

Hot Topics

Abortion and Euthanasia

January 30/31, 2010

Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Hot Topics: Abortion and Euthanasia

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Genesis 1 and 2; Isaiah 46:3-4; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Exodus 20:12-13; Psalm 139:13-16; Amos 1:13; Mark 7:9-13; Leviticus 24:17, 21; Isaiah 53:3-4; Romans 5:3-4

Introduction

This life in us, . . . however low it flickers or fiercely burns, is still a divine flame which no man dare presume to put out, be his motives never so humane and enlightened. To suppose otherwise is to countenance a death-wish. Either life is always and in all circumstances sacred, or intrinsically of no account; it is inconceivable that it should be in some cases the one, and in some the other. (Malcolm Muggeridge).¹

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The University of Notre Dame, in March, invited President Barack Obama to present its commencement address to graduating students May 17, 2009. The university also awarded the new president an honorary doctorate in laws.

In response to the fact that President Obama has a history of supporting what some call a women's right to choose whether or not to abort her unborn child --- a position directly contrary to Catholic Church teaching --- Notre Dame's president, Holy Cross Father John Jenkins, noted that the university also hosted President George W. Bush at its 2001 commencement ceremony, the year after Bush, as governor of Texas, approved the execution of 40 prisoners found guilty of capital crimes. The incident has stirred both vigorous protests and vigorous defense of Notre Dame and its decision-makers. It aroused calls for condemnation and penalization, as well as calls for tolerance and compassion. It also led Mary Ann Glendon, the outgoing U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, to refuse to accept Notre Dame's *Laetare Medal*, which would have been presented at the commencement. (*Tidings Online*, May 15, 2009).

The phrase, "sanctity of human life," belongs to a wide range of bioethical issues: abortion, embryo research, cloning, genetic engineering, euthanasia, and others. Those who use the phrase oppose technologies or practices that they believe violate the intrinsic value of human life. In some cases it denotes an ethical approach concerned with the entire range of moral problems that human beings face, from abortion to poverty, from war to the death penalty, from child abuse to the environment. As such it casts a moral vision which seeks to value, protect, and enhance human life in every context and condition. This was true for the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago. While the concept of the sanctity of life has a long intellectual history, and many related terms have long been in circulation (human dignity, sacredness of life, reverence for life, etc.), the widespread contemporary use of the concept appeared in the 1970s. Its immediate intellectual context was the Christian moral tradition and opposition to legalized abortion.

After the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision which overturned all state abortion laws to permit what amounted to abortion on demand, it took three years or so for conservative Protestants to become politically and intellectually organized enough to shape a response. As early as the late Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority in the mid-70s, such groups have universally opposed the *Roe v. Wade* decision and have sought unsuccessfully to get it reversed. In doing so, they used the vocabulary of "the sanctity of life." It can be found anywhere you look in evangelical life, as a brief *Google* search of some 2,480,000 of references reveals. Mainline Evangelical Protestants, who have historically been suspicious of Roman Catholicism, broke through that distrust in a time of moral crisis and borrowed from Catholicism the concept of "the sanctity of life."

¹ *Something Beautiful for God*, Harper and Row, 1971, p. 29.

Then there's Jack Kevorkian, the so-called "Doctor Death," who thinks that "suicide is a liberty right and assistance is morally legitimate...should be legally permitted whenever requested by competent persons exercising that right." They consider their lives as their own and that they can choose and arrange their own deaths.² Within this opinion lies something called "the right to die." To some he acquired notoriety for relieving suffering in terminal patients. However, studies have shown that those for whom the "right to die" cause has been developed, are the least likely to want to "take advantage" of the benefits. A recent study of cancer patients conducted in Boston revealed that those with pain are more likely than others to oppose physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. They are also more likely to prefer and to request a change in doctors if their attending physician indicated that he or she had performed physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia.³ Pain has not been a primary motivator in those who have sought their solution to life's problems through such means as promoted and practiced by Kevorkian. Leading factors have been perceived loss of dignity, fear of loss of control, the thought of being a burden to someone else, depression, and hopelessness. This "medicide" is a camouflage for violence.⁴

In his own study, Frank Sheed⁵ reached the conclusion that suffering may work in two ways: 1) it may be good for the sufferer by aiding character development and maturity, and 2) it may be a test. Suffering that comes with life is either curable or incurable. Suffering that is incurable must be endured. Knowing that not every man must endure the same suffering, no man is allowed by God to be afflicted with more than he can withstand, with God's grace. The relief of suffering is one of the noblest expressions of the Christian law of love of neighbor; however, it must be within the limits of God's law

Ordinarily we tend to treat the topic of life's sanctity as part of "Christian theological ethics." It involves biblical research, theological analysis, intellectual and cultural history, engagement with Christian and secular philosophical beliefs, discussion of the contemporary cultural, political, and ethical landscape, and at least brief analysis of a number of key bioethical problems of our time. Of course, in these *Background Notes*, there is insufficient space to address each of these interdisciplinary contributions. Our concerns will be limited to biblical texts which address the sacredness of life, particularly as it pertains to abortion and euthanasia. Admittedly, we will be forced to omit discussions of other related concerns, such as the death penalty and war — matters which reach beyond the scope of these *Notes*, and which implicate other principles found in Scripture.

The literature on abortion is large. Some of the best known articles have been collected in anthologies. You might want to start with the collections edited by Baird and Rosenbaum, Cohen (and others), or Feinberg. There are also excellent full length books on the subject. Philip Devine takes a very conservative position. Baruch Brody defends a somewhat less conservative view. L.W. Sumner takes a moderate liberal position. Michael Tooley defends a very liberal position. All of these books are clear and well argued. In many cases they address each other's arguments. The list of works, included in **Appendix One**, includes a sampling of sources for you to use in exploring different dimensions of the topic.

The Lord and Giver of Life

The *Nicene Creed* (written in the 4th century) is divided into three main parts, one part being dedicated to each of the three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The third part of the Creed affirms: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life." For the ancients, breath in the body (which is what "spirit" literally means, Hebrew: *ruah*; Greek: *pneuma*) was the sign of life. Then it came to mean the source or

² Michael Walzer, "Feed the Face." *The New Republic*, vol.216, n.23 (June 9, 1997), p.29.

³ Ezekial Emanuel, "Whose Right to Die? America Should Think Again Before Pressing Ahead with the Legalization of Physician-assisted Suicide and Voluntary Euthanasia." *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol.270, n.3 (March 1997), p.73.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Frank Sheed, *The Map of Life*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994.

principle of life. God's Spirit was involved in the production of all life in the world as we read in Genesis (1:2): "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." It is the Spirit that gives life, both physical and spiritual. In order to have eternal life a man must be born "of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). According to St. Paul, "the Spirit brings life" (2 Cor 3:6). Since it is the Holy Spirit who pours out love in the hearts of the faithful (Gal 5:5), he is the source of all true life in God. So in the Creed we proclaim our belief that the Holy Spirit is "the giver of life".

Image and Likeness of God

Respect for the sanctity of life is rooted in "the image of God" which He has given human beings:

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:26-28).

