

Theology Matters

The Duties of Love: A Christian Response to Homosexual Behavior

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The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), like many mainline denominations, is currently debating whether to relax its ordination standards for church officers. Specifically, the church is being asked to relax its historic standard of faithfulness in marriage or chastity in singleness for church officers, including deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders, and, for the sake of peace and unity, to endorse practicing homosexuals and lesbians as candidates for ordination.

Throughout its history, the church universal has judged both the practice and endorsement of homosexuality to fall outside God's expressed will for humanity. The practice of homosexuality has, consequently, disqualified persons from consideration for ordained offices in the PCUSA. Some would now urge the PCUSA to part ways from the witness of the whole church on this matter, and overthrow the common-sense understanding of Scripture and the denomination's historic polity on this issue. They argue that the teaching of Scripture not only regarding homosexuality but sexuality in general is bound by cultural and historic norms that are no longer valid in a postmodern mindset. They interpret the freedom afforded in the gospel from the perspective of individual rights and privileges rather than as responsibilities to be conformed to the liberating image of Christ as set forth in Scripture. They want the church to join in the growing acceptance of homosexuality and lesbianism in Western culture and expand its standards of ordination to include those who desire to claim a license not permitted by Scripture.

In many respects, the controversy over homosexuality has defined the existence of the PCUSA for the past quarter-century. Should the church now compromise or abandon its rich heritage in theology, creed, and covenant in hopes of ending or lessening the divisiveness caused by this controversy? Should it concede to what some consider a practical imperative to consent to live and let live, accepting our differences and increasing our distance in order to reduce disagreement and acrimony, lest those differences rend the fabric of our unity? The answers we give to these deeply-felt issues will determine the future of our denomination.

Acknowledgment and Preservation of Truth

The lessening of the divide in our denomination and the healing of its wounds cannot be achieved by political compromise, but by reclaiming the confessional basis of the church. Church unity is not established or preserved by structural and procedural measures, but by establishing

Table of Contents

The Duties of Love: Homosexual Behavior.	p. 1
Drastic Measures	p. 7
The Duties of Love: Abortion.....	p. 10
Heidelberg Catechism Study	p. 15

the grounds of unity in the purity of faith. Church unity begins with unity of confession, not with organizational and administrative unity. Any attempt to unite and preserve the church apart from confessional unity is to act apart from Jesus Christ as “the one Word of God, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture” as noted in The Theological Declaration of Barmen (*Book of Confessions* 8.11).

What is this word of God and truth of the gospel regarding human sexuality that alone is capable of healing our wounds and restoring our fellowship? We seek to understand and disclose that truth by imparting a vision of the gracious will of God and the purpose of human persons in it.

A. Male and Female as God’s Creation

The Bible begins the story of God’s dealings with humanity by proclaiming God as the creator of the universe. God is known and honored as the creator of heaven and earth (Acts 12:15). Our Confessions affirm him as the creator of all that exists.

Christian faith in God the creator is the response to the Biblical proclamation of creation. According to this proclamation, God created the human being to consist of two complementary genders, as male and female. As male and female, they are different from each other, but in this bipolarity they are God’s human creation. It belongs to the essence of being human to live either as male or as female, but also in mutual relation to one another as man and woman. The first creation account states, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). A literal translation of the original Hebrew underscores the mutual relation and unity of humanness more concretely than does the above English translation. It reads: “God created *adam* (=humanity) in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” The second creation story tells that the female was taken from the side of the male, making her truly of Adam’s kind but at the same time completely different (Genesis 2:21f.), so that they are able to cling together and “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). The point of both creation accounts is the same: God has created humankind in the complementarity of male and female. Each human being is either male or female, but man and woman are each other’s counterparts, two halves of a single whole.

Jesus unequivocally endorsed this design of God’s creation. In the coming kingdom of God, Mosaic rules about divorce are set aside in favor of a restoration of the basic blessing of creation. Jesus says: “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’. So they are no longer two but one flesh” (Mark 10:6-8).

Human life is God’s creation in the complementary structure of male and female. At its most fundamental level, it is defined by the relation and distinction of its male and female forms. While this complementary structure finds its most obvious realization in the marriage of one man and one woman, it marks all human life, including those who have chosen to remain single. It is the imprint of God’s will upon human life, for married and single people alike, that male and female are distinct from each other. But it is equally the will of the creator God that in this difference male and female are made to be related to the other, whether married or single, to live with and for the other. The rich harvest of human culture is inconceivable without the ever present force of this attraction of male and female to each other, but also of the tension that is caused by the difference between them.

The confession “We believe in God the Creator” implies the affirmation “we believe in our being created as male and female.” God the creator is honored by the thankful acceptance of God’s work that called us into being as men and women. It is our task to respect and uphold our call to be God’s creation by guarding equally the difference between us as men and women, and the wonderful bond that summons us to be each other’s mate, friend, and companion.

Homosexual practice and theory is the denial of the complementary structure of human nature expressed in the creation by God of the human being as male and female. It flees, for whatever reason, from the divine praise that lauded the creation of male and female as a work worthy to be called “very good” (Genesis 1:31), choosing instead to seek fulfillment not in the other, but in the reflection of its own self through a partner who is basically the same as the one seeking fulfillment. For that reason, homosexuality is essentially heterophobic. Homosexual theory and practice are, therefore, incompatible with the Christian confession of God the creator of male and female.

B. Reverence for the Life of Children

The biblical account of creation attributes the power of procreation to a special blessing of God. The creation of fish, birds, and animals is accompanied by God’s blessing that enables them to multiply (Genesis 1:22), and the creation of the human as male and female culminates in the sentence, “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28). From creation onward, the power to pass on life from generation to generation is praised and revered as a divine favor and a fulfillment of the divine will.

The capacity to procreate does not claim to give divine powers to a human couple. Fish and birds share this blessing with humans, and, together with the animals, a human pair does not reach God-like status by having children. A human life is valuable to God whether or not it is given offspring. Jesus and Paul were not married and

remained childless. Hosts of God's most dedicated servants through the centuries, both male and female, remained unmarried and produced no children. The gift of passing life on to a new generation is a gracious favor of God, not a passport to citizenship in God's kingdom.

The gift of children, however, remains a blessing of God in the Christian community. In this community children are not incidental by-products of the love relationship that unites husband and wife. After blessing the human couple God's first commandment is for them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28), thus indicating the God-ordained causal relationship between human conjugal love and human offspring. Such offspring are welcomed, loved, and nurtured. As a gift of God, their well-being becomes a primary responsibility of their parents.

Today, there are various means to have children. From artificial insemination to adoption, methods exist to provide new life for adults that avoid the physical union of a man with a woman. But all such methods depend on the fact that human life cannot be regenerated except through the union of a male reproductive cell with a female reproductive cell. The complementarity of human nature is the precondition for the continuance of human life.

Homosexual theory and practice embraces a sexual activity that cannot reproduce life. It is, by its nature, an exercise in barrenness. The claim that homosexual acts are morally equivalent to heterosexual acts declares barrenness to be equal to life. Homosexual acts are, therefore, flights from the Christian confession of God, the creator of life.

