

That They May Have Life

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, The President’s Commission on the Sanctity of Life

Human life

Human life is not an achievement. It is an endowment. It has measureless value, because every individual, at every stage of development and every state of consciousness, is known and loved by God. This is the source of human dignity and the basis for human equality. It must therefore be asserted without exception or qualification: No one is worthless whom God has created and for whom Christ died.

Uncompromising respect for human life is fundamental and the foundational principle for human community that enables individuals to live together in security and harmony. This principle calls upon every individual and society to rightly define the human community. Will all be counted as neighbors, or will some be regarded and treated as strangers and cast beyond protection? In a democracy, men and women of every walk and station of life have a role and responsibility in answering these great and significant questions.

A Society of Strangers

American society, in its response to these questions, is steadily becoming a society of strangers, obsessed with personal rights and severing the ties of duty, compassion and love to the weak and unwanted.

American culture has come to favor those who can stridently assert their autonomy and choice in a struggle for political power. As a result, America has become an inhospitable, even dangerous, place for those too weak to compete effectively in this contest of rights—the young, the elderly, the dying, the handicapped.

American society has adopted a distorted definition of freedom. Freedom focused only on the self and its rights. Freedom from the bonds of community. Freedom from duties of parents to children. Freedom from the obligations of generation to generation. Freedom from the responsibility to sacrifice for others. Freedom even from a sense of empathy.

The ultimate and inevitable outcome of this new freedom is the individual's private, autonomous power to choose life or death, for self or even for others. This is the concept of freedom behind the increasing acceptance of euthanasia and infanticide in American society. This new freedom finds its broadest, most blatant expression in abortion.

Of every three lives conceived in America today, only two are allowed to survive until birth. What was once defended as a rare and tragic necessity has become an accepted solution to unwanted pregnancy, a popular political stand, and a profitable industry. American law against abortion has not been liberalized or reformed but abolished, with abortions now legal through the ninth month of pregnancy, until birth, under any circumstances. Given this most permissive law of any democratic nation, abortion is the most common surgical procedure in America, following circumcision.

Abortion has not only led to the shocking loss of 1.3 million lives each year, it has also resulted in a coarsened society, desensitized to death and disloyal to life. America has crossed over the line of a civilized society, approving routine violence against the weak and teaching its children through actions and attitudes that this is a proper way to treat the inconvenient. It can only be guessed and feared how the next generation will eventually treat its aged parents, its handicapped, and its sick.

God's law and human conscience call America and the world to a different and higher behavior. They call upon American culture to respect and protect, not just the self and its rights, but life and its promise. They call men and women to show concern and offer care to their weak and suffering neighbors.

Men and women in every walk and station of life have a role in addressing this great concern. Roles will differ as vocations differ with responsibilities in three different circles of society: the teaching responsibility of the church, the civic responsibility of Christian laity in the world and the responsibility of all of society.

The First Circle Of Responsibility: The Church

The purpose of the church is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. The Church does this by faithfully teaching God's Word and administering Christ's sacraments. The Scriptures reveal God's perfect will and expose mankind's sinful rebellion against God, preparing the way for the message of forgiveness, life, and salvation, through which God creates faith and a desire to do what is right in His sight.

The church does not exist to establish government or carry out the responsibilities of government. The church

does, however, have a public teaching responsibility, especially for the sake of its members. The church must do all it can to speak the clear word of truth with a clear voice.

The church must take care to avoid politicization when it speaks in the public arena. Separatism and indifference are also of great concern, when Lutheran churches, not wishing to confuse the role of the church and the role of government, fail to speak out forcefully regarding critical moral issues. The failure of many Lutherans in Germany to resist not only the Holocaust, but also the eugenics movement of the 1920s and 1930s, is today recognized and acutely regretted. Many Lutherans and other Christians said nothing when this movement developed the concept of *lebensunwerten lebens*, "life unworthy of life." As a result, the mentally and physically handicapped were legally killed in the name of compassion. It was a stain on the church's soul.