No other creatures were endowed with "our image" and "our likeness" but human beings. Theology has long explored the implications of having this image, and refers to it as the *imago dei*. If we limit ourselves to the immediate context of this passage, several dimensions of the image come into focus:

1. The unique community of persons signified by the word "our."
2. The rule over the created order.

To these observations we add additional ones, derived from theological reflection across the centuries:

3. Not a physical likeness. This is generally accepted since God is Spirit (John 4:24), and material reality is the result of original creation, and thus, not essential to God.
4. A mental likeness. Paul, when commenting on the transformation of human beings by Christ, explains that we are "being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10). Knowledge implies reason and mental capacity. Certainly the earliest aspects of human culture included care for the created order, including cultivation of the "garden" and the naming of the animals — both of which reflect quasi-scientific tasks which require reasoning powers (see Genesis 1:26, 28; 2:15, 19, 20).
5. A moral likeness. Human beings are intelligent and *voluntary agents*, enabling them to think about the good and then proceed to put it into effect by action. Again, Paul affirms that the *new humanity* is "after God created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (Ephesians 4:24), and these belong to the moral dimension. When *Ecclesiastes* states that "God made humans upright" (7:29), it is affirming human moral capacity.

The Hebrew words used in this passage are:

Šelem for "image": that which resembles, often used of the images of pagan gods or other objects; literally, something "cut out," which implies a substantive source or origin.

Dēmûth for "likeness": that which appears like something else.⁶

What are we to make of *Genesis*' use of the two terms "image" and "likeness"? The church fathers, Irenaeus and Tertullian saw these as different concepts, applying "image" to *bodily features* and "likeness" to *spiritual nature*. However, Clement of Alexandria and Origen rejected a bodily component. They defined "image" as the essential qualities of human beings (what makes *human* to be *human*), while "likeness" referred to the non-essential features which either could be *developed* or *lost*.⁷ Pelagius thought that the "image" pertained to reason which is able to know God; free will which might choose the good; power to rule creation. Generally, until the Reformation, the idea of "image" was applied to intellectual powers and to freedom of the will,

⁶ A more thorough discussion of these two words appears in J.M. Miller's "In the 'Image' and 'Likeness' of God," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91:289-304 (September, 1972). Also, *Theologisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. E. Jenni u. C. Westermann, pp. 556-62; James Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis — A Study in Terminology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51 (1968), pp. 11-26.

⁷ This view was held by Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine and John of Damascus.

whereas the "likeness" had to do with the original righteousness possessed by human beings before the Fall. The "image" belonged to man's nature as a human being, while "likeness" was an endowment intended to control or offset the lower nature. The Reformers, starting with Luther, rejected any distinction between the two terms, arguing that human nature was a unity and that the image/likeness together belonged to that nature when human beings were originally created by God. They believed the image was lost as a result of the Fall, but restored through the work of Christ.

Having the image/likeness of God *distinguishes* human beings from all other forms of life. It is an endowment by God, given at some point in the emergence of human beings during the creation process. Once so endowed, human beings possess a form of "life" with special sanctity and sacredness. They share with God His very life.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:4)

That which illumined the true nature of human beings and gave it its uniqueness is the image/likeness principle.

1. This nature is passed along to the descendents of Adam, the human representative:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth (Genesis 5:3).

2. The killing of other human beings was brought under God's judgment early in the history of humankind, precisely because of the "image" principle:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image (Genesis 9:6).

3. The uniqueness of human beings in the image/likeness of God prompted the wording of the first commandment in Exodus 20:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exodus 20:4).

Since there was only one "image/likeness" of God authorized by the Creator, constructing idols as image/likeness was not only a violation of God's sacred person, it was also a violation of the human image. Anything which diminishes human beings by usurping their ordained role as God's representations in the world, also dishonors God. Note: the Hebrew words used here are different than in Genesis 1:26 but the meaning is similar. The prophet Isaiah sarcastically criticizes those who would liken God to an idol, using the word *d'mûth*:

18 To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? 19 An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains (Isaiah 40:18-19).

4. The prophet Ezekiel offers a concrete vision in which a "likeness" (Hebrew: *d'mûth*) of Yahweh assumes a central role, especially in terms of the "man" who appears in the vision:

26 Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. 27 I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. 28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

Notice the "figure of a man" seated on the heavenly throne, and how the prophet connects this to the "likeness of the glory of Yahweh." The point of the vision is not, of course, that God is human or has a human form, but that human beings themselves are designated bearers of the essential image/likeness of God.

5. The Hebrew words for "likeness" and for "blood" look and sound similar (*d'mûth* and *dām*). This is probably not coincidental. In the ancient world there was wide-spread belief that human beings were made from the blood (*dām*) of the gods. The biblical writers are countering that view by arguing instead that human beings were made in the likeness (*d'mûth*) of God.

By design, God commanded the human images of God to disperse and diffuse throughout the earth, bearing offspring so that the dominion of human beings over God's creation might become effective (Genesis 1:28). Anything which artificially diminishes the number, role or dignity of God's image-purpose for human beings is in violation of the original creation ordinance. By covenant, human beings are bound to respect, honor and sanctify the image of God which they bear in the world.

Breath of Life and Living Soul

The second creation account in Genesis 2 offers the following description:

7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. 8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed (Genesis 2:7-8).

Several key ideas are found here:

1. Yahweh God "formed" Adam. The Hebrew word for "form" is *yāsar* which ordinarily refers to the human activities of: 1) a potter forming a vessel from clay; 2) a carver shaping wood; 3) a person devising or framing something in their mind. By extension and metaphor, God engages in numerous "fashioning" actions such as making living things, including Adam; human beings in their mother's womb; the human eye; light; seasons; the "spirit" (*ruah*) of human beings.
2. Human origins consist of a material aspect which includes: 1) "dust of the ground" (the fundamental chemistry of human beings comes from the material universe. Hebrew: *'āphār min-hā^adāmāh*). The literally rendering of this phrase is "Adam .. dust from the ground." There is an intentional pun on the root for both words. Adam is "dust" from *ha^adāmāh*, "the ground." 2) "breath of life" as breathed into human beings by God (the essential principle of animation/life). The verb "breathe" is *nāphaḥ* and simply means "blow, breathe" and is applied not only to breath but also to fire or heat. This is not merely blowing air but warm, animating breath: *niš^cmat*, of life: *ḥayyîm*. 3) the declaration that Adam is "a living being." The word order seems clumsy in English, but the sense is as follows: "And it was the case (*wayihî*) that the human (*ha'ādām*) [now] belongs to (*l^c*) [the class of] "soul" (*nepheš*) life-forms (*ḥayyāh*). The word *nepheš* is usually translated as "soul," but its meaning is not the same as the Greek idea of *psychē*. The Hebrews saw the human being as a unity without the sharp division between body and soul. What this passage affirms is that as a result of God's special work, the earth-creature (Adam) *becomes* a special kind of life-form, one with an endowment here described as *nepheš*. Adam is not said to *have* a soul, but to *become* a soul. Used in this way, the concept of *person* comes closest to the meaning. That is, Adam becomes a personal life-form. Prior to this endowment, the creature is not a personal life-form, but in this final development of human identity, the person-feature now fully applies.⁸
3. Whatever certain earth-creatures had been at some point in the distant past, one unique class of them arose by the direct hand of God such that we may say of them that they are personal beings. Relating this development to our previous thoughts on 1:26-28, we might say that Genesis 2:7-8 *personalizes* the statements of the previous passage, showing God's involvement in the forming of humankind, giving to them a form of life that was distinct from all other life-forms on earth. Of no other creatures do we read that God so endowed them.
4. The implications for human creation are significant. In Hebrew thought, we cannot speak about material identity of human beings *without endowment as persons*. The ideas are entirely enmeshed and form an indivisible unity. Whatever exists in the womb of a human mother is already a unity: a living soul=person.