C. Marriage and God's Covenant

Several Old Testament prophets have spoken of God's covenant with Israel as a marriage between God and God's people. God stands in a relationship of husband to Israel his wife. For the prophet Hosea, the fervor of God's love for his people is cast into language of a husband's intense struggle for an unfaithful wife. Israel is to God a disloyal spouse who is being divorced (Hosea 2:2) because she continually runs after other lovers (Hosea 2:5). Yet God, contrary to law and custom, will restore the covenant with the divorcée. Thinking of her, his heart recoils within him and his compassion grows warm and tender (Hosea 11:8) so that he will eventually return her to him in a new covenant in which she will be called "my wife forever" (Hosea 2:19).

In the New Testament this image is transformed into the picture of Jesus Christ as the groom of his bride, the church. The analogy between a marriage on earth and the covenant of God is captured in Ephesians 5:31-32: "A man will leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and thus the two will become one flesh." This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church." These words declare that God's covenant with his people is the prototype of the covenant of marriage that unites a human couple. Christian marriage of a man and

woman is thereby conferred the dignity to reflect the bond and dedication through which God chooses to be committed to the church through Christ's love. Christian marriage is called to be an image and parable of God's covenant with those whom he has called.

There is a world of difference between the covenant of God and his people, and the bond that unites a husband and a wife. But both prophetic language and the language of the New Testament dare to establish an analogy. God and Israel, as are Christ and the church, are simultaneously distinct and different from each other, yet they are shaped into a unity with one another that is the nerve center of their lives. This distinction and difference is not a cause of alienation and separation of one from the other. It is, rather, the very ground of a joyful and enriching life together. The same is true for the marital relationship. Husband and wife are made by God to be distinct from each other, but also ordained by God to love and serve each other in a companionship for life. No husband and no wife can do for each other what God in Christ alone can do for them. But their actions and attitudes can, and will, be inspired by Christ's care for them so that they become, in their earthly union, images of the love of Christ for his church (Ephesians 5:29).

The advocacy of homosexual behavior as a possible Christian life-style refuses to acknowledge the theological and ethical significance of our being created as male and female. It views marriage between a man and a woman as a form of attachment that is equal to a love relationship between partners of the same gender. The existence of a love relationship does not in itself justify sexual intimacy. Like all relationships, love relationships, too, are subject to the Lordship of Christ; they cannot be defined apart from discipline and obedience, and they may not lead to sexual relationships apart from marriage between a man and a woman. Advocacy of homosexuality obscures the analogy between God's covenant of grace and the bond of human marriage. It does harm to the Christian confession of God's solemn commitment to the church, and to the calling of Christian couples to grow, through their union of structurally different lives, into paradigms and signs of Christ's saving act.

D. The Love Commandment.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," taught Jesus. "This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39). According to the explanation given to Jesus' saying by the apostle Paul, the summation of the law in the love commandment is not the annulment or abrogation of the law, but the fulfillment of the law. Paul states that "one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8), and the Ten Commandments are concrete explications of what love accomplishes in crucial areas of life: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other

commandment, are summed up in the word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Romans 13:9).

Reformed teaching has been characterized from its inception by the conviction that the reception of God’s unmerited grace results in the constant amendment of life. The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 described Christian ethics in their totality as acts of thankfulness. The question: “Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?”, is given the answer: “Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us with his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified in us” (*Book of Confessions* 4.086). In the same vein the Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934 states: “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of the world for a free, grateful service to his creatures” (*Book of Confessions* 8.14).

The commandment to love one’s neighbor furnishes no license to approve of every desire, either of one’s own heart or of one’s neighbor’s. Christian love is discerning. Paul insisted: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good” (Romans 12:9). We have to learn concretely what love requires in the specific decisions that are demanded of us. Our natural blindness to the liberating power of God makes it necessary that we continually learn what true love of the neighbor entails. This learning must be guided by Scripture as the Magna Charta of our liberation to genuine love. God’s commandments are the charter of Christian liberty, and in their power to set the boundaries of liberty, they instruct us in finding the ways of true and unpretentious love.

The thankful response of individuals for the forgiveness of sin in Christ’s death is to love God by obeying his commands. In the first and last references to faith in the Epistle to the Romans the apostle Paul refers to this response as “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). This obedience of faith is a call to live righteously with God, with others, and with the created order. Loving God is not limited to personal and individual ethics. It also involves the love of neighbors by desiring that they, like we, might experience Christ’s love and righteousness, and respond to both by living in love and righteousness. The duty of love requires of Christians that they seek the wholeness of their neighbors in every possible way.

Indifference toward the needs of our neighbors, whether those needs are spiritual, moral, or material, is a grave infraction of the Christian love command. The good news that “God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8) implies a duty of love that leads Christians to share the good news of the gospel and seek those who apart from the gospel do

not know the salvation of Christ. Those who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior and who through baptism have become members of the church have a special claim on this duty of love. Christians are obligated to help one another live into the fullness of the new life in Christ by proclaiming the good news of the gospel, by the celebration of worship and the sacraments, by humility and confession of sins, and where necessary by rebuke and discipline. Each of the above is commanded of Christians in Scripture.

The homosexual agenda in the church has been advanced by the thesis that the New Testament has no consistent and distinctive sexual ethics. This thesis assumes that the requirement of loving others in consensual acts of trust is the only basic guide to personal ethics in the New Testament, while all concrete elaborations of this guide are time-bound products of a dead culture. We reject this thesis because it is irreconcilable with a widely shared understanding of the love commandment and of the sanctification of the Christian individual within the Christian community that is brought about by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in us through the Word of God. Indeed, if consensual acts of love are seen to legitimate sexual activity, then not only lesbianism and homosexuality can be condoned, but also other relationships in which love and trust can be present, including sex with multiple partners, sex with close blood relatives, and even perhaps sex with children and animals.

E. Sexuality and Idolatry.

Many people in the church today are asking what their duty is toward neighbors who engage in same-sex behaviors. Christians cannot avoid the unambiguous declarations of both Scripture and the confessions that such behavior violates the will of God, and that unrepentant practice of such behavior can separate those who indulge in it from the kingdom of God. “Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals (effeminate males who have sex with men), nor men who lie with a male, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9). Love of neighbor requires that Christians not lead their neighbors into such judgment, whether by practicing such sins, condoning them, or being indifferent to them. The Confession of 1967 is particularly clear that “anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man’s alienation from God, his neighbor, and himself.” The Confession admonishes that, “The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ.... The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time” (*Book of Confessions* 9.47).

