faith. And yet, for those with impairments, our churches can be places with barriers that prevent them from being able to join in. The reason it is important to consider this theologically is that the church is more than the building; it's the gathered believers who worship God together. The environment of our worship is never just the building; it includes the welcome of the gathered people, and is tied to hospitality.

Hospitality is more than a gift, it is a command in the Scriptures.² We are exhorted to show hospitality to strangers, which includes making welcome those who are not like us.³ Moreover we are told to offer hospitality without grumbling.⁴ Giving welcome and making a hospitable environment for those with disabilities is a key part of this obedience. When we fail in this, we are guilty of being like those who do not listen to the gospel, whom Jesus tells his disciples to leave and shake the dust off their feet on the way out.⁵ In fact, if people choose to

¹ Exodus 20:8–11; 1 John 5:3; Matthew 5:17–19; Hebrews 10:25.

² Romans 12:13.

³ Hebrews 13:2.

⁴ 1 Peter 4:9.

⁵ Matthew 10:14.

leave our company because we have failed to welcome them, the shaking of dust off their feet is a testimony against us.⁶ It is something of a disgrace for God's church to be a place where others cannot find comfort, welcome, or loving generosity.

Disability theologians have clearly articulated a rather obvious truth: any and all of us, either now or in the future, may have disabilities. It's the club that any of us can join at any time! This means that society is composed of the disabled and the temporarily abled, not the forever able-bodied and the disabled. Injury, disease, ageing—all of these can happen to anyone, whether temporarily or more long term. Our physical and intellectual abilities are not guaranteed for life, and it doesn't take long to realize that.

Our churches, when they gather together, must be spaces of communal worship, of secure hope, of comforting physical presence, of peace and joy and inclusion for all. And yet the story of so many is that they were forced by disability and lack of access to change churches, or even stop going altogether, because there was no one to hold the door open, or to secure safe public health practices, or to provide a physical environment that did not impede focus or wholehearted engagement. If the church is truly to preach and live a theology that celebrates and encourages and cultivates life, then joining together must be equally accessible and welcoming to all who would come, perhaps especially for those who do not yet know Christ.

How do we understand disability, and how does that impinge on the blessing of abundant life, promised in John 10:10?

The term itself usually conjures the idea of people in wheelchairs. Theologian Sarah Barton encourages us to think differently about what constitutes disability when she writes, "if a society eliminated stairs and instead built ramps for navigation of all indoor and outdoor structure, whether private or public, people using wheelchairs might no longer be considered "disabled" in these contexts of architectural access and disability."⁷ In fact, if we think about disability as a condition that challenges current social norms, then the integration of the disabled into "normal" church life falls not upon those with impairments, but upon churches as social groups with the power to create access and enable participation. Inaccessible buildings are only one part of the problem. Creative solutions are needed to address the marginalization of the disabled through discriminatory attitudes, a failure to understand the socially constructed nature of disability, and unreflective ideas that see others as somehow less.

Jesus Christ was a man who never failed to include the marginalized, the poor, the diseased, the foreigner, the outcast, the children, and other persons considered non-normative in the world he walked through.⁸ Those who follow him, who seek to imitate him,⁹ ought therefore to mirror his priorities and inclusive practices. How can we do that? By removing

⁶ Luke 9:5.

⁷ Sarah Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community*. (Baylor University Press: 2022), introduction.

⁸ Luke 14:12–14; Matthew 25:35–40; Luke 6:38; Deuteronomy 15:11; Proverbs 19:17.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6

barriers, making space, attending to the needs of the impaired¹⁰, and honoring the weak above the strong, like Jesus did. Theologically, this approach is underpinned by two important commands: to love our neighbor,¹¹ and to go out and seek the lost, becoming “all things to all people”¹² as the apostle Paul says, rather than requiring them to adjust to our own expectations or standards.

Since Christians are exhorted to meet together regularly, and the combined witness of gathered believers is the most powerful method for evangelizing, our worship spaces are not avoidable electives, but rather integral to the life and mission of the church. Practically speaking, many barriers exist that make our buildings, our events, or our gathered company difficult or unwelcoming for those with disabilities. Perhaps it is more useful to look at this problem from the opposite direction: what do our worship spaces provide that make it possible for those with disabilities to fully participate?

In practical terms, many churches provide large-print bulletins for those with impaired sight. Do we also attend to the size of the font on the screens at the front, ensuring it is legible for all, even from the back pew? Some churches provide earbuds with amplified sound for those who are hard of hearing. For the deaf, do we have ASL interpreters? No deaf person will attend unless this becomes a regular feature. Do we maintain our buildings so that the temperature is comfortable, or lights do not flicker, thus enabling those with sensory sensitivities to participate? Do we make space for wheelchairs the same way we provide space for crying babies? Most of these things are about the physical space, but other aspects of welcome are equally important.

For the growing number of people with compromised immune systems,¹³ do we incorporate options for the “passing of the peace” that will enable them to participate in ways that do not increase their exposure?¹⁴ In places with warmer climates, are there options to worship outdoors or in well ventilated spaces? Is there at least one service each week where everyone remains masked? These accommodations are often seen as bothersome, because the truth is that the majority of people in the US do not experience high risk health. However, these are precisely those to whom Jesus would have given special care, those marked by disease and

¹⁰ Philippians 2:4

¹¹ Galatians 5:14.

¹² 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.

¹³ Current CDC figures state that 61 million adults in the US live with a disability.
[<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>]

In the US, there are ca. 3 million people in cancer treatment (close to 2 million people are diagnosed every year) whose immune systems are compromised. More than 16 million adults in the US today have symptoms consistent with long Covid, according to the Census Bureau’s July 2022 HPS Survey [<https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-data-shows-long-covid-is-keeping-as-many-as-4-million-people-out-of-work/>]. Statistics for the effect on cancer plus Covid incidence is not yet available.

¹⁴ This is of course all offered with the caveat that those with contagious conditions ought to stay home until their usual good health returns. This is meant to address the needs of those who suffer ongoing conditions that make them more fragile, and therefore to be treated with greater care.

sickness, upon whom “he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹⁵ To fail to plan for safe public health among our weak and immuno-compromised people is to leave them without a shepherd, something the church should never allow to happen.