Other implications of this appear in the Scriptures.

The Unborn: The Matter of Language

In what follows, we make a cursory survey of relevant texts which speak about life in the human womb. The biblical writers have no word for "fetus," as if they imagine some special category of being growing inside the mother other than a *human being*.

1. **Genesis 25:21,22.** Rebekah conceived twins, and "the children struggled together within her." That which was conceived was called a "child" between the conception and the birth. The Hebrew word used here (*ben*) is the most common Old Testament word for a child or son. When used for the physical offspring of humans, it consistently refers to distinct human individuals (see Gen. 25:1-4; 3:16; etc.).

⁸ For an analysis of human life in the biblical world, see "The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel" by Aubrey R. Johnson, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Dec., 1950), pp. 404-405. Also, "The Use of *nepheš* in the Old Testament," by Charles A. Briggs, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2 (1897), pp. 17-30.

2. **Job 3:3.** On the very night of Job's conception it could have been said, "There is a man-child conceived." The word for "man-child" (Hebrew: *geber*) elsewhere means "man," i.e., a human individual (see Job 3:23; 4:17; 10:5; Psalms 127:5; 128:4; etc.).
3. **Job 3:16.** Babies that die before birth are called "infants" that never saw light. This corresponds to the idea of babies that are aborted. The term for this condition is: *nēphel* ("still-born, aborted"). The word for "infants" (Hebrew *ōlēl*) always and without exception refers to human individuals (cf. Hosea 13:16; Psalm 8:2; Joel 2:16).
4. **Numbers 12:12; Luke 1:43.** Moses describes "one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb." If a baby dies before it is born -- as in an abortion -- the woman who conceived it is still a "mother." In Luke 1:43, Elizabeth addressed Mary as "the mother of my Lord" before Jesus was born. The word "mother" (Hebrew: *ēm*; Greek: *mētēr*), in contexts referring to physical human reproduction, always refers to one who has procreated or formed another human individual, a separate and distinct individual from the mother herself (see Num. 6:7; Gen. 3:20; Luke 1:60). A woman who has conceived, even if the child is not yet born and even if it dies before birth, is a "mother."
5. **Luke 1:41,44.** Elizabeth conceived (v. 24), and the life "in her womb" is called a "babe" or "baby" (Greek *brephos*). This is the second-most-common New Testament word for a baby. It is always used for that which is a human individual separate and distinct from its mother (see Luke 2:12,16; Acts 7:19.)
6. **Luke 1:36.** Again, the life conceived in Elizabeth's womb, before it was born, is called "a son." The word "son" (Greek *uios*), in contexts that refer to the physical offspring of humans, always refers to that which is a human individual separate and distinct as an individual from its parents. It is the most common New Testament word for a "son" (see Matt. 1:21,23,25; Luke 1:13,31; 2:7; etc.).

That which has been conceived and lives in the mother's womb from conception on is referred to by God as a "child," a "son," an "infant," a "baby," a "man-child." The woman in whose womb it lives is a "mother." No human being anywhere in the Bible is identified by terms that are more distinctly human than these terms. God makes no distinction between born and unborn life. He uses exactly the same terms for both, therefore we should view them as having the same nature. The life in the mother's womb is human life. The only question to be settled was whether it is a distinct individual from its mother or just part of the mother's body. Consider the force of the evidence we have now examined: Does the Bible refer to parts of the mother's body as "child," "son," "baby," etc.? Clearly not. Nor is a woman ever called a "mother" just because she has these body parts. Why is this so? Because the terms "child," "son," "baby" are terms that imply a separate human individual, not just a part of the mother's body.

Insights from an Ancient Egyptian Text

In his helpful article "Potters' Wheels and Pregnancies: A Note on Exodus 1:16,"⁹ Scott Morschauser discusses a phrase which appears in Exodus 1:6 and also in Jeremiah 18:3. The implications have relevance to pre-partum infants:

When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.

The reader will no doubt recognize this passage as coming from the Egyptian Pharaoh who was trying to reduce the flourishing Hebrew slave population in his country. The phrase under consideration is "on the birthstool." However, the corresponding use in Jeremiah reads quite differently:

So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.

"At his wheel" translates the same Hebrew expression: *'āb^enayim* which literally refers to a potter's disk or turning wheel used in the shaping of a clay pot. Of this curious parallel, Morschauser writes:

...the "potter's wheel" is regularly linked to pregnancy in ancient Egyptian religious literature and art. The implement was associated with the creator god, Khnum, a ram-headed deity who was depicted as an artisan. In mythopoetic texts, Khnum would mold and shape each human being at conception "upon his wheel," with the potential child being granted the physical and psychological traits that would define it as an individual-obviously including characteristics of gender. During this time of fashioning, the developing infant was said to be "upon the potter's wheel" from which it

⁹ *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 122, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 731-733.

would hopefully be delivered hale and healthy. What is significant, is that the metaphor refers to a gestating fetus prior to parturition (i.e. birth).

We suggest that the Hebrew is an adaptation of the idiom and refers to a child still forming in the womb that has not yet come to full term...

According to Egyptian medical texts, physicians used all sort of prognostications (potions, etc.) to ascertain the gender of an unborn child. But that is only secondary to the significance of using the phrase "on the potter's wheel" as a metaphor for the formation of the unborn child. If the pagan Egyptians could imagine their gods sharing in the formation of children in the womb, how much more so would the Hebrew followers of the One true God see His role (as in Jeremiah 18) as potter, forming human beings while yet in their mothers' wombs.

A notable example appears in our next reading.

From Potter to Weaver: The Child in the Womb

13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you (Psalm 139:13-18).

This is a rich psalm with both literary beauty and theological depth. Its relevance to the sanctity of human life is obvious. The metaphor is not that of the "potter's wheel" (see above) but of the weaver whose hands guide the loom, directing each warp and woof of thread until the whole cloth is finished and its design intact. A few observations about the language will shed light on this passage.