According to Scripture and our Confessions, God's creation of the human family in its polarity of male and female is to be received with thanksgiving and honored as God's gift. But God's good creation can turn into chaos. The life together of men and women can change into a problem, a temptation, a burden. The Old and New Testaments do not attribute the root of this disastrous mutation from good to evil simply to weaknesses of human character or to vicissitudes of fortune. The root issue is not moral but religious. The Testaments disclose infidelity to the one God of Israel, and unfaithfulness to the one Lord Jesus Christ, as the breeding ground of human perversion that transforms the excellence of creation into a cup of poison. Sexuality deteriorates into idolatry and the veneration of false gods produces sexual perversion. The corruption of nature through corrupt religion is expressed nowhere more clearly than in Romans 1:23-24, where idolaters "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

Idolatry is not only virulent in sexual forms. The Heidelberg Catechism defines idolatry very broadly: "It is to imagine or possess something in which to put one's trust in place of or beside the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word" (*Book of Confessions* 4.095). But it is not by coincidence that Paul's indictment of idolatry and the resulting ethical perversion is followed by his condemnation of lesbian and homosexual practice in pagan society (Rom 1:26-27). Paul's coordination of idolatry and sexual deviancy echoes the frequent charges in the Old Testament that Israel's infidelity to its God is tantamount to whoredom. Israel prostitutes itself by perverting the exclusive attachment to God through the adoption of nature cults, and by engaging in fertility rites that enact through human actors the procreative forces of nature.

The celebration of fertility rites and the veneration of fertility gods have all but disappeared from our religious landscape. But the elevation of sex to an almost god-like status is widespread in our culture. The lure of sexual attraction and the desire to gratify sexual drives are omnipresent. The dynamic of this impulse resides in the conscious or sub-conscious conviction that sexual fulfillment is essential to the goal of finding one's true personhood. Sexual identity, so it is claimed, determines the true self, and the loss of this identity results in injury to one's realization of personal worth. Knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, defenders of homosexual practice perpetuate this cycle of sexual self-absorption. They are enmeshed in, and often captivated by, a culture in which sex decides the value of the self. A healing from this pseudo-religious disease is possible only if we can teach convincingly, and act persuasively, so as to lead ourselves back to the

fundamental starting point of Christian identity. The Christian finds his or her personhood by losing it, by burying the idolatrous old self in the death of Christ, and by rising with him to a new life that receives its value and fulfillment in discipleship. The cure of our sexual ills, personally and collectively, does not come at a cheaper price.

The Three-fold Offices of the Church

The church has a duty to turn people from idolatry to faith in the one saving gospel and to the joyous freedom of being formed into the image of Jesus Christ. The church inherits this duty because it is the body of Christ. The Reformed Tradition rightly sees in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the three crucial offices in the Old Testament by which God is revealed, those of prophet, priest, and king. The Apostle Paul also speaks of the church as "the body of Christ," the corporate and contemporary presence and mission of Christ in the world. If the church is the body of Christ, and if Christ is the perfect fulfillment of the Israelite offices of prophet, priest, and king, then it is proper to apply the offices of prophet, priest, and king to the church as well.

In its *prophetic* role, the church proclaims the Word of God, which it understands as the Truth. By "Word of God," the church intends first, the Incarnate Jesus Christ; second, the proclamation of the gospel; and third, the written attestation to both in Holy Scripture. The church proclaims and interprets the Word of God to particular circumstances in the church and in the world. When rightly proclaimed, the Word of God reveals both the judgment of God on sin and unrighteousness, and the mercy of God to repentant sinners. It challenges people both within and without the church to turn from idolatry to the one true God, revealed finally and forever in Jesus Christ. It calls people to repentance of sin, reception of God's forgiveness in the gospel, and the embracing of a new and joyous life of transformation not simply to God's will, but to the very person of his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.

In its *priestly* role, the church intercedes for people by offering God's grace through the sacraments, as commanded by Christ. In its unique role of administering the sacraments, the church assures believers that in Christ their sins are forgiven and that in faith they are bound together into a new people of God, the body of Christ. The sacrament of baptism is a singular sign wherein by the washing of water believers signify that by God's saving grace they have died to their own self-serving wills and by his redeeming power they have been raised to new and eternal life. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a repeated sign wherein by bread and wine believers are continually reassured of their growth, protection, and inclusion into Christ's Body by the gifts of his own body and blood. Both sacraments cleanse sinners, reconcile them to God, and empower them to embark on the joyful journey to Christ-likeness.

In its *kingly* office, the church governs through order and discipline. Through order and discipline the church attests to its unity and purity. Unity depends on the provenance of the Spirit, and purity rests in the protection of the Spirit. The governance of the church through order and discipline is not a repressive exercise, but rather a means of building up the faith, of maintaining believers in the faith, and of restoring and renewing them in the faith when they have fallen from it.

The three-fold offices of the church do not exist simply to establish or prolong the existence of the church, and certainly not to curtail human life. Their purpose, always and everywhere, is redemptive. They are the means by which the saving presence and work of Christ are made effective in the earthly lives of believers. They declare the promise of new and eternal life to persons caught in sin, confusion, addiction, fear, and death. The Preamble to the *Rules of Discipline* in the *Book of Order* rightly identifies the purpose of discipline not as an execution of vengeance but as an exercise of redemption in service of the great ends of the church. “The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing.” Church discipline is the church’s exercise of an authority given by Christ for the guidance, control, and nurture of its members. It nurtures believers as they seek to submit their weak and resistant lives to the liberating transformation of the gospel. It amends and corrects the lives of believers from false paths to the One who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

We Seek You That We May Find You

As the primary way God wills to order the life of his earthly covenant community, the three-fold offices are God’s *redeeming* gift to and for the church. Whenever a group within the church seeks to establish an alternate polity valid for one constituency or place but not for another, the redeeming purpose of the one Lord, one faith, and one church is imperiled. The great bishop and theologian of the early church, St. Augustine, was once chided for not allowing another bishop to break from the church. “Why do you seek after us?,” he was asked. Augustine replied thus:

Who is it who seeks after you, either through the Scriptures or by the voice of the church or by the discipline of the church, except the God who dispenses mercy to you in all things? We seek you that we may find you. We love you because we want you to have life with the same intensity with which we hate your error. The purpose of our seeking is not to destroy you, although we would destroy that which destroys you. We pray that we might seek you in such a way as

to find you, and be able to say with rejoicing of each of you, “He was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Augustine, *Letters to Petilian*, II, 37, 89).

“We pray that we might seek you in such a way as to find you, and be able to say with rejoicing of each of you, ‘He was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’” The bishop who sought to assert a parochial view of the church couched his appeal in terms of individual rights and freedoms. Augustine was convinced that when the health of the church as the redemptive community of God was at stake that appeal to individual rights and freedoms was foolish. For Augustine, the desire to separate for the sake of peace was like an errant sheep that strays from the flock: unless found, it will perish. There is no greater joy on earth, and no greater sign of health in the church, than to see those who have strayed restored to saving faith and rightful fellowship in the people of God.