More even than the concern for buildings or for accommodations that should be in place *before* they are needed, there is also a need for congregations to be aware of the implications of living with disability and how that can change one’s experience of worship. Awareness is not something that can be assumed, nor should it, apart from clear discipleship by church leaders, especially since it’s the sort of thing one doesn’t notice until it happens to you. If you have ever broken a bone and needed crutches, you find out rather quickly that others who are able-bodied often are simply not aware of the limitations that go with them. This can be as simple as providing chairs that are not too low or difficult for older people to sit in, or too flimsy for children to use, or too close together for newcomers to feel welcome.

To take another example, many church leaders, laudably seeking to honor certain people, will ask members, say military veterans, to stand to be recognized on November 11 (or mothers on Mother’s Day, etc.). However, supposing there are veterans present who are unable to stand, what does that communicate to them? That they must be able to stand in order to be honored? Disability activists would call this an “ableist” notion, but Christians should see it as an unnecessary barrier to full participation.

This awareness extends most importantly to participation in the Lord’s Supper. In many churches, the Supper is administered by requiring members to walk forward. If you have mobility issues, this is a problem. Even the idea of asking those unable to come forward to raise a hand in order to receive communion can be problematic, because it puts the onus on the disabled person to catch the attention of those serving communion. A better way would be to offer communion first to those with disabilities, then to the able-bodied. This would communicate care and awareness, as well as an ethic that echoes Jesus’ concern for the marginalized. There’s something odd about a church that consistently puts the disabled last, when even the secular world sometimes (e.g., airlines) put them first.

Some Scriptures on Disability

What does God think of physical disability? There are a number of people in the pages of the Bible who would qualify for ADA accommodations if they were living in the US today. It is important to notice that God does not change how He interacts with disabled people as though they were somehow less human. In not one single place does God denigrate, look down upon, minimize or ignore the disabled. For God, disability can be an opportunity for greater communion with Him, both for the disabled person and for those around them, and in fact at no point does God imply that a person must be whole and healthy in order to be saved. At no point in Scripture does a disabled person require a healing miracle before they can be a fully human

¹⁵ Matthew 9:35–36.

contributor to society. In fact, changing or healing a person's disability is less of an issue for God than it seems to be for some disabled people themselves.

For example,¹⁶ Jacob was lame in the hip after wrestling with God,¹⁷ but marks the moment of his disabling as a transformative experience in his relationship with God that he would not have traded. Indeed, when he leans on his staff to bless his sons, the blessing that he offers is one that he himself received *through a disabling experience*.¹⁸ Moses had a speech impediment, and thought it would disqualify him from a prophetic ministry, but God disagreed.¹⁹ Elijah was so depressed that he struggled with suicidal ideation,²⁰ but God responded by giving him a nap and a snack, to strengthen him to finish his prophetic ministry.²¹ Rather more interestingly, Daniel (and perhaps Ezekiel) describes God's throne as a chair with wheels, which sounds a bit like a wheelchair, which is something able-bodied people think is something no one can or should be grateful for in any way.²² And yet, Joni Earickson Tada, who has been a paraplegic most of her life, considers her wheelchair a gift of God. She envisions a conversation in heaven one day that goes like this:

I will then turn to Jesus and say, "Lord, do you see that wheelchair right there? Well, you were right when you said that in this world we would have trouble, because that wheelchair was a lot of trouble! But Jesus the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be."²³

In the NT, Zacchaeus may have been a little person; his height is mentioned by Luke's source, but never by Jesus.²⁴ Paul is open about having a "thorn in the flesh" and well as God's apparent decision not to remove it.²⁵ Timothy is known to be chronically ill, hence Paul's advice to take a little wine to help with "frequent infirmities".²⁶ The paralytic needed four men to carry him up onto a roof and lower him down in front of Jesus—who doesn't even address the physical problem until after the spiritual problem, and He does the physical healing in order to demonstrate his power for spiritual forgiveness.²⁷ In John 9, when Jesus is asked whose sin is

¹⁶ Many of these examples are drawn from Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not A Prayer Request. Disability Justice in the Church* (Brazos, 2022).

¹⁷ Genesis 32:22–32.

¹⁸ Hebrews 11:21.

¹⁹ Cf. Exodus 4:10. <https://forward.com/culture/142439/did-moses-have-a-speech-impediment/>

²⁰ 1 Kings 19:4.

²¹ 1 Kings 19:15–18.

²² Daniel 7:9; cf. Ezekiel 1:15; 10:6.

²³ <https://www.joniandfriends.org/wheelchairs-in-heaven/>

²⁴ Luke 19:1–10.

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

²⁶ 1 Timothy 5:3.

²⁷ Mark 2:1–12.

responsible for a man's blindness, he says neither him nor his parents, because the man's blindness is actually a way to display the power of God in the man's life.²⁸ The majority of the chapter is devoted to discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees about God's power to heal; the healing itself is not the main point of the conversation, because physical wholeness is less important than the rest of it.

Jesus' attitude is found in Luke's gospel, in the midst of an exhortation to humility, where he instructs his disciples to invite guests to the banquet not friends, family, or wealthy people, but rather those who are "poor, crippled, lame, blind, and you will be blessed."²⁹ The infirmities of various disabilities do not disqualify disabled people from fellowship with God. In fact, those very disabilities might have been permitted to create a path for greater intimacy with God, as suffering often does. Why, then, is 25% of the US population so invisible in the church? Why did the church fight the mandatory accessibility laws enshrined in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act? Is the cost of building accessibility an unworthy use of our budgets? If so, we should probably reconsider the connection between God's priorities and God's provision of tithes and offerings. In light of inescapable disabilities we all may experience either temporarily from injury or increasingly as we enjoy the blessings of old age, perhaps our churches full of shiny beautiful people might benefit from reconsidering the Christian theological perspective of disability.

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²⁸ John 9:1–41.

²⁹ Luke 14:13.