1. "Created my inmost being." Various translations handle the Hebrew word *qānāh* differently. The basic idea is that of acquiring, possessing or even buying something. The NIV "create" looks like a secondary meaning. More primary, it would seem, is the idea of ownership or having the controlling interest in something. But the same word occurs in Genesis 4:1 where it is on the lips of Eve who says of Cain's birth: "I have gained a man from Yahweh." The word "gain" seems less likely here, and in fact the same Hebrew word can mean "create" in several other texts.¹⁰ While God certainly does "take charge" of human development in the womb, the idea that He actively "creates" better fits the context and is supported by the comparative linguistics with other extra-biblical texts.¹¹

While "inmost being" looks sophisticated, in fact the Hebrew word is the more concrete "kidneys" from the Hebrew *kilyāh*. To the ancients, internal organs of the human being had corresponding psychical or spiritual meanings. As an organ, the kidney was the most sensitive and vital part. Applied to other objects, such as wheat, it indicated the "choicest or richest" part of something. Figuratively, this organ assumed the role of emotions and affections which were deeply implicated in human character. Thus, translations prefer "inmost being" as defining the most characteristic dimension of human life.

2. "Knit together in my mother's womb." The Hebrew *sākak* initially means "to cover" as in providing a covering or screen for something. A certain protective connotation is involved. The role of clouds or trees as a form of "shade" appears in the Old Testament under the auspices of this word. Putting on clothing is also meant. By extension, the word comes to mean "to weave" the cloth from which the covering is made. While yet in his mother's womb, the psalmist writes, God prepared him with an appropriate covering so that when he left his mother's womb he would be prepared to live in a different environment.

¹⁰ For *qanah* = "create," see Gen 14:19, 22; Deut 32:6; Pss 104:24; 139:13; Prov 8:22, and elsewhere.

¹¹ Isaac M. Kikawada, "Two Notes on Eve," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (Mar., 1972), pp. 33-37.

3. "Fearfully and wonderfully made." This familiar rendering of the text gains in elegance but loses somewhat in accuracy. The root verb *yārē'* does mean "fear." However, when used in the plural as a participle, it commonly means "wonderfully, gloriously" in keeping with something inspiring awe or reverence. It is not that the psalmist is wonderful or glorious but that God's work in making him is marked by these features. The second descriptor is *pala'* and means "be surpassing, extraordinary" in such a way as "to be difficult" to understand. The work of God in making the psalmist in his mother's womb is exceptional! The verb translated "made" is actually *pālāh* and has the root idea of "be distinct, separate, set apart." Putting these ideas together, the psalmist is saying: "I am made a distinctive being in my mother's womb by the wonderful and exceptional work of God." This confirms our earlier comments (see above) that the unborn child is a distinct being and not merely a part of the mother's body. In fact, it serves as a source of wonder to the psalmist that he develops in this distinct way, while yet in his mother's womb.
4. "My frame ... in the secret place." The psalmist writes about his "bones" (Hebrew: *ōšem*) as his "frame" which becomes covered by God, through being "covered" in his mother's womb. What amazes the writer is that God is able to assemble such solid, substantial structures which are hidden to us but not to Him. The expression "secret place" is actually the word *sether* which refers to something that is "under cover" and is in some way concealed from others. However, we should also not miss the idea of "protection." This is especially vital in our understanding of the unborn in their mother's womb. **There is a general presumption that the womb is a place of protection and safety where the child may be formed by God and develop unmolested by outside intruders. On this basis, abortion becomes just such an intrusion which violates the God-given protection and covering of children in their mother's womb.**

Note: The prophet Amos makes direct reference to the violation of the womb when he announces God's judgment on the Ammonites for crimes against mothers and their unborn. The language of the following passage leaves no doubt about the prophet's intentions:

Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border (Amos 1:13).

The violence with which the enemies of Israel perpetrated this crime makes it even more heinous.

5. "Woven together in the depths of the earth." The word for "woven" is *rāqam* and means "variegate," the production of variety, usually through colors. It comes to mean "woven," and the work of a weaver. In the Hebrew, the word "weave" is a homonym to "womb" (*rehem*), and the likely intention is to play up this similarity in sound in order to reinforce the idea: "I am *rāqam* in the *rehem*! The location of this work is given as a metaphor referring to the deepest parts of the earth. Once more the emphasis falls on the hiddenness of the psalmist's formation, something known only to God.
6. "Unformed body" as something seen by God. The word behind this translation is *gōlem* a term taken from the verb root which means "to roll up, wrap up." The resultant meaning is a noun, supposedly the term "embryo." However, this is the only such occurrence of the word in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. Mitchell Dahood proposed a better rendering of "life stages" from *gīlay-mī*.¹² This better suits the context since the psalmist goes on to write about God's "book" whose words are already present in the womb of the psalmist's mother. Much like the book by Francis Collins, *The Language of God*, the psalmist's depiction of himself in the womb includes the idea of a scroll where God has written down His thoughts.

Psalm 139 is a powerful statement of God's presence everywhere throughout His created world. The writer rises to the heavens above and to the depths below, but then turns to his own mother's womb where life began for him. Throughout this majestic hymn, the psalmist consistently speaks of himself with personal pronouns ("I, my, me"), and makes careful distinctions between his own existence and that of his mother. God is present, says the writer, even in the womb where He begins His personal relationship with human beings. Shaded from the dangers outside, human life first appears, is shaped and guided by the divine hand until one day a human being leaves this inner protection and emerges into the outside world where God continues to be present.

¹² Mitchell Dahood, *Biblica* 40 (1959), 168-169.

Considerable mystery surrounds life in the womb, as this psalm suggest. The Wisdom writer expressed this mystery by saying:

5 As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything (Ecclesiastes 11:5).

The word for "spirit" is *ruah*, and has several meanings in the Hebrew Bible. The word includes the ideas of "wind, breath, and strength," and we are not certain which one is intended in this case. However, the arrival of "spirit" takes place in the womb and is "the work of God whom makes everything."

From Womb to Tomb: Maker, Bearer, Carrier and Savior

Borrowing language similar to Psalm 139, Isaiah speaks God's word to His people, Israel:

3 "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; 4 even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save (Isaiah 46:3-4; also, 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5;).

Granted, the prophet uses the metaphor of a single child in the womb to describe Israel in God's care, but the metaphor would not work unless the underlying truth about the unborn child wasn't also true. God likens Himself to a mother carrying a child. What's more significant is God's life-long commitment to Israel from womb to tomb, as Isaiah adopts the majestic image, "even to your old age ... to gray hairs ..." What even more striking is the continuing activity of God throughout *all the stages of life*. A string of verbs follow rapid-fire in the text to make this point: "borne, carried, carry, made, bear, carry, save." Life is sacred throughout all of its stages, the psalmist is telling his audience, beginning with formation in the womb and climaxing with old age. God does not discard human beings because of age. What better argument could there be for affirming God's valuation of human life —its sacredness and sanctity — from beginning to end. The aged are no less valuable to God when they become disabled, decrepit, and unable to care for themselves. To them, Yahweh declares, I remain the "I am" (Hebrew: *'ānî hû'*) of existence, the ground of being and the source of life.

When Job, in his suffering, wonders aloud about his misfortunes, his thoughts turn to how he treated the servants of his household. In the ancient world, such persons were often property and subject to substantial devaluation by uncaring owners. But Job must have treated his own servants differently than was common, for he tells his accusers:

13 "If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, 14 what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? 15 Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb? (Job 31:13-15).