In Augustine’s day it was not clear that his position would prevail. Likewise, we cannot today guarantee that faithfulness to Scripture and the ordination standards of the church throughout time and space will prevail over the attempts of those who would dismantle them. Nevertheless, we choose to stand with Augustine. Arguments and actions that do injury to the truth of the gospel cannot promote either the unity or peace of the church. We seek with unflagging zeal those who promote personal exemptions and parochial interpretations over the one God, one faith, one gospel. We pray fervently for the division in our church to be healed. We are bold to hope for the triumph of the truth of the gospel, for the truth of the gospel produces purity of faith, and purity of faith produces peace and unity in the church. We do so because it is a duty of love.

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Drastic Measures

Sermon by Kevin Finch

Text: Matthew 5:27-30

Near the end of junior high, my Sunday school teacher issued our class a challenge. Any of us who could memorize the whole Sermon on the Mount (all of Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7) would get a brand-new, top-of-the-line, red letter, black leather Thompson Chain Reference Bible tricked out with the three column New International Version format. As it turns out I'm more competitive than I sometimes let on and so I went home that Sunday afternoon and started memorizing immediately with verse one of chapter five:

Seeing the crowds Jesus went up on a mountain, and when his disciples came to him, he opened his mouth and taught them saying, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit..."

I knocked off a verse a day for the next couple of weeks—which put me well ahead of everyone else in the class (I checked). Then I hit verse 27—our passage today—and found myself at the edge of a precipice more terrifying than anything I can remember up to that point.

I might not have been able, in junior high, to give you a technical definition of adultery, but I knew lust. And suddenly the technical definition of adultery didn't matter. By the standards of the kingdom, Jesus said that hungry, ugly look and the feelings that came with it were not some precursor to sin but sin themselves.

My attempt to memorize the Sermon on the Mount as a Sunday School assignment ended abruptly at this textual cliff. Up to verse 27, Jesus had simply been talking to a clump of his fans up on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. But with verse 27, he turned and started talking to me.

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

I knew the Ten Commandments. In fact, I think I got a milkshake for memorizing them a couple of years before. And while I didn't think I was home free with the 'big ten,' at age 14 I felt that I had a few more years before I

needed to start worrying about Number Seven: "You shall not commit adultery."

I was wrong. According to Jesus, lust wasn't just the beginning of some slippery slope that could lead to sin. Lust was sin itself.

I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

I tried to keep up my verse-a-day pace toward my red letter, black leather Thompson Chain Reference Bible, but I stumbled over these verses every time I came to them. I stumbled over them, that is, until the day I quietly concluded Jesus' standard here was impossible and that I would find a way to minimize the meaning of the text or the seriousness of my sin...or both.

I became what you could call a '**moral minimizer**' because of this very passage, Matthew 5:27-28, and, to be honest, the careful minimizing work I did with this passage I've repeated over the years with other passages. Maybe you know what I mean because you've done it too. We moral minimizers, when faced with an intractable and obviously impossible passage like this one today, give up trying to really understand it or even live with the tension it suggests between our current lives and the kingdom life Jesus sets before us. Instead we look for loopholes and exemptions: ways to explain reasonably what God might have in mind that requires...at the very most...minor adjustments on our part, but not deep transformation we won't be able to control. We moral minimizers look for ways to soften the kingdom up...make it more palpable...less extreme.

Take this classic passage today that got me started. We minimizers would note that clearly adultery in the heart is not as damaging as actual physical adultery. No one else is involved. If it *is* actually damaging (which we can debate), it is only damaging to us, right? And then what really does technically qualify as out-and-out lust in a realistic view of the world? You know, as well as I do, that the Hebrews were an unusually earthy people, so genuine lust must have been something really dark, rather than just that occasional hungry, ugly leer and some internal musings about sex. Wouldn't you agree?

We minimizers become masters at tossing in examples to muddy the moral waters. We pose theoretical questions to our disturbingly simple Savior in patronizing or bemused tones: So on the subject of lust and adultery, Jesus, does

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looking at the ladies underwear pages in the Penny's catalog qualify? Or how about this? Can you really lust in your first look at someone or only in your second? Is there a minimum time limit for the genuinely lustful look? Ten seconds? Five? How about two?

Before long, we minimizers have so obscured the words of scripture, that we don't need to change anything substantial in our lives. Mark Twain at least was more honest when he said: "It is not the parts of Scripture I don't understand that disturb me, but the parts I do."

But what other choice do we actually have...faced with the immensity of the sin in our lives? What other choice do we have? "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Faced with the immensity of our sin, I think we all become minimizers in the end.

Because this is not just about lust. Any of you women out there who think that you're golden because Jesus is so clearly picking on us guys, think again.

True...Jesus doesn't pick adultery randomly out of a hat. The first thing recorded as evidence of sin in the Garden of Eden, was that Adam and Eve saw that they were naked and became afraid, and over the years I can't think of anything more wonderful in God's creation than sex that the devil has twisted to wreak so much havoc and destroy so many lives.

But if you think that all Jesus is talking about here is shacking up or considering it, think again. He is talking to every one of us and about much more than a leer here or a leer there when he says:

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

You see, in stark contrast to all of our attempts to minimize or justify our own sin or qualify this or that text, Jesus uses some of the most violent language that will ever cross his lips to describe how decisively we must separate ourselves from even a sliver of sin.

Jesus is not calling for the literal lopping off of a wandering limb or the removal of an errant eye, but do not minimize the urgency of this text.

It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

The truth is that we serve a forgiving God. We serve a God of grace and a God of love, but don't mistake our loving God for a minimizer, soft on sin. Scripture says that the wages of sin are...death...and this is not some arbitrary decision by an unenlightened God that will be

revised in *Christianity Version 2.0*. Our loving God is simply telling us as straight as he can that sin will separate us from the mercy he longs to pour into our lives. You see God is, in his very being, holy fire; and sin—any sin—simply cannot exist in God's presence any more than darkness exists the moment you turn on a light. This is not up for negotiation. Salvation is not determined on a bell-curve.

"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

Can we hear this not as some ridiculous impossibility or rhetorical overstatement but as a realistic warning about the desperate danger of sin for us from a God who loves us enough to come and die that we might not? Jesus doesn't just warn us, he gives his life to save us.

Years ago, *Guideposts* carried a story about a woman whose husband was often gone on business. During these trips, a neighbor down the street offered to help with any problems that surfaced, and he would come over, if she called, to move something heavy or fix a toilet that was overflowing. This went on for some time, and they became good friends. After he would help out, they would just talk. Then one day, something felt different. As they talked as they had done so many times before, she realized what it was, and she could see in his eyes that he felt it too. As it got dark, she knew without asking that if she gave the slightest indication, he would stay the night, and she realized she wanted him to stay. She was desperately lonely and he was more than just attractive, he was kind.

I don't know if she remembered what Jesus says here in Matthew five, but she was a Christian and in spite of her longing for him to stay, she chose, by God's grace, to fight the longing that night. They were standing on her porch and overhead there was one light—her porch light—burning in the dark. And rather than invite him back in—something they both wanted—she moved slowly to stand directly under the light and standing there she said goodbye...not "see you later," but "goodbye."