Chapter 20

Adoption

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Although I am not an adoptive parent, my family lives among a community of believers in which our daughter, a biological child to my wife and myself, is the single biological child out of ten. My wife and I don't raise adopted children, but we are raising our child in a community of adoption. We have seen the challenges. We have seen and heard how determinative biology is, in spite of the most earnest efforts of parents at nurturing children in different ways. Adoption is not for the faint of heart and it's not best suited for people who are looking to fill an emotional need. Children are beautiful and wonderful, but God did not create children to meet the needs of adults. Children have a life of their own and are their own people, even as we seek to form them within the context of a community of the people of God.

And this is a picture of the church, in many ways. All of us come into the body of Christ as adopted children. We were not adopted out of any need God had. Even as we are "born again of the Spirit" we are still of our flesh. We still act like our biological parents, like it or not. We are impacted by the sins of our parents, whether through substance abuse and addictions, or simply through finding ourselves without a home in the world.

Adoption is well attested in the Bible and an integral part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It makes sense, then, that a community focused on revealing the abundant life of the kingdom of God would practice adoption as well. But the modern practice of adoption differs in meaning somewhat from the practice that was common in Jesus' day. Adoption in the Bible is almost exclusively royal.

Biblical Adoption

In the Old Testament, Moses stands out as the adopted royal child of Egypt. He, of course, was hidden away, sent down the river, and found by the Pharaoh's daughter, who then used the services of Moses' mother to raise him. Moses' situation is rather unique in this way, being raised both by his mother and by a member of the royal family. Moses' situation nevertheless speaks to a relatively common occurrence in adoption today, cross-cultural adoption that raises questions of identity and integration both for parents and children. Moses retained his Hebrew identity and murdered an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave. He chose to reject his adoptive family and return to his original people and culture.

In the New Testament, one of the most historically famous people to be adopted was Caesar Augustus, who was known as Octavian before he became sole emperor. Octavian was adopted by Julius Caesar, a practice fairly common in Roman society. The system of patronage that operated in Rome allowed for social advancement by adoption to wealthy and aristocratic families who may have wished for a suitable male heir. Sending a child out to adoption could be the best way to provide a better future for the child, and solidify a relationship between a client and a patron. This is important because Augustus' adoption provides a notable backdrop to the

claims of the New Testament about what adoption meant. This social-mobility adoption obviously didn't benefit the poor, but the upwardly mobile.

Paul used this background of royal adoption in Romans 8 to claim that those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God by adoption, and joint-heirs with him of the kingdom of God... provided we suffer with him too.¹ John likewise uses the notion of adoption, if not the word itself, to claim that we have the authorization to become children of God, provided we have faith in Jesus and are faithful to him and his commandments.² And this is a crucial point that goes back to our previous discussion of the image of God in Part I of this book. Jesus is the only begotten Son, but we *can be* adopted into the family of God through Jesus. Humans are not children of God by nature, but by adoption. And where this differs from Roman adoption is that Jesus' kingdom is full of adopted children who aren't upwardly mobile, but excluded by the world, the people who come into his wedding banquet.³

Whereas modern people tend to adopt to bring a child into the nuclear family to receive nurture and, all too often, to satisfy the parents' desire for children, the royal adoption of Paul and John is about inheritance, identity, and bearing the image of the father. So, Jesus contrasts the children of God and the devil in John 8:44 as does 1 John 3:10. He describes entry into the kingdom of God as a new birth from a new parentage in John 3. Clearly, this is a theme John thought was important. In John's books, the children of Abraham, of God, and of the devil act like their respective fathers. Similarly, Paul uses adoption language in Romans 8 to proclaim that we were predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ, that is, to bear the image and character of God.

Modern adoption, just like modern families, doesn't tend to emphasize the need for children to be worthy of the family name and reputation. And so, we need to be somewhat careful not to sentimentalize the notion of adoption in the Bible. Although love is, of course, a major part of the gospel, the notion of inheritance and character-formation are really the main point of the New Testament's use of adoption language.

Family of God

Thus, biblical adoption should be understood within the framework of the family of God and the people of God, rather than the nuclear family. Adoption, in and of itself, is not uniquely Christian. What makes it Christian is into whose family we are being adopted and adopting others. Christian adoption is a form of discipleship and should be an ecclesial activity. Adoption of children into the nuclear family should be a participatory symbol of adoption of a child into the people of God.

¹ Romans 8:14–17.

² See John 1:12; 1 John 3, 5:2.

³ Luke 14:15–24.

Put more simply, the church is itself entirely made up of a single begotten Son, with the rest having been adopted. The church is adopted. The point of this adoption is that we would become like our Father by imitating his Son, and so bearing the character of the family to the world. We are all adopted and adopting people who are being formed by discipleship into the image of our Father.

Practices

Practically speaking, that means that Christian adoption ideally will happen in community conversations, not simply within the nuclear family. Having a wider community of disciples to walk through the process can aid in keeping expectations and hopes solidly grounded, establishing support when and where it is needed, and ensuring that adoption happens for the right reasons.

In my town there is a Mennonite ministry that fosters the children of incarcerated women. This mission “New Horizons Ministries,” understands that few families are able to foster and (sometimes adopt) children by themselves. Instead, they make use of houses in which a mature couple fosters the child with the help of trained young women (“nannies”) who do much of the work. While this ministry works to reintegrate a child with his or her mother after her sentence in prison is complete, regularly these children end up being adopted into the Mennonite community. The Mennonites who come to serve as nannies or as a mature fostering couple sign up for a commitment of 2-3 years. They come from all over the country. The work of fostering and adoption is very difficult, and the strength of community prevents burnout, stress, and, hopefully, the bad fruit of these stressful situations. It is a community that seeks to give out of its abundance to those who would otherwise have no hope. And the Mennonites do this without necessarily hoping for any great earthly benefit. It’s not growing their numbers. They’re fostering infants, not school-age children, so it’s not as though they are educating the children in Christian faith. They care for the “least of these” believing only that it is treasure in heaven and the faithful response to the call of Jesus.

Having a child born in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, we experienced something rather different. Our daughter didn’t meet other people for much of her first year. It was an incredibly stressful time without the potential for much help. Parenting has historically been a community-supported life-stage. Fostering and adoption must be community-supported.