The implications of Job's rhetorical question are enormous. Whereas human beings might become subject to social stratification in the external world, they did not begin life that way. In fact, life "in the womb" (two different Hebrew words are used, both meaning "womb": *beten, reqem*) endows human beings with a common origin as persons made and fashioned by God. "Did not *one* fashion us?" is a provocative question. Some scholars suggest an alternative translation: "Did not He (God) fashion us *one*?" Valuing life in the womb also has implications for life outside the womb — in social terms! We might well speak of the divine democracy of the womb where God fashions us as equals. Job, on the basis of *pre-natal existence*, argues for the fair treatment of his servants when they bring a complaint before him.

Vocation Before Conception and Birth

4 Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:4-5).

God knows Jeremiah, according to this passage, "before" He "formed" him in the womb. The verb "form" (Hebrew: *yāšar*) appeared in the *Genesis* account of human creation (see above). What's significant is God's "knowing" of a personal being ("you") even before conception. Human life is not completely physical but has a dimension which transcends chemistry. This is not to deny the physical aspect, but only to caution against reducing human existence to a purely material basis. As noted above, we are made in God's image/likeness as a

distinct action. The prophet is hearing Yahweh disclose His intimate knowledge of him as an experience distinct and apart from the prophet's physical existence.

But once the prophet assumes his existence in the womb, God continues to treat him as a person who can be "consecrated" and "appointed" to his vocation. This parallels a similar "calling" found in Paul's letters where the apostle says of God:

...he ... set me apart before I was born, and ... called me by his grace ... was pleased to reveal his Son to me ... (Galatians 1:15).

The same language is used of Samson when God makes His announcement to his mother:

...you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb ... (Judges 13:5, 7; also, 16:17).

Perspectives from the New Testament

Among the more powerful passages addressing human life before birth are those which report the conception of John the Baptizer and of Jesus. The following passages appear in Luke 1 which documents both conceptions.

...for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15, referring to John the Baptizer).

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy..." (Luke 1:39-44).

Only human *persons* can be "filled with the Holy Spirit." Only human *persons* are capable of expressing forms of praise. Elizabeth speaks about the unborn John in terms of "the baby" responding to the arrival of Mary. Moreover, Elizabeth refers to both Mary and Mary's unborn child ("the fruit of your womb") as "blessed." This dual application of the divine blessing draws no distinction between the mother and the child as *persons* under God's favor.

If we listen to Jesus addressing his contemporaries about their treatment of aging parents, familiar sanctity of life themes can be heard. One text is especially germane:

6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "' This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." 9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)- 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do" (Mark 7:6-13).

What Jesus has to say about parents, and their provision in old age, finds its basis in the Torah, especially the Ten Commandments:

12 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12).

Had Second Temple Judaism followed the intentions of Torah, they would have developed and maintained a just welfare system for aging parents. But those who reached old age, including widows and widowers, conveniently fell through the social cracks. In order to understand how life in old-age had been cheapened, we offer the following historical-cultural explanation of the practice Jesus references.

Mark begins 7:9 with the Greek word *kalōs*, an adverb which normally is translated, "well, rightly, finely" and applies it to the verb "set aside". If we were to literally translate this statement, it would read "You rightly

(finely) set aside the commands of God in order to observe your traditions". The NIV handles this "You have a fine way of setting aside..." The sense is sarcastic, much like our saying to someone, "That was a fine thing you did, splashing the little old lady when you drove by! I hope you are proud of yourself!" This is what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees: "The way you so cleverly and ingeniously find ways of avoiding the plain sense of God's word so that you can make it mean whatever fits your plans--I hope you are proud of yourselves for being so good at that!"

Judaism recognized both the written Torah (*kathîb*) and the Oral Tradition (*halakah*) which interpreted Torah. The rabbis knew that the circumstances under which the original Torah was given had changed in their own time. New times required fresh approaches. Eventually, in the centuries after Jesus, when the Temple had been destroyed and Judaism was exclusively about Torah-keeping, that oral tradition took written shape in the Talmud--that which had been "learned" or "taught" about Torah over the years. But before the Temple was gone, that tradition took a decisive turn. Whatever the right-wing of the Pharisees taught about Torah had to be skewed to the practical and political realities before them. This interpretation would keep certain people out, while pulling others inside the circle of true Israel.

What Mark is telling us, from Jesus' reply to the Pharisees, is that he is onto them. Using one particular example, the so-called "law of Qorban", Jesus accuses them of setting aside the plain sense of the commandment which says, "Honor your father and your mother". By doing so they run the risk of incurring God's judgment also stated in the Torah: "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death." How have they done this? The word "Qorban" is Aramaic and means "a thing of highest devotion". Used in various contexts, the term can mean "you are my sacrifice", or "I am your sacrifice". Addressing another person with this expression showed sincere praise worthy of sacrifice to God. Pronouncing something Qorban meant is was pure, clean and fit for God's use.

On the surface, the declaration of Qorban looked pious and holy. A piece of property declared as Qorban ceased to be available to the person who offers it and must be devoted to the service of God. Qorban transferred ownership to God: that's the true meaning of sacrifice. But Jesus uncovers a dark side to the Qorban practice:

1. Rabbinic teaching provided a way for a person to declare his possessions as "Qorban" and give them to the Temple treasury.
2. In so doing, he could deny those same possessions to his parents, to care for them in their old age.
3. Obviously this would benefit the Temple bank.
4. Yet it would deprive the aging Jewish population of its necessary support.
5. The young Jews who declared Qorban would gain standing within the community and demonstrate loyalty to the common cause.
6. However, the same loyalty would be withheld from the previous generation.
7. Jesus is in effect saying, "You may wash your hands from the defilement of an impure marketplace, but the rules you make up to guide your everyday life, leaves a blood-stain on your hands. Qorban may sound like sweet words on your lips, but your hearts dishonor God by distorting the deeper sense of his word, his Torah."

It might be noted that the sociological impact of this Rabbinic rule would weaken and diminish the influence of the parents in their adult children's lives. In place of parental guidance, the religious leaders would assume a new role--to set their own agendas and overturn the authority of Torah in the lives of the young. Since we know that Second Temple Judaism had designs on subverting the Roman occupation, this twisting of Torah by the Pharisees had the added result of welding a close bond between themselves and the youth of Israel whose healthy bodies and obedient minds would be necessary to wage war with the pagans.

By arguing as he does, Jesus seeks to uphold the sacredness of life near the end of life, especially that of parents whose children might be tempted to abandon them for pious reasons. While Jesus does not directly, in this context, speak to the weighty issue of euthanasia as it pertains to the aged, he lays down simple principles for

assessing choices when faced with life or death. "Honor your father and mother" is the only command in the Decalogue to which is attached a promise about living a "long life" for oneself. Perhaps a deeper meaning than appears on the surface surrounds this commandment and its promise. Is it possible that Scripture warns about the general loss of respect for life when persons concede even the smallest ground to losing it? Should I fail to honor my aged parents, do I not, in effect, set the stage for my own children to dishonor me, and thereby surrender "long life" in the process? The commandment may well be warning about cultural disintegration in much the same way Jesus rebukes the professional lawyers of Judaism for allowing the exception of Qorban. Under such conditions, we might well examine how a "culture of death" emerges within a society — especially when the pragmatics of money and convenience displace the principles of life and its dignity.