I love the image of her standing in the light as she said goodbye, but you know what? In our world where we have so muddied the moral waters and minimized sin, just standing in the light might not be enough anymore. You may not be able to find the light to stand in when you realize sin is asking to stay the night.

Did you know that in 1973, according to *U.S. News & World Report*, Americans spent \$10 million on pornography? Any guess what this figure was in 1999 given the growth of the Internet? In 1999 we spent 10 billion dollars on porn—a thousandfold increase. And in 1999 this was far more than Hollywood's domestic box office receipts and larger than all the revenues generated by rock and country music recordings combined. And that was six years ago. I've heard that over a hundred new porn sites go up not every month now, but every week.

Just standing in the light might not be possible now and Jesus knows this. His message is not ‘just say no.’ He tells us to tear ourselves away from sin the second it enters our heart. Gouge it out. Cut it off. Make no accommodation whatsoever.

Let me put it this way for us in Spokane, the home of Bloomsday, the largest timed road-race on the planet: run away.

Run away from sin! Flee as fast as you can—limping if you must—but run.

It’s the Joseph Principle. You remember Joseph, don’t you? In Genesis chapter 39 we find him serving as a slave in Egypt, and when his master’s wife demands that he sleep with her (adultery incidentally) and she refuses to take ‘no’ for an answer and grabs his tunic and won’t let go, he wrenches free, leaving his cloak, and runs.

Run from sin. It is the Joseph Principle, and I think it fits our text today, but based on our text, let me also say that while it is simple...to run...this doesn’t make it easy. Our run away from sin will not be some easy lope from darkness into light. It will feel, as we lurch away, like death. It will feel like we have lost a limb or our eye has been torn from its socket. We may need to scream as we run, but run. Trust God and run.

It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If this is true... if Jesus isn’t just blowing smoke or being melodramatic, let me ask you this: **Is there a place in your life where you need to tear away and run...from sin?** You may think you have this particular sin under control. You may think you can contain it. You may think you can step back whenever you choose.

“You have heard it said...” Jesus *whispers*... “but I say to you....”

“You have heard it said...” Jesus *roars*... “but I say to you....”

Is there a place in your life where you need to tear away and run from sin?

You know in my twenty-four years of wrestling with this challenging text, I’ve failed to find any hope here, but as I talked with Karen last week, she pointed out that there is hope...even here...for if we take sin as seriously as Jesus does, we will find ourselves free to live into the joy of God’s design for our lives. Sin, as compelling as it looks and feels, is nothing more than a knock-off of real life, of God life, of the kingdom. But it is not until we completely

cut ourselves off from sin...it is not until we trust God and run...that we discover this. If we try to contain it or control it, but keep it as an appendage in our lives we will die.

I have a friend whose mother has a deep paranoia about the medical establishment: hospitals, doctors, medicine, you name it. This fear has become so extreme she hasn’t seen a doctor for years. But the problem is that a while back she developed a tumor on her face. It would not have been a big deal if she’d seen a doctor early on, but she didn’t and it has gotten worse and worse to the point that it has now essentially devoured half of her face. And this is not just a cosmetic horror. It will kill her if she doesn’t get help, and even if she gets help now, she still might lose her eye.

Here is what made me think of this story in relationship to our text today: On the phone this week she told my friend she thinks she is getting better and that she might not need the surgery—the surgery, the doctors say, is the only thing that will save her life.

In stark contrast to all of our attempts to minimize sin, Jesus tells us to tear ourselves away from sin. Gouge it out. Cut it off. Make no accommodation.

We must trust God—believing that he who created us knows what will save us—and we must run from sin. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

It used to be when people parted they would wish each other “God’s speed.” From what I know of our loving God, and in light of our text today, this is exactly what I want to wish you today. May you have God’s speed as you run...run from sin...and run into the arms of our Father.

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The Duties of Love: A Christian Response to Abortion

by Terry Schlossberg

The whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:14)

The sum of the Ten Commandments is: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. (Westminster Shorter Catechism, 7.042)

*Thou shalt love thy neighbor more than thy own life.
Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion.
(Epistle of Barnabas, 19:5, circa 125 AD)*

God, out of his great love for us in Jesus Christ, has blessed us by revealing his will to us in Scripture, so that we may know how to love each other, as Christ loves us.¹ That revealed will is the moral law.

One of the chief confusions of our time is the relationship between Love and Law. We find it baffling to learn that the Law is abrogated by Christ's coming—that to use it makes us legalists—and then discover that we are trying to resist the moral relativism of our age without it. We know that Jesus Christ is "the Truth," but we are told that what is true arises from particular circumstances. Thus our confidence is shaken because we are of two minds on what is morally right or wrong. A good example of this loss of confidence is in the expression, "I would not have an abortion (usually meaning, "I do not believe abortion is right"), but I cannot say what is right or wrong for another person" (usually meaning, "I don't want to impose my personal beliefs on anyone else"). Most of those who have learned to repeat the apparent generosity and compassion of this statement probably are not conscious of the overwhelming conflict in it.²

Loving another person outside the Law's framework means there is no objective measure for making judgments about what others say or do. It means both that I must respect anyone else's truth to be as legitimate as mine, and that my own expression of love is not

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accountable to any moral standard outside myself. The separation of Love from Law ultimately means that we are freed to express the depths of our depravity and we can commit heinous crimes in the name of Love. This is not far-fetched. There are defenders of this view. And this view is played out in life and death decisions for the innocent and vulnerable in our society every day.

Joseph Fletcher's situation ethic: morality based on love without law

Episcopal priest Joseph Fletcher wrote a little book in 1966 called, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. The book expresses well the premises on which moral relativism is based. Fletcher's view can be summarized as: love is the single moral absolute, good moral decisions are based on love of neighbor, and love is the antithesis of law and derives its meaning from response to circumstances.³ Fletcher's book has had a significant effect on moral thinking in our society, even among those who never read his book.

Fletcher writes that situational factors are so primary that "circumstances alter rules and principles." Love, in his view, makes every absolute relative so that absolutes can be adapted to the circumstances. "Thou shalt not steal," he says, must not be read as a commandment. It is merely a guide, a "maxim." It, like all the commandments, may be employed when it is useful. There are times when stealing is right and when it is wrong. If a lie is told unlovingly, it is evil; if it is told in love it is good. My *reason* for lying can make it a good.⁴ "If people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside marriage, it isn't, unless they hurt themselves, their partners, or others."⁵ "There are no rules—none at all."⁶ Fletcher justifies not only abortion, but also infanticide, euthanasia and assisted suicide with his ethic: "In principle, even killing 'innocent' people might be right."⁷

In this view of morality, no deed is good of itself. An act acquires its good only if it serves the welfare of another human. "Whatever is benevolent [loving] is morally right; whatever is malevolent or indifferent [unloving] is morally wrong."⁸ In this view, the words that form the basis of the judgments have no content except that given them by the decision-maker: words such as "hurt," "good," "welfare,"

and “malevolent”—like “love”—are defined by the person in the circumstance.⁹

The situation ethic has reshaped our whole society’s understanding of love. By making Law the antithesis of Love, situation ethics allows us to sanction lying, stealing, sex outside of marriage, and every other violation of God’s Law governing human relationships.