Robust communities that focus on children and their needs, not for what we get out of it, but because it is the Jesus-shaped thing to do, are communities of abundant life. And these kinds of communities can welcome in single women who struggle with parenting or keeping a child. They radically transform the future of children who are removed from abusive or addicted parents. It can break cycles of poverty and reduce the likelihood of future criminal behavior and incarceration.

Not everyone is right to be adoptive parents. But every Christian community is right to be a place where we all tell our story as, “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down

to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a great nation..."⁴ If we tell our own story as people who have been adopted and so therefore should be an adopting people, we tell the story of a people "born from above, by water and the Spirit"⁵ who can become heirs with Christ of his Father's kingdom, as we are conformed to the image of God in Christ.

⁴ Deuteronomy 26:5.

⁵ See John 3.

Chapter 21

Reproductive Technologies

Dr. Meredith Riedel

Current medical research is developing an ever-widening spectrum of technologies to address infertility.¹ In broad terms, these techniques, collectively known as assisted reproductive technologies (ART) can be divided into two groups. One involves primarily medical intervention into natural reproductive processes and includes fertility drugs, artificial insemination (AI), gamete/zygote intra-fallopian transfer (GIFT/ZIFT), intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI), intrauterine insemination (IUI) and in vitro fertilization (IVF). The second involves third party contributions such as the use of donor sperm, donor eggs, and/or surrogate/leased wombs. This distinction is a blurry one in some ways, because medical intervention techniques like IVF are often used in conjunction with third-party contributions, thus complicating an already murky ethical picture.

IVF is increasingly popular for the treatment of infertility. Approximately 75,000 babies are born each year in the US as a result of this technology, or about 2% of all live births. It is often considered the most cost-effective method of producing a child by ART, yet it is not inexpensive. The most conservative estimates place the cost of a successful live birth via IVF at \$40,000. It enjoys high recognition as a result of the well-publicized “test-tube baby” stories, beginning with the birth of Louise Brown in the UK in 1978. However, there are four areas of ethical difficulty: the understanding of sex, the definition of personhood, the claims of technology and the sovereign goodness of God.

The clinical procedures

What does IVF involve? An understanding of the medical procedures is crucial to reaching an informed ethical position. First the ovaries are hyperstimulated to produce up to a dozen or more mature ova instead of only one. These are then surgically harvested and combined with sperm in a petri dish, hence the title *in vitro* which means “in glass” as opposed to *in vivo*, or inside the body. If fertilization occurs (not a guarantee by any means), the resulting blastocysts, or 8-celled organisms, are inserted through the cervix into the uterus (usually 3-4 at a time) with the hope that implantation of at least one will occur. If an embryo successfully implants, flourishes and results in a live birth, the IVF is considered to have succeeded. Success rates vary, but 15% is considered outstanding.

Dilemmas arise when multiple embryos result from the fertilization, which is not unusual. If 20 eggs are harvested and 12 fertilized, then the question becomes what to do with the “extra” 8 or 9 embryos which are not immediately returned to the uterus. These are normally frozen for

¹ For this organization of ideas, I am indebted to Scott B. Rae, *Brave New Families: Biblical Ethics and Reproductive Technologies* (Baker, 1996) 13–16.

later use, but there are numerous cases where the parents of frozen embryos have died or divorced, leaving clinics with the decision of what to do with the frozen embryos. Are they to be donated to other infertile couples? Used for research? Discarded? Even in cases where the embryos are to be used by the original couple, they often do not survive the thawing process. Are the parents then theologically responsible not only for the creation but also the subsequent extinction of their embryonic offspring? One possible solution would be to store frozen sperm and eggs, instead of embryos. This works quite well for sperm but not for eggs, which disintegrate upon thawing.

One particularly horrible dilemma arises when several embryos successfully implant, causing the parents to choose between a difficult and possibly dangerous pregnancy with three or more fetuses, or selectively terminating some in order to give another one a better chance to survive to term. For a couple who has experienced the despair, the expense and the intrusive medical procedures associated with infertility treatments to have to choose to selectively abort, this choice can be nothing short of catastrophic.

Ethical issues

With the challenges surrounding IVF, it may surprise some who have never experienced infertility that anyone would be willing take these risks. This surprise underestimates the power of the human instinct to procreate and ignores the theological difficulties inherent in the desire to overcome the obstacles. Infertility is

a religious issue, which raises questions of intense concern to each of us... To condemn the technological procedures while applauding adoption is to miss the crucial issue, namely, appropriate ways in which childlessness may be overcome. The crux of the matter is therefore childlessness, the ramifications of which have medical, social, ethical, and theological implications.²

Ethically, the debate about IVF and other assisted reproductive technologies careens between utilitarian or consequentialist arguments and deontological ones. The former regard the goal as primary, judging the value of an act on the basis of its consequences. The latter seek categorical imperatives to help ethical decision-making based on absolute principles. Many Christians regard the Bible as a handbook of deontic principles given for the purpose of breaking ethical stalemates. However, in the context of finding a way to cope with childlessness, such principles (if such can be said to exist) are often subordinated to the goal of having a baby. In the realm of technology, utilitarian approaches are unquestionably winning the day. In the realm of theology, there has been little, if any, attempt among Reformed Christians to wrestle with the conundrums of childlessness and assisted reproductive technologies. Christian voices in the debate have emerged primarily from the Roman Catholic Church.

² D. Gareth Jones, *Manufacturing Humans: The Challenge of the New Reproductive Technologies* (Oxford: IVP, 1987) 191.

IVF (and other assisted reproductive technologies) causes a bifurcation between sex and conception, breaking in a profound way the bond of the normative model. With this technology, it becomes possible for single women to give birth without the old-fashioned stigma of sex outside of marriage. Lesbian couples can build families using one partner's ovum fertilized by donor sperm and gestated in the other partner's body. Women (or men) diagnosed with terminal illnesses can have posthumous offspring produced through a surrogate. Infertile couples can prenatally adopt embryos which are then brought to term by the wife or a surrogate. In an area especially rife with secrecy and deception, sterile men are enabled to "father" children using IVF and donor sperm through their wives, without family or friends ever knowing there was a donor. Another common practice enables couples to finance their treatment via egg donation programs, a necessary incentive given the high cost of IVF and the invasive procedures for harvesting fresh ova. Every one of these scenarios is a present reality, not a hypothetical one. Every one of these scenarios has really happened.