The Fear of Suffering and the Culture of Life

While I'm not too enthusiastic about personal blogs, every now and then a gem surfaces in the cyber jungle. Such was the case with *Reflections of a Paralytic*, a blog nurtured by someone called Chelsea who was paralyzed by a car accident in high school. She wrote: "A culture that respects human life must have a joyful acceptance of human suffering." Had those words been spoken from a philosopher's armchair, I'd likely have moved on cynically, thinking, "What does this fellow know about suffering?" But, as you can imagine, the personal trial of a real human being boasts more weight with me than abstract speculations. Then there's the posting by Drusilla whose parents died when she was young, and her life was tormented by a foster father and the murder of her own grandfather — right before her eyes. She would later write the following:

If we have enough courage to examine suffering closely, we will find "hatred for God and his kingdom." We will find Satan -- not as a curiosity, nor as a convenient name for evil, nor as a metaphor for the process of maturation in which we separate from our parents and become autonomous, but as an actual being. [...]

[God] has neutralized the enemy's best weapon: fear of death. And by becoming man, "by taking [our] manhood into God," he has made it possible for us to participate in his victory if we will turn away from that insidious voice, if we reject Satan's 'freedom' and instead be set free to be fully human, to grow into God's image and likeness, to love him so much that even the wiles of the devil can only make us more like him.

That is, God immerses Himself in our suffering and is not the "impassable"¹³ God of some theologies.

The ancients were well aware of the dilemmas facing those awash in human suffering. Consider:

Against all the injuries of life I have the refuge of death. If I can choose between a death of torture and one that is simple and easy, why should I not select the latter? As I choose the ship in which I sail and the house which I shall inhabit, so I will choose the death by which I leave life. In no matter more than in death should we act according to our desire... why should I endure the agonies of disease... when I can emancipate myself from all my torments?
(Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 B.C. – 65 A.D., Rome).

The same notions of individual autonomy and mercy to which Seneca appeals, remain central to pro-euthanasia arguments today. As in ancient times, the contemporary pro-euthanasia movement is a political response to humankind's fear of suffering. Pro-euthanasia advocates use these principles to defend the so-called "right-to-die." This view is contrasted with the Judeo-Christian tradition which promotes the fundamental sanctity and dignity of human life from natural birth to natural death.

Science has made many attempts to prolong life and reduce suffering by means of pain control. The desired outcome is a world in which suffering is diminished and life is extended. But what happens when life is maximized but suffering is not minimized? How do we relieve the pain of a suffering patient? Should we ever pursue death? Instead of distinguishing between ordinary and extraordinary care as Christian moral theory suggests, we have begun to embrace relief of tension through sanctioned killing — if you can't eliminate the suffering then eliminate the sufferer.

¹³ This term is a theological one and refers to God's inability to feel human emotion, such as pain and suffering. Philosophers, prior to Christianity, held such views, but the early church fathers challenged these in the interest of Christ's incarnation — his coming in the flesh and being touched by every conceivable human emotion.

Whether we examine the Hemlock Society, Dr. Kevorkian or other advocates of euthanasia, beneath the surface lies the ever-present fear of suffering. From all appearances many fear suffering more than death.

In these *Notes*, what interests us about suffering is its connection to what might be called a "culture of death." Respect for human life and hatred of any kind of suffering are inversely proportional: as one increases, the other decreases — or so it seems. When we approach such human technologies as those associated with euthanasia, a whole host of red flags spring up on the ground of theology. Yet, behind such technologies lies a belief that suffering is always evil. Think in these terms provokes a few questions:

1. Why is it that fear of suffering leads to decreased respect for human life?
2. How does the fact that people increasingly deny the existence of a real, personal, evil force (Satan) factor into all this, if at all?
3. What about fearing other people's suffering (or potential suffering) on their behalf -- how can we be deeply compassionate and helpful without falling into the dangerous "your life isn't worth living" territory?
4. If there is a connection, what can we do? How does rethinking suffering factor into working towards turning around the trend of decreasing respect for the dignity of human life in the world today?

To these we might add a few reflections. A world in which suffering is seen as an evil that must be avoided and eradicated at all costs is one in which those who suffer are seen as burdens to society and a burden to themselves and also I think, a stark reminder to us that we are not as invincible as we would like to think. Such fear of suffering strips us of our ability to value the sufferer. We value this life more than the one to come, and therefore we strive to make this life as pain free as possible. When suffering is accepted and embraced and united to the Cross, there is an substantial amount of grace given, not only to the one who endures the suffering, but to those persons that he prays for.

Some years ago, Pope John Paul II publishes his Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris* (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering),¹⁴ In it he argued that suffering is not merely that which happens to human beings but is, in fact, essential to being human and is part of human transcendence. He also noted that there are sufferings of the body *and of the soul* — psychological ones — which derive from the *moral nature* of human beings. Suffering is not itself evil but may be the product of evil.

“Salvation means liberation from evil,” John Paul II remarks. Christ liberates man from sin by means of His cross, that is, by the means of suffering. The work of salvation is a labor of suffering. Every person is called to participate personally in that suffering through which our redemption was accomplished and through which all suffering was redeemed. “In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man in his suffering can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.” Christ, who took on all human suffering, participates in every individual’s suffering.

Suffering (the Cross) is the one universal door through which all must pass to enter the kingdom of God. While on the human level suffering is an “emptying,” on the divine level it is a glorifying or a “filling up” and an invitation to manifest the “moral greatness of man.” The glory of suffering can be seen not only in the martyrs, but also in those who, while not believing in Christ, “suffer and give their lives for the truth.” John Paul II explains that:

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1984).

The weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's cross. In such a concept, to suffer means to become particularly susceptible, particularly open to the working of the salvific powers of God, offered to humanity in Christ. In Him God has confirmed His desire to act especially through suffering...

From a Christian perspective, suffering is an opportunity for everyone, Christian and non-believer alike, to experience the power of God and share in the work of redemption. In the midst of each individual's suffering, Christ is present to share that person's suffering -- just as he invites each of us to share His suffering. This inter-participation of suffering unites our sufferings and Christ's sufferings, as well as uniting us with Christ personally.

Scripture has much to say about this topic, and perhaps the best corrective to the erroneous equation of suffering with evil, is to immerse ourselves in the key texts, allowing their witness to the truth to shape our understanding. Two texts present themselves almost immediately: one from the Old Testament and the other from the New Testament.

3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:3-5).

Here are concrete terms for suffering: "despised, rejected, man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, borne our griefs, carried out sorrows, stricken, smitten, afflicted, wounded, crushed, chastised." Scholars refer to Isaiah 53 as the primary "Suffering Servant" text. From the vantage point of ancient Israel, this "servant" was Israel itself, besieged by her enemies, undergoing exile, and hopeless before a hapless future. Like the sage Job whose story fills many chapters, Israel underwent and endured horrific suffering nationally. As time passed, the promised "we are healed" did not materialize. In place of the whole nation, some looked for a Coming One — a Messiah — who would stand in Israel's place, himself an Israelite, and bear the full brunt of suffering. Such an experience came to be called the "Messianic Woes," and they would accompany a coming age of salvation.