In the Christian view, true love is not a free-floating emotion to be caught and filled with our own personal version of goodness. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg asks, “Can love ever be sinful?” And he answers, “The entire tradition of Christian doctrine teaches that there is such a thing as inverted, perverted love.” Pannenberg writes that true love is perverted whenever we turn away from God. God’s will is our “guiding star,” he says, to loving rightly.¹⁰

The situation ethic is the inversion of love of which Pannenberg speaks because it is so easy to rationalize decisions to serve our own purposes. The problem with a law written only on the heart, and not also in the Book, is the condition of our hearts. Calvin wrote about our susceptibility to self-delusion: “For our nature, wicked and deformed, is always opposing [God’s] uprightness; and our capacity, weak and feeble to do good, lies far from his perfection.”¹¹ This is a spiritual reality that Christian faith knows about the human heart. It is what Fletcher’s view denies. Fletcher’s rejection of the Commandments is a way of saying we do not need God’s definition of the moral. We can determine it for ourselves.

This law-less ethic of loving the neighbor does its greatest harm when it is used to make life and death decisions about others. It is the basis of the “choice” of abortion. Abortion may be regarded as a loving act, a good, only if love is emptied of biblical content and then twisted to mean the opposite of God’s intent: that killing innocent human beings is allowed. It is an inverted, perverted love.

The “benevolence” of the church’s modern position

This topsy-turvy understanding of benevolence, or love, as justification for abortion has been the ethic of the documents of the Presbyterian Church (USA) since this denomination’s great reversal on abortion in 1983. The document from that year speaks of a “covenantal responsibility of parenthood,” or familial love. Compassion for the needs of the woman involved, other children in the family, the general conditions of life at the time of a pregnancy, are what justify the abortion decision.

...The decision to terminate a pregnancy is a question of one’s covenant responsibility to accept the limits of human resources.... When someone can discern that it would not be good for a child to be born as the result of a particular pregnancy, she has a responsibility to take her human limitations seriously and to act accordingly.¹²

The child lives or dies depending on the way in which the woman chooses to express the situationist’s version of love.

The current policy document of the PC(USA), adopted by the General Assembly of 1992, has a more moderate tone than its predecessor, but it, too, yields to circumstances rather than to law as the determiner of the morality of abortion. “Problem pregnancies are the result of, and influenced by, so many complicated and insolvable circumstances that we have neither the wisdom nor the authority to address or decide each situation.” The policy leaves the decision to the pregnant woman, and declares her decision, whatever it is, morally acceptable. The decision to kill the unborn child or to allow the child to live are morally equal decisions. Of course, the policy does not express its view in such stark language.¹³

This is a very attractive position in our modern world. It frees us from the legalist label. It permits us to appear tolerant and compassionate. We think it allows us to avoid conflict. It is unnerving to discover that it isn’t Christian.

In Christian faith Law is the ground in which Love is rooted

Scripture says that “The whole Law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14).

Scripture teaches us to love the law of God (Psalm 1, “Blessed is the person [whose]...delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.”). It teaches us that obedience to the law is how we express our love of God (John 14:15, “If you love me, keep my commandments”). It ties love of neighbor to obedience to the law (James 2:8, “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”). It shows us that we demonstrate our love of our Savior in our treatment of the neighbor (Matthew 25:40, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”). Loving the neighbor is not the means of obtaining the grace of God, which no work of ours can possibly do. It is, rather, the means of expressing God’s grace as members of his body. It is the living of the Christian life as Christ’s disciples. Fletcher is not far from the mark in his great emphasis on love. But he could not be farther from the mark in thinking that God’s revealed will as the meaning and content of love is the antithesis of loving the neighbor.

Unlike the ceremonial laws, which were fulfilled in Christ and abrogated by his coming (Gal 3), the moral law, the summary of which is the Ten Commandments, continues for all time. The Reformed confessions teach that the moral law applies to all people, unbelievers as well as believers. “The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof.”¹⁴ Luther defined two uses of the Law and Calvin added the third. The third is closest, Calvin said, to “the proper purpose of the law.”¹⁵ The first two uses are the Law as a

Schoolmaster, showing us our need and leading us to Christ, and the Law as a restraint on evil-doers, a standard for the execution of justice. Calvin's third use of the Law describes it as a guide to obedient discipleship: living in a way that is pleasing to God and truly good for the human community. All three uses are applicable to love of neighbor. The first implies a caring for the state of the neighbor's soul, the second implies a caring for the protection of the neighbor from harm, and the third implies a Christ-like positive obligation of laying down our own lives for the neighbor.¹⁶ Fletcher's view of love does violence to all three understandings of the benefits of the law in loving the neighbor.

Law's relationship to love: The example of the Good Samaritan

Love begins with God who is love. Therefore, the context for viewing a neighbor and his or her needs is God and not the circumstances. The neighbor doesn't always inspire our natural compassion. It is when we see Christ in the neighbor, as Jesus explains in Matthew 25,¹⁷ that we begin to comprehend the meaning of love. In the Christian view, God is the primary context for good moral decisions, and the circumstances provide information to guide the response. Often the circumstances become the obstacles that must be overcome in order to love the person. Circumstances are not insignificant and they are not to be ignored. But neither are they determinative of decisions that please God.

The Law is based on a prior biblical premise that God has marked every human being with his own image. We have that image in common with every other human being and it is the basis of our neighbor-hood. It is the reason that no human being is a stranger to us. Therefore, every person is the worthy recipient of our love. Circumstances do not disqualify a person from possession of the image of God and the obligation of love. Calvin comments on the claim that image in the neighbor places on us:

Say, 'he is contemptible and worthless;' but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in his own place in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to himself. Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions.¹⁸

Christian faith's call to love of neighbor is not a matter of what we are inclined to do naturally. That love often calls us to behavior and actions that we resist *because* of the circumstances.

Perhaps the best example of the contrast between the situational and the biblical ethic is in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). The man on the road had nothing to commend him to his prospective helpers: he had been robbed and was penniless; he was beaten, dirty, and

bleeding, already "half-dead;" he was alone, without friend or family member who might have had a natural desire to care for him. He was a stranger, an alien, on this road, someone who put no natural claim on passers-by.¹⁹

Only one of the three people who encountered this man chose to help him. We may say that the two, the majority, regarded the circumstances and judged that it is morally acceptable to "pass by on the other side." Why did the Samaritan make the opposite decision? Was the answer in the circumstances? Not likely. The Samaritan was of a race hated by the injured man. In order to help, he had to delay his own trip and spend his own money on a stranger. He had to find lodging and care for the man, and pay for it out of his own pocket. What besides the obligation of love that Scripture places on us would explain why the Samaritan did not also "pass by on the other side"? Even if the Samaritan did not know the biblical teaching, he behaved as if he recognized in the distorted, damaged, nearly-lifeless human being the image of God; he behaved as if he understood the Law's requirement to avoid what "tends to the destruction of the life of any," as well as the Law's positive requirement of "comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent."²⁰ He was merciful at great cost to himself. We call him the "good" Samaritan because he is an imitation of Christ. He shows us how to lay down our lives for each other (John 13:34-35; 15:12).