The church must speak directly and forcefully in those clear and limited circumstances when fundamental moral principles are at stake. The most fundamental of those principles is the protection of innocent life, from either centralized tyranny or privately authorized killing.

It is true that the Bible does not specifically condemn abortion, as it does not specifically condemn infanticide or slavery. But silence is *not* neutrality. New Testament ethical teaching is not intended to be exhaustive. It defines principles which can be applied to *any* human problem while not directly applying those principles to *every* human problem.

The leaders of the early church reacted to moral challenges as they arose. When the challenge of abortion surfaced in the early centuries of the church, the response was unequivocal. The early Christian document, the *Didache* states: "You shall not kill an unborn child by abortion or murder a newborn infant" (2.2).

Moral principles relating to life are clearly defined in the Holy Scriptures. All public killing is rejected except war and capital punishment, the two exceptions which are to be applied correctly and justly by civil authority. All private killing except in self-defense is also rejected. Children are to be actively welcomed and loved. The aged are to be respected, the sick treated with compassion and the stranger looked up-on with concern. These were moral principles in direct contrast with the ancient world, where the value of life was often determined by status or strength. They remain in direct contrast, and challenge the practice of contemporary culture.

Christian ethics, based upon Holy Scripture, puts human life in a different category than other human goods. Life, even one's own life, is not owned. Nor can it be rightly given away to others in slavery, even with one's agreement. It must not be destroyed in suicide, even when desired. An innocent life cannot rightly be taken from another individual, even should a society call it legal, enlightened or humane. Life is not a "thing" to be given or taken. It is a divine gift, to be valued wherever it is found and mourned whenever it is lost.

Christian teaching regarding abortion has varied over time according to the limits of human knowledge. Thinkers have tried to place the beginning of individual moral significance at various stages of fetal development, such as quickening (when a child is felt to move) or ensoulment. But in due time all such theories have been discredited as biologically unsound and morally arbitrary.

The church, therefore, will side with Martin Luther, who described human nature as so wicked that women even "kill and expel tender fetuses, although procreation is the work of God!" (*Luther's Works* 4:304). From the moment of conception the fetus is alive and biologically human, son or daughter, distinct from mother, with an unmatched genetic code. Beginning at conception, the development of human life is a continuum which unfolds until natural death. At some points in this continuum every human being is dependent upon others, while at other points independent. But at every point he and she are valuable. There is no identifiable moment on the continuum of life where "meaningful" or "worthy" life begins. Any attempt to locate such a moment, whether at viability, birth or any other time, is fundamentally arbitrary and rooted only in convenience and not in principle.

The church must therefore speak on behalf of the innocent and voiceless child, before and after birth. The fact that some children may not be physically perfect or wanted by their parents does not make them worthless. These children hold the same claim to human dignity and value as every other human being. The church must therefore also speak for and to women experiencing crisis pregnancies, to help them through the dark valley of their difficulties. The church's answer to crisis pregnancies will not be harsh moralism, but care and mercy out of respect for life and out of love for the person, moved by the Gospel. The church must also deny that there is an ultimate conflict or need for choice between the lives of children and the value, dignity, and rights of women. Women and children alike are deserving of compassion and support.

The church must also speak to men, whose role is often overlooked or ignored in times of crisis pregnancies, who bear an equal burden of responsibility. Even as men participate in creating a life, they are also responsible for fathering the child and caring for the mother after its birth, financially and emotionally.

The church must also speak for the poor, rejecting that most pernicious argument that abortion is necessary in order that society may avoid the economic costs and consequences of indigent children. Working to alleviate poverty, the church must reject the idea that poverty can be solved by eliminating the poor. Christians are called to particular care for the poor, and not to particular cruelty.