The danger in using donor reproductive material lies in the objectifying of human body parts, subjecting persons to the impersonal market forces of supply and demand. Even organ donation does not involve the exchange of money; one cannot "purchase" a new heart. However, since fresh ova are hard to come by, young women who "donate" are paid (often far less than their eggs are worth on the market), and infertile people who use these ova must pay a hefty fee. Many Christians do not blink at this practice, despite its uniquely exploitative character.

Can these things be done within the context of faith? When one considers that a child may be (and this has actually happened) born with no fewer than five parents (two biological/genetic, two social and one surrogate), the potential for confusion is enormous and the resulting difficulties with personal identity represent as yet unexplored wilderness.

Personhood

Most alarming, IVF often results in "extra" embryos which must be either frozen (with a 7% survival rate³), donated to other people for prenatal adoption, used for stem-cell research or discarded. The least problematic of these is prenatal adoption. The other options all involve embryonic death.

At issue in the debate over what to do with "leftover" embryos is the status of those embryos. Are they persons, with the full rights of personhood? Are they potential persons with the limited rights of the pre-born? Are they not persons but only property, undistinguished masses of cellular material with no personal rights at all to speak of? As with donor eggs, leftover embryos are depersonalized and objectified.

³ "Techniques of embryo freezing are now able to preserve the embryo with a viability of 50-60%. The pregnancy rate following the transfer of a frozen thawed embryo is of the order of 7% per embryo transfer. Based on this data, each four- or eight-cell embryo which is frozen has a 7% chance of surviving freezing and of implanting after transfer." (Jones, 193)

Currently, there is no uniform legal standard for determining the rights of embryonic persons, or what some have called “early human beings.” Few states have enacted laws to regulate assisted reproductive technologies involving the creation and use of embryos and national legal standards, when applied, previously fell under the umbrella of the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which granted no rights at all to the pre-born, but subordinated them entirely to the wishes of their mothers, at least up to 24 weeks gestation. With the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, the legal picture has become even more inconsistent and confusing.

Technology

Few couples pursuing the realization of their dream to have biological progeny stop to consider the ethics of the available options. IVF holds out hope, but at what cost? Technology infiltrates our thinking with its own set of presuppositions and philosophy of informationism. The cyber-age brings with it not only an overload of data, but no effective filter for evaluating its endless offerings. The *summum bonum* of the cyber-age is speed and efficiency, achieving unexamined goals faster than we could yesterday, with no pausing to reflect on the driving purpose behind our choices. We know only that it is possible, and therefore to be pursued. The immediacy of our high-speed, high-tech world moves only in the present, pressing into the future, with no thought to the “ought” of the movement.

David Gushee has noted, “One of the best things biblical faith contributes to the biotech discussion is a well-considered understanding of human weakness, finitude, and sin, and the double-edged potential of many human endeavors.”⁴ Often we do not stop to consider the double-edged potential of IVF, because we are entranced by the possibilities for satisfying the desire for a child. The scriptures well understand this insatiable desire. The writer of Proverbs observes, “There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough!’: the grave, *the barren womb*, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire which never says, ‘Enough!’”⁵ Telling an infertile couple that their desire is outrageous or even in some sense morally unjustifiable spectacularly fails to reckon with the reality of God’s revelation of human nature.

A vibrant theology of God’s sovereignty must acknowledge that technology, including assisted reproductive technologies, is a divine gift, in some sense. However, this must be weighed against the equally divinely given human responsibility to make righteous over unrighteous choices. “For the more than 100,000 unused frozen embryos in the United States alone, the moral problem remains the manipulation and ultimate destruction of a human life at its earliest and most defenseless stage.”⁶ God knows each heart and has promised never to forsake his children. At the same time, the Bible unabashedly declares that God’s glory is primary.

⁴ David P. Gushee, “A Matter of Life and Death” in *Christianity Today* (October 1, 2001) 36.

⁵ Proverbs 30:15–16, italics mine.

⁶ Gushee, 38.

In light of this truth,

Couples need to ask themselves hard questions about the lengths they are willing to go to pursue their dream of a child. What does the no-holds-barred pursuit of these technologies say about these couples' courage, persistence, and trust in God's sovereignty? These are questions of virtue and character, and though they must be asked sensitively, they nonetheless need to be asked.⁷

From a Christian perspective, we need to honestly examine whether the motivation to employ IVF is an idolatrous attempt to dig our own cisterns⁸ or simply taking advantage of the fruits of human ingenuity to obtain a good and righteous end, in this case, the birth of biological progeny. Like Abraham, Abraham's spiritual children must be willing to take their blessings to Mount Moriah, knowing even more clearly than the patriarch did that he can raise the dead.

Towards a biblical solution

What does the word of God require, what does it prohibit and what is the way of wisdom? In the words of John Frame, "it is too easy to think that we can never reach an assured conclusion ... Scripture contains a clear (though not always rationally comprehensible) methodology for attaining this certainty [in Romans 12:2]."⁹ The only way to determine with certainty whether and how IVF (or any other ethical dilemma) can be pleasing and acceptable to God, in conformity with his will, is to be renewed in our thinking so that we breathe the very air of God's revealed word. The word requires nothing less than total whole-souled commitment and an invincible faith that says, without doubt, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted."¹⁰ It holds out hope for every believer who prays with the psalmist, "I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes."¹¹

In practical terms this means that in the absence of any direct teaching (or proof text!), we must consider the principles of Scripture as well as the character of God. God is the creator and sustainer of all life,¹² the giver of every good gift,¹³ and the one who exercises omnipotent sovereignty over every aspect of life, including childbearing.¹⁴ No matter how terrible the trials of life become, God is never to be blamed, because he is not the author of evil but of salvation

⁷ Rae, 145.

⁸ Jeremiah 2:13.

⁹ John M. Frame, *Medical Ethics: Principles, Persons and Problems* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1988) 28.

¹⁰ Job 42:2.

¹¹ Psalm 119:125.