Jesus teaches in this parable that not every person's decision in this circumstance expressed love for the neighbor. The priest and the Levite could not stand before Jesus and justify their decisions.

Abortion, like situation ethics, is opposed to the Christian view of love

In any pregnancy where, for any reason, the baby is not wanted, it is possible to find a benevolent-sounding reason in the circumstances for why the pregnancy must end and the baby must die. The reasons may range from the baby's poor prospects for a normal life after birth to a teenage girl who exercised poor judgment when she was alone with a male friend. They may range from pregnancy as a result of a violent attack to contraceptive failure. If the baby is not wanted, the circumstances will always cooperate with a reason for doing away with the innocent child.

The stories of two pregnant teenagers and two women who came to their aid serve as a modern version of Jesus' parable. These are true stories.

In one, a clergywoman writes that she received a call from a school nurse who wanted help getting a high school teen across a state line to have an abortion. The minister drove to the school, picked up the teenager and drove her to an abortion clinic in New York. She waited while the young woman had the abortion and then drove her back to school and dropped her off. She tells us nothing more about the teenage girl. It was the only contact she ever had with the young woman.

In the other, a young pregnant teen sought help from a woman in a pregnancy care center. The teenager had been raped by a young man of another race. She lived with her grandfather whom she knew would react violently to the news, so she felt she must have an abortion. The woman offered to go with the teenager to see the grandfather and help deliver the news. The teen agreed. The woman writes that the trip to grandfather's house was one of the most dreadful moments of her life. They found him sitting on the front porch of his farmhouse. When they told him the news, he exploded, and told the girl to leave and not to come back.

The young girl now had a friend in the woman, who cared for her and who accompanied her time and again in trips to visit the grandfather. Gradually, the grandfather warmed up and accepted his granddaughter back into his home. The baby was born there, and became the grandfather's pride and joy.

We should ask, as Jesus did, who proved to be neighbor?

When the Church bases its morality in circumstances rather than in the Law, it puts human beings in peril, both physically and spiritually. When a young woman enters an abortion clinic and finds an attractive religious brochure with her denomination's name on it, sanctioning her abortion decision, the defenses of her own troubled conscience are broken down. The church has abetted her spiritual peril. When the Church then denies her need for forgiveness by regarding abortion as morally equivalent to preserving innocent human life, it has set up a barrier to her healing and her reconciliation with God. Women need the ministry of the church that warns them away from decisions that will harm them spiritually. They need the pastoral ministry that proclaims how ready God is to forgive. And they need a spiritual family who will reach out into its community and commit itself to acts of mercy toward women in troubled pregnancies.

Scripture tells us that in bearing each others' burdens we fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). The loving response to the abortion crisis of our time is both to see that the innocent babies' lives are spared, and to do the difficult and time-consuming work of caring for young women, both spiritually and physically. The church has expressed love in this way throughout her history.

Theologian and writer Richard John Neuhaus says that abortion raises the question of whom we regard as neighbor, and to whom we will be neighbor. Who is outside the biblical requirements of love? Who is it we have no obligation to protect and care for? Neuhaus points to the danger of the situational approach for every needy person.

Among the senile aged, the comatose, the grievously handicapped, the mentally deranged, the drug enslaved, and the millions who are starving, we encounter innumerable people who are not useful to themselves or others, are not viable, and have no claim upon our

caring by virtue of their present or potential achievement. In short, any criterion we might employ to exclude the unborn from our field of moral vision inevitably excludes millions of other human beings as well. The Church's moral teaching rests on the proposition that other people do not need to qualify for our love and protective concern. It is enough that they are members of the human community and God's children in need. If we do not care about every human life, it is doubtful that we really care about any human life. In biblical language, of course, the question is: Who is my neighbor? If by some measure we can exclude the unborn as neighbor, can we not by the same or similar measure exclude, for example, the emaciated victims of Ethiopian famine or the "vegetables" in our state hospitals?²¹

It is the moral law, reflecting the will of the Law-Giver, that protects the widow, the orphan, and the poor, those among us who cannot defend themselves. No unborn child is safe without the protection of that law. None of us is safe without the protection of that law. James 1 chides believers who think they can profess faith in Christ and ignore his commands. True expression of faith is found in caring for the needy and vulnerable (James 1:27). Scripture admonishes us to demonstrate our faith by how we live our lives. In what sounds like an allusion to the parable of the Good Samaritan, James says, "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:15-16). Faith must be visible in what we do.

The situationist's version of love is at its heart no more than love of self. The love we have from God and are commanded by God to express toward each other, makes big demands on us. But its end is all blessing.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

¹ 1 John 4:9-12: God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 1 John 5:2-3: By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.

² Christian faith is based on the premise that there is Truth that comes from outside ourselves. Scripture, for example, is revealed Truth. Therefore, it is possible to hold a belief that is

true in itself; that is, the truth of it is not dependent on a person's believing it.

³ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 1966.

⁴ Fletcher, p. 65

⁵ Fletcher, p. 140

⁶ Fletcher, p. 55

⁷ Fletcher, p. 75.

⁸ Fletcher, p. 64

⁹ Fletcher quotes Emil Brunner: "Love, however, is free from all this predefinition," p. 27.

¹⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Revelation and Homosexual Experience," *Christianity Today* (from their website edition), Nov. 11, 1996.

¹¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, Westminster Press), p. 367.

¹² *Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion*, OGA, 1983, p. 32-33.

¹³ Christians seek the guidance of Scripture in the midst of relationships and circumstances of awesome proportions that affect their interpretation and decision making. ... We affirm the ability and responsibility of women, guided by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, in the context of their communities of faith, to make good moral choices in regard to problem pregnancies. ... The considered decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy can be a morally acceptable, though certainly not the only or required, decision. Possible justifying circumstances would include medical indications of severe physical or mental deformity, conception as a result of rape or incest, or conditions under which the physical or mental health of either woman or child would be gravely threatened. Quotations are taken from "Problem Pregnancies and Abortion," Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly policy of 1992, pages, 10-11.

¹⁴ Book of Confessions, Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXI, "Of the Law of God," (Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, KY, 1999), p. 141. See also, *Institutes*, Book II, especially chapters VII and VIII. ("God... set forth more fully and clearly by the Ten Commandments everything connected with the honor, fear, and love of him, and everything pertaining to the love toward men, which he for his own sake enjoins upon us." (II, VII, 11, p. 377.)

¹⁵ *Institutes*, p. 360.

¹⁶ The church for most of her life responded to the circumstances with the moral counsel of the Scripture's law of love. The *Didache*, a first century church document, outlines the good and righteous life under the commandments to love God and the neighbor. First under the second great commandment, it forbids "murder," including the murder of "a child by abortion...." The Epistle of Barnabas, quoted at the beginning of this paper is an example from the second century.