The church must also speak for the elderly and sick who are near the end of earthly life. Many who are considered burdens and obstacles to the self-fulfillment of others and made to feel unwanted, unloved and rejected appear ready to become their own executioners, as if it is their duty to die. But there is no right or duty to take any human life including one's own. It will be the church's duty to express in word and deed its patience, tenderness and love for those nearing death. They will be comforted, supported and offered the hope of the Christian Gospel, not resented and driven to despair.

The church must speak for all who are considered mentally and physically handicapped. We understand that human dignity and worth are not measured by mobility, intelligence, or achievement in life. When genetic testing and abortion are used to dispense of "defective" children, this is not compassion but bigotry completed in violence. Every child destroyed in the womb for a mental or physical handicap sends the sorry message to every handicapped individual in our society that they are worthless and even burdensome. They are neither. Any proposal that persons suffering from handicaps should be relieved by hastening death must be categorically opposed.

In all these ways the church affirms the truth that no one is worthless whom God has created and for whom Christ died.

The Second Circle Of Responsibility: Christian Laity

The church proclaims to a sinful world the forgiveness *of* sins and the eternal salvation won by Christ our Lord. Faithful Christians are called to live out their lives in conformity with the Word *of* God and to take the truths *of* the church into the world. Where the sanctity *of* life is concerned, they have the primary responsibility and serious charge to work and act-as citizens, professionals, parents and friends-to restore the present culture's respect *for* life.

Because the shape *of* laws and culture in a free society is ultimately determined by consensus and not imposed by fiat, the work *of* Christian laity necessarily begins with persuasion. Social reform is secured when first minds and then laws are changed. Christians must, therefore, learn to present the case *for* protecting human life in ways which are publicly effective, appealing to medical science, clear reason, and common decency. Theological and Biblical assertions, however correct, will not suffice in the public square. Christians must be encouraged to prepare themselves to give strong public testimony to their beliefs, drawing from the entire scope *of* pro-life argumentation.

When persuading their neighbors, *how* Christians advocate is nearly as important as *what* is advocated. Debate on issues *of* life and death is often divisive, requiring civility not only because *of* its importance to democracy, but also because it is the proper way to treat others. Kind words and true compassion can cross barriers *of* anger and suspicion. Words *of* healing and love, not bitterness, are particularly important *for* women who have had or are considering abortions. The desired goal is not to sound the bullhorn *of* a partisan agenda but to awaken the still small voice *of* conscience.

A special opportunity exists here *for* Christian health professionals and institutions. Each has the responsibility to be an example to the world *of* principled respect *for* life by bringing healing or, when healing is not possible, by bringing *comfort*, counseling, and relief *of* pain. Some treatments which merely extend the process *of* dying may be rejected, but never with the aim to kill, consistently upholding the principle that it is morally wrong to directly end a life, even at a patient's request.

Secondly, Christians will tirelessly promote compassionate pro-life alternatives. Respect *for* life is not just an intellectual belief. It is personal commitment which recognizes that other people will not be convinced *of* moral seriousness regarding these issues until that seriousness is evidenced in actions. The protection *of* the innocent, aged, and handicapped is, therefore, both a social goal and an individual responsibility.

This means providing to women in crisis pregnancies medical, financial, and spiritual support. This means adopting unwanted children, including those who are older, handicapped, and otherwise hard to place. This means visiting the elderly, and ensuring that they know they are valued and not resented. This means comforting men and women who are facing the hard and lonely deaths of AIDS, cancer, or other diseases and comforting them with love and a loving touch. These acts of compassion and faith provide a compelling alternative to a culture of efficient, convenient death.

Finally, Christians must seek the legal protection of life. Such laws are not determined by the church. Such laws are properly determined by Christian politicians, voters, and activists working with other

concerned citizens. Secular authority has a God-given responsibility, in the words of the Augsburg Confession, to "protect body and goods from the power of others" (AC 28.11). The state must protect human life and liberty. Christians have the duty, particularly heavy in a democracy, to hold the state to account.