¹² John 5:21; 1 Corinthians 15:26.

¹³ James 1:17.

¹⁴ cf. Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:6–8.

and faith.¹⁵ Nor does he tempt anyone, in the sense of leading us to sin.¹⁶ Rather, we know that he has given every believer “*everything we need for life and godliness* through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”¹⁷ At the same time, we cannot glibly pronounce the blessing of God in situations of extreme anguish, like childlessness. We must honestly wrestle with the problem of suffering, while clinging to the plain truth of God’s goodness and power.

Regarding the options available through IVF, the wise use of assisted reproductive technologies is not prohibited. The way of wisdom must be one that simultaneously honors God as the creator of life and respects biblical boundaries. The way of wisdom seeks to avoid the humanistic view of embryos as commodities to be purchased, subjected to cryopreservation or left to scientific experimentation. Wisdom decrees that technology be handled thoughtfully under the authority of a fiercely revelational biblical ethic that seeks not only the good of every person, whatever their stage of development, but also the glory of God.

¹⁵ Hebrews 2:10; 12:2.

¹⁶ James 1:13.

¹⁷ 2 Peter 1:3.

Chapter 22

Euthanasia

Rev. Dr. Eric Laverentz

A 2017 movie nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, featured a case of euthanasia as a plot point. A small-town sheriff diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer decides to take his own life before the cancer can take his life away. After a beautiful day with his family, while his wife and daughters sleep, he goes out to his horse barn. After a brief goodbye with his two horses, he places a black bag over his head with a note attached to the front saying, "Don't open the bag just call the boys," and shoots himself in the head with a .357.

In the note he left for his wife, Sheriff Willoughby explained his act saying "...seeing in your eyes how much my pain is killing you, how my weakened body as it ebbs and you tend to it are your final memories of me. I won't have that."

At the heart of his rationale for euthanizing himself is the idea that he didn't want to cause anyone else pain. But there is a deeper rationale that taps into the general argument for euthanasia, that life where pain and suffering is predominant is not worth living or at least it is so diminished in quality that non-existence is preferable—even heroic.

As Christians, although we can sympathize with those who suffer, we reject this line of argument and the practice of euthanasia (the practice of eliminating a life which is deemed no longer worth living) for several reasons.

First, Christians must vigorously hold to the sacredness of life. Indeed, this simple idea has been one of the Bible's great contributions to humankind everywhere. In Scripture's first few paragraphs it is affirmed that all humanity is created in the image of God.¹ Later we are even told that we share a common flesh with God.² Time and again the Bible prohibits murder precisely because it denigrates the image of God freely given to humanity. Genesis 9:6 is one of those places: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Life is given by God and it should only be taken by God. Indeed, we see in Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, God commanding His people to take life. But the idea of human beings acting of their own volition to take life, including their own, is anathema. The Westminster Catechism as it expands upon the Sixth Commandment forbids, "all taking away of the life of ourselves, or others."

Second, the gift of life, especially human life, is not minimized because it is polluted with pain and suffering. Pain and suffering are inescapable by-products of living in a world broken by the power of sin. It is the exception not the rule. Suffering may diminish the quality of life but it does not diminish its sanctity. Judging the value and worth of a life by its quality is an affront to

¹ Genesis 1:26.

² John 1:14.

the sovereignty of God who assures “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”³ Indeed, more than one prophet of the Lord, including Moses, Elijah, Jonah plead with the Lord to kill him. The servant woman Hagar, the mother of Abram’s son Ishmael, after she was cast out of his household, sat down to along with her son to die in the wilderness, wept and cried out. Every one of these lives played a great role in our redemption story. Job’s testimony about his own suffering speaks to God’s sovereignty and the value of even a damaged life. When his wife seeing his terrible condition suggests that he “curse God and die,” in essence begging him to commit Divinely facilitated euthanasia, Job responds: “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?”⁴

Because of God’s sovereignty, suffering, has enormous potential for redemption. This was recognized by Martin Luther King Jr. who famously (and often) said, “Unearned suffering is redemptive.” Of course, nowhere is the redemptive nature of suffering more vividly and decisively demonstrated than in Jesus’ death upon the cross. Upon the cross Jesus’ suffering not only redeems all of humanity but He identifies with our suffering. God uses human suffering as a vessel to unite us eternally with Him:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.⁵

Third, the Greek phrase euthanasia literally translated means ‘good death.’ For Christians there is no such thing. It is an oxymoron. Death is not a natural part of the created order. It is the penalty for sin. There is nothing good about death. Paul called death “the last enemy to be destroyed.”⁶ Death did not exist before the Fall⁷ and death will not exist for the elect in eternity.⁸ Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus even though Lazarus would soon be resurrected because the very idea of death troubled Him greatly. Although death for the Christian is not something to be feared, neither is it anything to be embraced. Such an idea is a pagan concept that sees a natural continuity between life and death rather than death as by-product of sin, an unnatural part of God’s good creation.

There is beauty and goodness in the frailty of life that we miss if we simply seek a ‘good death.’ In 2002 the musician Johnny Cash shot a video for his cover of the Nine Inch Nails song “Hurt.” He was in constant pain as the footage was shot. By this time in his life Cash’s freight-

³ Matthew 5:3.

⁴ Job 2:10.

⁵ Isaiah 53:4–5.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:26.

⁷ Genesis 2:16.

⁸ Daniel 12:2–3.

train baritone voice had grown weak and gravely. His Parkinson's caused his extremities to shake. None of these tell-tale signs of his approaching death and weakened state were hidden. In fact, they were highlighted against a blizzard of images from his youth and Jesus' crucifixion. Cash, bloated and somewhat disfigured, appears every bit of his 71 years. Death and the staleness of old age stalks the video. A banquet table laden with overripe fruit and meat left out too long is the setting. His wife, June Carter Cash, appears in the video as well looking over her husband from the staircase with a look of concern. She would be dead within three months of its shooting. Johnny died four months later.

The video is regarded as a classic, among the greatest pieces of music ever put to video, precisely because it stares death in the face and does not blink. It sees death for what it is and finds unrelenting, beautiful life amid its snares.

Is this argument for life saying, "Life must be preserved at any cost no matter what?"