¹⁷ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was

hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

¹⁸ *Institutes*, p. 696.

¹⁹ There is a modern story reminiscent of Jesus' parable in the death of the renowned Spanish artist, Antonin Gaudi. Unpretentious in dress and lifestyle, Gaudi was struck one day by a street car in Barcelona. He was taken to a paupers' hospital and died in a hallway, waiting for medical care that did not arrive in time. In Gaudi's situation, the story ended differently because there was no Good Samaritan.

²⁰ Book of Confessions, The Westminster Larger Catechism, on the Sixth Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill," (7.245 and 7.246), p. 217. C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.), 1947, argues that the Ten Commandments have their counterpart in every culture and civilization. He calls this universal understanding of morality the Tao.

²¹ Richard John Neuhaus, "Abortion: Christian Doctrine and Public Policy," *The Forum Letter*, (New York: The American Lutheran Bureau), Sept. 21, 1988. Neuhaus explains in the beginning of this article that he is responding to a letter to the editor expressing the belief that "the abortion decision should be 'based on individual circumstance.'"

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Study of the Heidelberg Catechism

Study 5 Questions 24-64: The Nature of The Trinity

By Rev. Stephen Eyre, College Hill Presbyterian Church,
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I grew up on the west coast of Florida. As a teenager one of my favorite activities was watching the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico. I made the trip from our house to the beach at the close of day whenever I could, generally several times a week. A few years ago I returned to my favorite sunset watching spot to discover a restaurant with a large deck. Although initially indignant about this commercial invasion, I still chose to enjoy a meal out on the deck at sunset. Just before the sun, that evening appearing gloriously huge and red, sank into the sea, a hush settled on my self and my fellow diners. Conversations all but stopped as we turned and looked west. When the last glimpse of the sun vanished below the horizon, everyone broke into spontaneous applause. I am still moved as I think about it. Surely the heavens declare the glory of God.

Of course, we all know, in this modern world that the sun doesn't set, the world turns. Even so, whoever says, "That was a beautiful world-turning this evening"? Despite our education, it still appears to us that the sun sets.

The insight that the world revolves around the sun was first proposed by Copernicus in the early 16th century. His proposal did not arise out of common sense but by careful and thorough observations which led him to advocate that which even today seems counter-intuitive to our daily experience. In fact, much of what we know about the world today seems counter-intuitive; whether it be the strange world of quantum mechanics or the vastness of space filled with billions of stars and thousands of galaxies. Careful observation leads us to discover that reality is not what we expect.

In this regard, what is true for this physical universe is also true about God. God is not what we expect. Over the course of several centuries, the great teachers of the early church were driven to break with "common sense" as they struggled with the "data" revealed in Scripture. The God revealed by Jesus Christ was somehow God incarnate, and yet he prayed to his heavenly Father. The Trinity implied in the Apostles' Creed and articulated in the Nicene Creed was their daring conclusion.

Copernicus' heliocentric theory won out over common sense because no other proposal better explained careful observations or cleared up the persistent problems with calculating the calendar by the motions of the night sky. Likewise, for the theologians of early church, no other

explanation adequately accounted for all that was revealed about God in the Scriptures or provided all the spiritual dynamics necessary to achieve the benefits of salvation that Jesus bestowed on his church.

The Heidelberg Catechism explores the mind wrenching conception of the Trinity in Questions 24 through 64. Questions 24 and 25 introduce the doctrine of the Trinity. There are three questions on the Father 26–28; sixteen on the Son, questions 29–52 and twelve on the Holy Spirit, questions 53–64.

We will look briefly at the introductory questions on the Trinity and the Apostles' Creed in this study.

Question 24. How are the articles divided? Answer. Into three parts: The first concerns God *the Father* and our *creation*; the second, God *the Son* and our *redemption*; and the third, God *the Holy Spirit* and our *sanctification*.

It is noteworthy that the Heidelberg includes the roles of each member of the Trinity in our creation, our redemption and our sanctification. It also includes their persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In some circles current discussion of Trinity refers exclusively to the members of the Trinity as Creator, Redeemer and Revealer. The underlying concern is that referring to God as Father and Son raises gender issues about God that are unpleasant for some to ponder.

However, both their person and their roles in this world are important for us to consider. We need to know not only that God is the Creator, but more than that, he is Father. We need to know Jesus, not merely as Redeemer, but as God's Son. In their relationship and in their roles we find the explanations of this world and our redemption.

Each person of the Trinity has a special role: creator, redeemer and sanctifier. However, while each has a unique role, the roles are not exclusive. They are in relationship. Genesis makes it clear that the Spirit was active in creation while the first verses of John reveal that the Son was engaged in creation as well. Likewise each person of the Trinity has a role in our redemption and sanctification.

Question 25. Since there is only one Divine Being, why do you speak of three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Answer. Because God has thus revealed himself in his Word, that these three distinct persons are one, true, eternal God.

Following the articulation of their identity and roles from question 24, this question and answer affirms their unity. There are not three gods. There is only one God. We don't believe in a "tri-theism" but a Trinity. Yet there is a distinctness that must be affirmed too. From the earliest

articulations of this doctrine it was affirmed that Father is not the Son or the Spirit; the Son is not the Father or the Spirit; neither is the Spirit the Father nor the Son.

No metaphors or analogies are sufficient to explain this plurality of persons but unity of being. Reality, especially when it comes to God, is indeed stranger than we think and beyond our ability to comprehend. While meditation on this divine mystery ought to make your brain ache, it shouldn't unsettle you about the plausibility of our faith. C.S. Lewis wrote that one of the reasons he believed that Christianity had such a ring of truth was because no one would ever come up such ideas by means of common sense.

Study Questions

1. What responses or concerns do you have concerning the doctrine of the Trinity?
2. Read Ephesians 1:1-23. What various references do you discover to the persons of the Trinity?
3. What is unique about the role of each person?
4. What do they share in common?
5. Read Ephesians 3:14-21. Again, look for various references to the persons of the Trinity. How do the persons of the Trinity work together in our lives?

6. A great Puritan leader said that we should have a personal relationship with each person of the Trinity. In what ways can you discern the persons of the Trinity active in your life?
7. At various times in our lives we may relate more to one person of the Trinity than another. With whom are you most consciously engaged at this point in your life?
8. How would you explain the Trinity to a new believer or to someone who was curious about Christianity?
9. Because the word Trinity is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible there are those who say that it is unbiblical. What might you say to them?

For Further Study (not an exhaustive list)

The Father is God: I Cor 8:6; John 5:23-24, 26; 8:54

The Son is God: John 8:58-59; Col 1:15-19, 2:9

The Holy Spirit is God: Acts 5:3-4; Heb 9:14; Psa 139:7

Theology Matters, Sep/Oct 2003, "The Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives"

Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions by Millard J. Erickson, Baker Book

The Trinitarian Faith by Thomas F. Torrance, T& T Clark, Edinburgh

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