It is unacceptable and indefensible for Christians to say that they personally oppose abortion but do not support the legal protection of the unborn. Commitment to life is not a matter of personal piety; it is a conclusion about social justice. Laws against abortion and other evils do not "impose" morality. They protect the weak from violence, one of government's defining roles. When a life is unjustly taken, this is not an expression of freedom or choice. It is the abuse of freedom and choice, and the permanent denial of freedom and choice to the individual who no longer lives.

It is likewise not sufficient or coherent for Christian politicians to say that they are personally opposed to abortion and yet refuse to work and vote against it, claiming to reflect the public will. Conscience cannot be divorced from conduct. Radically privatized belief is no belief at all. When a public official is faced with a public injustice which involves a primary purpose of government, he must work and vote to reform that injustice, even at political cost. He can be prudent but not passive. There is no refuge from action in the claim that our democracy or courts have spoken. The Christian public official must attempt to persuade citizens and judges to reverse or revise any law or verdict which undermines or removes the protection of innocent life.

Each of these three priorities for Christians in society-persuasion, pro-life alternatives, and legal activism-will be necessary to transform current conditions and redevelop a social consensus to protect the weak. All are undermined when anyone is ignored. Christian laymen are called to these efforts as long as they are necessary, avoiding both weariness and wishful thinking, motivated to serve the neighbor out of love for God.

The Third Circle of Responsibility: American Society

The Gospel speaks to every nation and to all of history. But most Lutherans in the Missouri Synod are tied to America and its distinctive history. We believe it represents something unique and valuable, providing an example to other nations around the world. And we call upon our national community to fulfill its best traditions and highest ideals.

American history is the story of an expanding circle of protection and inclusion to African Americans, to women, to generations of immigrants, to the handicapped. Each stage of moral and legal progress has been a victory for America's founding commitment to equal justice under law. Group after group-sometimes after generations of discrimination-has claimed and redeemed America's initial promises of life and liberty, demanding that our nation act in a manner worthy of itself.

Only twice in American history have our laws and courts officially excluded an entire class of individuals from the basic protections of our democracy. The first instance was the Ored Scott decision, which declared African-Americans to be less than human, leading America into generations of conflict, bigotry, hostility, and violence. The second instance was the Roe v. Wade decision, which effectively declared children until the moment of birth legally worthless and subhuman. Both decisions have been unworthy of America and its aspirations.

Our debate regarding abortion and other life issues is a debate on the very nature and the future of our American society. Is the gate of mercy shut and locked? Is our hospitality to the stranger and the out-cast exhausted? Or will we again reaffirm and extend the American ideal? And will we again expand our care and protection to the weak? The protection of the unborn is the next noble step for a generous democracy. We pray that our countrymen will act in a manner worthy of our country and its history.

No One Is A Stranger

Our opposition to abortion, infanticide, euthanasia and other such evils comes down to these simple principles: We reaffirm the value of every human life as created and redeemed by God through the life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord, and we condemn the use of violence to solve social problems. We condemn violence, even and especially when it is convenient for a majority. We condemn violence, even for reasons which may sound admirable and progressive. We condemn violence because we recognize that no individual is a problem to be "solved" but a person to be loved and a neighbor to be cared for and served.

The selective destruction of innocent life is always the triumph of the powerful over the powerless, the triumph of despair over hope. In every case, it is the triumph of will over love. A society that is ruled by the will of the strong becomes a hazardous place for the weak. This misdefined freedom-the freedom of the

autonomous will-has made our society less than just, less than decent, less than human.

In a community informed by the Christian faith, no one is a stranger, neither the "unwanted" child, nor the "useless" aged, nor the "worthless" handicapped, nor the "hopeless" sick. Rather than being burdens, such human lives are gifts of God, opportunities to demonstrate what is at the heart of a caring society.

A community must be more than a winner-take-all clash of individual interests. Its boundaries must define our responsibilities to one another, particularly to the poor, humble, and helpless. A community must hear not only the shouts of a majority but the cry of a single child. Our community has grown deaf to those cries. We must learn to listen again.