It is not. We must walk a fine line between seeing life as God's good gift and an idol. Preserving life that is really a living death, where a person is not able to exist without permanent extreme measures, or unnecessarily prolonging life does not honor the gift God has given us and does not commend the individual into the hands of a loving God. We are speaking here of a life terminating of its own volition rather than unnaturally ending a life of low quality. This is the conclusion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said there is a difference between taking every effort to prolong a life artificially and the deliberate ending of a life which remains viable, although wracked with suffering. Bonhoeffer wrote: "It is in any case not always possible in life to give effect to all conceivable means for the postponement of death and yet this is still fundamentally different from killing."⁹

As a pastor I faced this difficult choice with a family whose healthy, vibrant 20-year-old daughter contracted bacterial meningitis which suddenly and shockingly rendered her brain dead. She was able to stay alive indefinitely through feeding tubes indefinitely but there was no reasonable hope of her ever being aware or conscious again. The family and I prayerfully gathered around her hospital bed and discussed "What the Bible teaches and what Jesus would have us do." The decision did not come easily nor without prayer and many tears, but the decision was made to remove all the feeding tubes, including those providing water, and allow her to starve. It was gut-wrenching yet correct decision. They honored life and more importantly trusted Jesus with their daughter by allowing death to occur.

Life belongs to God and we are right to trust Him with it in its continuation and conclusion.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (ed. Eberhard Bethge, Collier Books: 1963) p.162.

Chapter 23

Contempt

Rev. Dr. Eric Jacobsen

Eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death. —*ECO Essential Tenets*, III E. 6

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister, will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, “Raca,” is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell.
—Matthew 5:21-22

As part of the officer selection process, our nominating committee asks prospective candidates whether they can affirm ECO’s *Essential Tenets*. Because of our contentious history in the PCUSA, we are especially interested in hearing whether they can affirm the interpretation of the 6th and 7th commandments.

In highlighting the 6th commandment, we are of course, asking if they too recognize the “image of God in every human being from conception to natural death” or more specifically are they in agreement with us on the issue of abortion. Recently, I was asked about this practice and went back to the source to ensure that we were appropriately representing ECO’s take on this important subject.

In reading the *Essential Tenets* again, I was reminded that ECO’s interpretation of the 6th commandment doesn’t begin with biological concerns which speak directly to some of the lightning rod issues concerning abortion (and euthanasia). Rather this commentary on the 6th commandment, taking a cue from Jesus’ interpretation in the Sermon on the Mount, begins with heart issues.

Our *Essential Tenets* instruct us to begin honoring the image of God in all humans by first “eradicating a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness”. And then it instructs us to “cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love”. All of this is expressed before we get to the biologically informed questions concerning when life begins and when it ends.

Reading this again, I wondered what it might look like for a pro-life church like ours to take the heart issues surrounding the recognition of the image of God in every person as seriously as we take the biological issues. In addition to asking potential officer candidates about their stance on abortion, would we check their social media activity or even their coffee hour

chats for evidence of “anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness”? Would we ask those with whom they disagree, whether they are exhibiting “gentleness, kindness, peace, and love” as they discuss controversial issues?

Just to be clear here, I’m not setting this question up as a kind of ‘gotcha’ moment for those who skew right in their politics. The tactics of Antifa *and* the approach of the Jan 6th rioters remind us that violence is on the rise from both sides of the political spectrum. And many left-leaning and right-leaning evangelical Christians, while not condoning such overtly violent activities, seem to have found permission in such tactics to ramp up the vitriol in their social media communications.

In this essay, I am going attempt a brief theological reflection on the relationship between our expressed attitudes towards other persons and our conviction that each person is created in the image of God. Specifically, I am going to address the question as to whether our contempt for another person might contradict our theological anthropology?

According to the Oxford Learners Dictionary, contempt is the “feeling that someone or something is without value and deserves no respect at all”. We experience contempt for another person if we feel disgust towards what they say, who they are, as well as their basic motivations. We might feel contempt towards someone we know personally. But it’s just as likely that we feel contempt towards a public figure or someone that we ‘know’ primarily through online interactions. I chose the word contempt because it seems to be a fairly common sentiment among many Christians today and it tends to be rooted in one or more of each of the negative descriptors in our Tenets’ interpretation of the 6th commandment.

When we feel contempt for another person we are tempted to believe that the world would be a better place without him or her in it. Of course, having contempt for another certainly need not imply that we would consider making plans to end their lives. (It does appear, regrettably, that death threats are becoming an increasingly common form of political discourse). Nor does it necessarily require that we would like to see their life come to an early end. Contempt can simply mean that we would be content to never have to interact with them for the rest of our lives.

To have contempt for another person is in its essence to fail to see the image of God in them. For why would we want something God created to cease to exist? And this is precisely where we discover the theological problem with this troublesome attribute. And this is not an insignificant problem. A theological anthropology that affirms the image of God in every single human being is both foundational and distinct to a Judeo-Christian worldview. Jesus was conspicuously devoid of contempt in His interactions with everyone He encountered. And the fruits of the Spirit, which include gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; describe attitudes towards others that we adopt when we recognize God’s image in them. To affirm the image of God in another person should make contempt for that person impossible.

Because we believe every person is made in the image of God, we believe that human life has inherent value. This is distinct from worldviews which hold that human life has derivative or instrumental value. We believe that a human life has value irrespective of one’s racial, cultural,

national, or socioeconomic distinctions. We believe that a human life has value regardless of one's physical attributes or mental capacities. We believe that a human life has value regardless of experiences, choices, or even prison record of the person in question. We believe that a human life has value even if it is unplanned or unwanted. And we believe that a human life has value regardless of their political activity, opinions, and voting record.

To value another life involves more than just tolerating their existence, however. When we approach another with an open heart and the Spirit graces us with a posture of gentleness, kindness, peace and love; we often discover something surprising about them. We might discover that in addition to being an advocate of a policy or candidate we disapprove of, they are also a daughter, a cancer survivor, or a bird watcher. To resist contempt for those with whom we disagree forces us to accept the uncomfortable truth that we, as image bearers ourselves, share something valuable in common with them. This, of course is more difficult if not impossible to experience with public figures or people we only "know" in an online setting. However, as we practice this approach with people we do know personally, it makes it easier to engage our imagination to humanize those we don't.