From this text arises the notion of "redemptive suffering," the idea that suffering is not wasted pain somehow dissipated within the human universe, but a powerful agent for eventually ridding the world of evil. At the center of Isaiah's description of the Servant is the reminder that in bearing our suffering, he in turn is "wounded for our transgressions and iniquities." What he embodies are the wounds of suffering but in the form of "stripes" which provide "peace and healing." Yes, there is a connection between suffering and sin, but it is not the widely held and fatalistic view prevalent in the ancient world that all suffering must signal the commission of sin. Rather, suffering attracts to the bearer the weight of sin so that it might be carried away and finally dealt with.

A culture which lacks this perspective can only see suffering as equivalent to evil, and such a society wants to take measures to rid itself, not of the evil, but of the suffering. In so doing, relief arrives in the form of death — the ultimate release from suffering. But in so doing, that society fails to give witness to the cross and the possibility that evil's demise lies in the endurance of suffering not in the release from it.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:1-5).

Several Christian virtues appear side-by-side in this text: "faith, peace, hope, endurance, character" — to identify several. Paul has arrived at a critical turn in the argument of *Romans*, and makes his firm declaration

that God has restored us through the work of "the Lord Jesus Christ." He makes clear that this is only *the beginning* of a new life, choosing the words "have obtained *access*..." to express this idea. A door has swung open as a result of grace doing its work in our lives. We not only "stand" in this grace, we also walk through the door which grace provides. Using this image of "access," as if through a door, Paul points his audience to the future and writes confidently about "hope of the glory of God." The word "hope" draws the reader into the *future* where "glory" reigns supreme. To this prospect, the text attaches *joy*, as Paul speaks about how "we rejoice" in the coming hope of glory. Walking through the open door grace provides is not, however, a casual stroll or self-assured swagger, as the text goes on to temper our understanding.

"More than that" translates the Greek coordinating conjunctions: *ou mono de*="not only so" and *alla kai*="but also." The "but also" part of the passage includes a few statements about suffering, and how we should also be confident about it. Perhaps it is easy to testify about walking through the open door of grace, yet less easy to bear up under the burden of suffering. And so Paul adds, "we rejoice in our sufferings," and then explains how suffering produces character, and in turn generates hope. His choice of the Greek word *thlipsis* for "affliction" is significant. The underlying meaning is the sort of suffering which comes from being "pressed" or "coming under pressure." Our English "distress" comes close in its emphasis on "stress" from "two" (di-) sides, as a person is squeezed by two forces pressing in on him.

Life and Death are the two common pressures facing persons who are sorting out "end-of-life" decisions. Adjudicating one over the other creates the suffering Paul identifies in this text. But far from fleeing such distressing choices, the writer urges his audience to see them in a fresh light — in the light of God's justifying grace which sorts out the sufferings resulting from the pressures. What God wants to emerge from all of this pressure-cooker existence is "endurance" (Greek: *hupomonē*). This quality, "holding up" and "not letting down" or "not giving in," belongs to something called *character*, from the Greek word *dokimē* — that which "proves itself genuine" after undergoing a "test." The verb from, *dokimazō*, if sometimes used of the process whereby metals are tested and purified by passing them through the fire.

If we allow ourselves to be "tested" to the point of "being proven genuine," that is a good thing. Indeed it is something to be sought as a desirable outcome or end of things.

We are not suggesting, of course, that suffering is, in itself, a good thing. Nobody likes pain or welcomes it — unless of course they suffer from a disorder which thrives on pain. We are not talking about sadism or any of its aberrant siblings. That belongs to the realm of psychological analysis. No, the sort of suffering we embrace is so directed by God that we obtain enormous benefit from accepting its discipline and then benefiting from its work within us.

God does not leave us alone in our suffering; He does not abandon us to its ravages. The promise of the God who *hears* and responds to suffering can be heard in this powerful passage written prior to the Exodus:

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Periz-zites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Exodus 3:7-8).

What comfort to hear the words "I have surely seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry," climaxed by the assurance, "I know their sufferings." The writer uses two words to describe Israel's suffering in Egypt: 1) *ānî*, which refers to an impoverishing kind of affliction which robs a person of strength and hope; 2) *mak^e'ōb* which has to do with both physical and mental pain. The words "see, hear, and know" communicate the degree of sensitivity exhibited by God in responding to the suffering of His people. God does not abandon us to our own devices or leave us with options which narrow our choice only to *death*.

The Gospel assures us about many things concerning suffering.

1. Suffering is not in vain (Galatians 3:4).
2. Sufferings gains it honor by being connected to the sufferings of Christ (Acts 5:41; 9:16).
3. We do not suffer alone, but suffer "with Christ" (Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 1 Peter 4:13).
4. Present suffering must be weighed in light of future glory (Romans 8:18).
5. Some suffering is a necessary loss that we might gain something greater: Christ! (1 Corinthians 3:15; Philippians 3:8, 10).
6. We suffer with one another to fulfill the purpose of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:26; Colossians 1:24).
7. Our sufferings contribute to the well-being of others (2 Corinthians 1:6-7; Ephesians 3:13).
8. Faith acquires authenticity through suffering ("not only believe, but also suffer") (Philippians 1:29).

An excellent summary text places suffering at the center of God's greater purposes for our lives:

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good (1 Peter 4:19).

Suffering "according to God's will" means suffering not as the result of our own foolishness or sin. When we suffer for all the right reasons, we are able to trust our whole life to God as our Creator. This suggests that suffering is not only that which drags us down or diminishes us, but the experience by which God shapes, forms, and develops us into something good. The close association of "faithful Creator" with suffering is significant. God is re-making us through the experience of suffering. Though we may only see "formlessness and void, darkness on the face of the deep," God sees the opportunity to make something fresh and new out of our lives. Through suffering God invites us to cooperate with Him in the New Creation, trusting His process, and doing the good He calls us to fulfill.

Whereas the non-believer sees only despair and death at the end of suffering, the Christ-follower trusts God for a deeper revelation of Himself and a richer transformation.

Euthanasia: In Our Midst

On October 27, 1997, physician-assisted suicide became a legal, medical "solution" to the problem of suffering for the residents of Oregon, the first state to pass such legislation. As of this writing:

- On November 4, 2008 Washington voters approved the Washington Death with Dignity Act (Initiative 1000), the second state to do so.
- On December 5, 2008 Montana became the third state to legalize doctor-assisted suicide when a judge ruled that physicians could prescribe life-ending medication to terminally ill patients without the threat of criminal prosecution. **After appeal, the Montana Supreme Court said in its opinion on December 31, 2009, that nothing in state law prevents patients from seeking physician-assisted suicide, making Montana the third state that will allow the procedure.**

The Oregon law was the conclusion of a long legal and political battle that began with the introduction of Measure 16, "The Oregon Death with Dignity Act." The Act was a citizens' initiative passed by the voters of Oregon by a margin of 51% to 49% in November of 1994, but its legal effect was delayed by court-imposed injunctions for almost three years. In November of 1997 the state legislature gave the voters of Oregon an opportunity to change their mind. Oregon House Bill 2954 placed Measure 51 on the general election ballot. The measure, which was defeated by a margin of 60% to 40%, would have repealed Measure 16.¹⁵

According to the official "Explanatory Statement" that accompanied Measure 51 on the election ballot: 1994's Measure 16 allows a terminally ill patient the voluntary choice to obtain a physician's prescription for a lethal dose of medication to hasten the patient's death when the patient is judged to have less than six months to live. Measure 51 ... would repeal that law. 1994's Measure 16 allows a terminally ill patient ... to voluntarily request a prescription for a lethal dose of medication to end his or her life. The Act also allows a physician to legally prescribe the medication ... The Physician and others may legally be present when the medication is self-administered by the patient.¹⁶

¹⁵ www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/cdpe/chs/pas/pas.htm.