The avoidance of contempt for others, can also teach us important things about ourselves and our opinions. It can open us up to the possibility that we might learn something from someone with whom we disagree. Sometimes, the extremity of our reaction to the different opinions of others stems from an insecurity about the viability of our own convictions. In many cases, our reason for choosing contempt is part of a larger strategy to move the spotlight off of our own foibles. We often react most strongly to disagreeable characteristics in others that we see in ourselves. Therefore, withholding contempt can force us to deal with contemptible aspects of our own personality.

I'm glad that ours is a pro-life congregation and I'm grateful to ECO for supporting us in this stance. But I'm also grateful that the *Essential Tenets* challenge us to remain pro-life as those human lives we value in utero are born and grow into sentient adults with their own opinions who might even disagree with us on Facebook.

Fortunately, I don't yet feel an urgent need to change our Officer vetting process. The leaders at our church by and large have managed to avoid much of the ugliness that has marred our public discourse of late. And I'm proud to note that when we discuss controversial issues we've managed to do so with gentleness, kindness, peace, and love. However, I must also admit that I'm going to be paying more attention to these heart issues going forward. If a candidate checks all the boxes of qualification for service, but exhibits contempt in their interactions, I'm going to have a hard time recommending them for leadership in this ECO church.

Chapter 24

Suicide

Editor's Note: The plan has been to offer pastoral reflections from members of our team. Some are forthcoming, but all are in a similar spirit to those included here. None will be arguing that suicide is unforgiveable, and all will be pastorally sensitive.

Rev. Dr. Bobby Griffith

Suicide is a topic that is often considered taboo. It is a misunderstood topic. We have some folks who believe that suicide is the unpardonable sin in 1 John 5. We have some folks who struggle with ideation. We often have communities startled by suicide. When it comes to suicide, it is incumbent upon our churches to create space for folks who wrestle with the thought of taking their own life; it is important to have a strategy.

In ministry, we have to be honest about mental health. We have to be honest about the impact of devastating, life-changing events that might lead someone to contemplate taking their life. We also need to realize that most people who make an attempt, decide to do it fairly quickly when they choose to succumb. When we have someone in our congregation, who has had a major event happen that might push them into considering suicide, it is okay to ask them if they are thinking of harming themselves. We are first responders. Sometimes that means you call the mental health hotline.

If the person has a firearm, it needs to be taken away. They need to know their church loves and cares for them. Their leaders need to pray with and for them, and shepherd them through this literal valley of the shadow of death.

We need to make sure that we have dedicated resources for our people to have access to high quality counseling. We need to make sure all of our staff are trained to follow mandatory reporting laws. We need to respond, not with judgment, but compassion and grace.

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

I had to begin more seriously reflecting on suicide in my pastoral experience when someone in the orbit of my wife's ministry died by suicide in a particularly challenging and public way. At the time she ran a transitional Christian housing program that also offered respite for people with mental health crises who were not suitable for continued hospitalization but needed extended care outside of their normal contexts. One young person found a sense of home and belonging and would often hang around even after the respite stay had ended. One Sunday near Easter my wife and I were driving towards a local church and saw this young person walking

in the opposite direction, we longed for this person to experience a life-giving and loving community, especially around this time of celebrating resurrection. But we knew the local church options and knew none of them could be a "home" where this person would experience the kind of intensive discipleship needed to experience a life worth living. This person looked too rough, wasn't always coherent enough, sober enough, and wouldn't really know how to participate in worship services. Eventually, mental health issues led this person to suicide. But this person chose where to die, and that was the place that was most like "home" (this person's own words)—the ministry that my wife ran, a place of comfort, of belonging. Ironically, this converted old roadside motel was owned by a local church, next door to a large modern worship center. Thus, this person died in front of an old seedy motel that felt more like home than the clean "church" that was next to it. This person's funeral, held at a different church, was surprisingly full of young people from all walks of life. This person was well-known by the wider community, so why was the motel recovery community "home"? It was the place where this person was known and loved enough to be challenged. It was a place of discipleship.

For my entire ministry I have heard how parachurch ministries are not "the church" because they don't do the ministry of Word and sacrament. I've begun to have a real problem with this mentality—that we all run highly specialized institutional ministries, none of which make much of a home for the whole life and community of God's people to come together to carry one another's burdens. We're institutionally segregated and isolated. What this means is that the church becomes, to put it somewhat bluntly, a public broadcast network focused almost entirely on public messages and large-scale singing events. We have optional side-gig "ministries" that our more enthusiastic volunteers run. But the main thing is our worship service. What I saw was that the institutional churches had no place for the "least of these" and few opportunities to confront its neighbors like the Good Samaritan did. Discipleship of even the mature has been focused on perfecting the kinds of "sacrifice of praise" we bring to the "house of God." Discipleship is the mission of the church, preaching and sacraments are part of discipling-making, they are not ends in themselves. We are the church, the house of God. There can be no institutional replacement for us.

Whatever we have to say about suicide and all the complexities of mental health, I think I would start with this—if we're going to show the world what it looks like when and where God is king in our churches, then we have to act like the king who left his home. Welcome and hospitality are great... but the building and the worship event are not a sufficient "home" and we can't outsource the essence of our ministry (discipleship) to parachurch organizations. The good news to much of the world isn't just a spoken or sung word, it's the home of God spreading its arms to lovingly embrace the lost by offering them a place where love is found in hard conversations, in mutual-discipline. Many people I met through my wife's work and through my former church's presence with the homeless often said, "No one's ever asked to hear my story before." I suspect this is probably also more true of people in our pews than we might realize.

So it's not just about going "out" there to find people struggling with mental health or a sense of not being valued. Many of us have had seasons of great difficulty, myself included. Jesus himself displayed an immense struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane where he felt the lack of the presence of his friends when he needed them most. There's a lot of room to get practicing this kind of discipleship by starting with ourselves, our staff, our elders. Every sheep needs a shepherd who knows them by name and loves him or her enough to offer loving correction.

Contributors

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