¹⁶ www.sos.state.or.us/elections/nov497/voters.guide/M51/M21ex.htm.

The culture of death is far advanced in Oregon. What caused Oregon voters to choose assisted suicide, twice, as a solution to the problem of suffering? The churches in Oregon did their best to take out media ads and present an alternative vision of the meaning of suffering, but it is fair to say that their vision was twice rejected by the voters of Oregon. Opponents of the measure repeatedly pointed out the religious motivation of many of those opposed to physician-assisted suicide. In addition, the author of the original Measure 16, Barbara Coombs Lee, made references to “the dictates of the pope” in her speeches, and several different television advertisements targeted the Catholic Church by name.¹⁷ After two lively debates on the issue, it is difficult to argue the voters were misinformed or that they did not know what they were voting for. The obvious answer is that the majority of the voters chose against the Christian vision of suffering and for death.

If human suffering, united to the sufferings of Christ, is as uniquely powerful for the salvation of the world as the Bible teaches, then we should expect to find The Enemy of our souls uniquely focused on spreading lies and corrupting the culture in an attempt to obscure the truth of suffering. The two referenda in Oregon demonstrate that this has taken place. The culture of death is far advanced in America and only a suffering God can save us. Our hope ultimately is in Christ and the power of His cross.

Concluding Thoughts

¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

More than a mere slogan, "choose life" reverberates with a deep regard for the sanctity of life created by God and entrusted to us. Nor is this choice of life a matter of the simple prolonging of life, but the enhancing of its *quality*: by "loving God, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him." We agree that the length of life — its *quantity* — is not the only value in play here. For "length of days" to have meaning, God Himself must be "our life," and He must be our reason for existence, both at the beginning of life and at its end. The choice God place before His people is more than a biological one; it is a *moral* one as well, as the commands in this passage strongly imply.

Such commands as "love, obey and hold fast" place a moral imperative on Christ-followers. It simply will not do to be naysayers in matters of abortion or euthanasia. True commitment to life involves a willingness to become involved in the lives of people who face the pressures surrounding pregnancies at the beginning of life and the afflictions surrounding physical decline at the end of life. Our calling is to "bear one another's burden," and therefore share in the sufferings of Christ on behalf of His body — and the world. If true regard for life means anything, it must reject all forms of violence against other human beings — even those with whom we radically disagree. At the same time, it means standing with and praying for those whose worlds have been turned upside down by suffering in all its forms. The question "What would Jesus do?" must be transformed into "What should *we* do?" Strategies for life must accompany the sacredness of life.

Pregnancy centers or Hospice care exemplify the call to become involved in concrete ways. Through these and other avenues of participation, Christians can embody in real-world ways the message of life's sanctity. Following the example of Jesus, we rescue human lives from death while simultaneously setting before them a new way of life. Human justice can get us only so far in matters of abortion and euthanasia. On the other hand, the *restorative justice of God* carries us across the threshold of suffering into "life more abundant."

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

Glory to God! Amen.

¹⁷ David Reinhard, "Liar, Liar" *Sunday Oregonian*, October 19, 1997, editorial page. Reprinted by the International Anti-Euthanasia Task Force, www.iaetf.org/liar.htm.

Appendix One: Short Bibliography on Abortion

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Digger Deeper: Hot Topics: Abortion and Euthanasia
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Hot Topics: Abortion and Euthanasia*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. In what ways have issues surrounding abortion and euthanasia affected you personally? Briefly describe your present views on these two topics, and offer your reasons for holding to them.
2. The *Nicene Creed* calls the Holy Spirit, "The Lord and Giver of Life." Compare that phrase with Genesis 1:2; John 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6 and Galatians 5:5. What relevance does the Holy Spirit have, therefore, to the topic we are discussing this week?
3. Carefully read Genesis 1:26-28. What specific language in this passage gives human life its special sacredness? Explain the key phrases "our image, our image." How do they affect our understanding of human life at its all stages? Compare this text with Ephesians 4:24 and John 1:4.
4. What do we learn about the image and likeness of God in human beings from the following passages: Genesis 5:3; 9:6; Exodus 20:4; Isaiah 40:18-19; Ezekiel 1:26-28?
5. What aspects of human life are described in the creation account found in Genesis 2:7-8? How does this passage talk about human beings as "persons," and how did they acquire that status?
6. What sort of language does the Bible use to describe the unborn in the following passages: Genesis 25:21-22; Job 3:3, 16; Numbers 12:12; Luke 1:36-43?
7. Psalm 139 sings the praises of the God who is everywhere, including the womb of our mother! Carefully list the various phrases which depict God's work in making us, *pre-partum*. How does the psalmist's use of personal pronouns underscore his view of himself as an unborn? In what sense does he speak about the "protection" God place over him in the womb? How is this relevant to "life issues"?
8. How does Isaiah 46:3-4 demonstrate respect for life from "womb to tomb"? Read also Isaiah 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5 and comment on their contribution to this question?
9. How does the sanctity of life affect our view of human equality? Read Job 31:13-15 for some hints.
10. In what ways does our "vocation" begin before we were born, and what relevance does that have to this week's topic: Jeremiah 1:4-5; Galatians 1:15; Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17?
11. Read Mark 7:6-13 and comment on the Jewish practice of Corban (or Qorban). Refer to the *Background Notes* for further clarification. What obligation under the Gospel, do we have to aging parents? How does this uphold the sanctity of life? (see also Exodus 20:12).
12. How does our perspective on "suffering" affect our valuation of human life? What do the following passages tell us about God's perspective on suffering: Isaiah 53:3-5; Romans 5:1-5; Exodus 3:7-8?
13. Read the following texts, and then suggest ways we might develop a distinctly Christian viewpoint on suffering: Galatians 3:4; Acts 5:41; 9:16; Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 1 Peter 4:13; Romans 8:18; 1 Corinthians 3:15; Philippians 3:8, 10; 1 Corinthians 12:26; Colossians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 1:6-7; Ephesians 3:13; Philippians 1:29.
14. In the midst of suffering and its effect on our view of life's sacredness, what should we do: 1 Peter 4:19?
15. What guiding principles do the following texts offer on the sacredness of life as it impacts our view of abortion and euthanasia: Deuteronomy 30:19-20; John 10:10?