

IN ALL THINGS CHARITY / **A SERIES**

ABOUT ABORTION

**10 THINGS A NEW GENERATION
OF CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW**

JAMES V. HEIDINGER II

ABOUT ABORTION

About the “In all Things Charity” Series

JOHN WESLEY IS often credited with the saying, “In essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity.”

As the world becomes more religiously pluralistic and societies and cultures grow more contentious and divided it will behoove the church to gain clarity in its discernment of the distinction between essentials and non-essentials. We must not shrink back from boldly articulating the core truths of the Christian faith. At the same time, we must grow in the quality of our character as our very conversations witness to the gospel in the presence of a watching world. Said simply, our relationships within the church are the barometer of our witness to the world.

Jesus minced no words when he told his disciples that the authenticity of their association with him would be known only by the quality of their love for one another. Later in prayer he would connect the loving unity of the church to the believability of the gospel. See John 17.

The Apostle Paul, in the celebrated thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian Church, in essence tells us the absence of charity, or love, signals failure.

As a publisher, Seedbed does not want to steer clear of the difficult subjects of our time. Nor do we want to agitate the church with unnecessary controversy. For this reason, Seedbed created the, “In All Things Charity” series. The series will contain books across a range of challenging issues. For the series we are selecting authors whom we believe embody the variety of character which enables them to demonstrate confidence in their point of view with truthful love in their approach.

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Introduction

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I became convinced of the need for this new generation of Christians to fully understand the substance of the case that can be made for life in the ongoing controversy about abortion. In these days, when we are being urged to rethink church, it also would be well for us to rethink abortion. The timing to do so is right.

In January 2013, we marked the fortieth anniversary of the sweeping *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, which gave women an unprecedented constitutional right for legalized abortion in America. Since that decision, an estimated 55 million abortions have been performed in the United States. The Guttmacher Institute, Planned Parenthood's research arm, claims that 43 percent of women of childbearing age in America have experienced at least one abortion. This staggering statistic tells us that there are literally millions of women in America who are living with the guilt, hurt, and heartache of having experienced an abortion.

Adding to the timeliness to rethink abortion, is the recent *Time* magazine cover story that noted the fortieth anniversary of *Roe*, saying, “[Forty years ago,] abortion-rights activists won an epic victory with *Roe v. Wade*.”¹ Underneath the title it reads, “They’ve been losing ever since.” According to the *Time* article, abortion-rights supporters are losing because it is getting more difficult to find clinics to do the procedures.

A 2010 Gallup Poll revealed that 47 percent of Americans say they are pro-life on abortion versus 45 percent who say they are pro-choice. An encouraging part of the poll was that 47 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds said they are pro-life, which is an increase of five percent from the 2008 Gallup numbers. If there is a growing resistance to America's culture of easy-access abortion on demand, we need to understand why that is happening.

Why rethink abortion? Because we have a generation of Christians who have known nothing except the culture of easy and legal abortion, brought about by the *Roe v. Wade* court decision. Many in this new generation, according to the Gallup Poll numbers, seem to have pro-life instincts. They may know of the political debate they see in the media, but may not be aware that it has not

always been this way in America. They may be unaware that the arguments and rationales used in the '70s and '80s in support of unrestricted abortion were (and remain today) substantively weak, not carefully reasoned, and sometimes based on misleading, even dishonest claims. They may not know that the Supreme Court's decision was and continues to be sharply criticized by respected ethicists, legal scholars, and Christian theologians. Knowing these things may help inform today's generation and give substantive support to its pro-life instincts.

I have found myself reflecting on what this new generation of Christians needs to know about the controversy—a generation which has only known forty years of *Roe*'s abortion culture. I have thought much about what I would try to say to my precious grandchildren—my eight- and seven-year-old granddaughters and three-year-old grandson—as they grow toward adolescence and maturity.

As I address this generation of Christians in America about abortion, I want to rightly handle the word of truth. The apostle Paul charged Timothy to be “a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). He also urged Timothy to keep what he had heard from Paul as “the pattern of sound teaching” (2 Tim. 1:13).

It may sound strange to speak about the word of truth, but the church has always spoken about truth. Paul also referred to it as the pattern of sound teaching. This sound teaching included, of course, the church's teaching about life, family, marriage, and children.

As we reflect upon the fortieth anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, I fear that neither the church nor American society has done well in following the pattern of sound teaching. We have not listened to what the church has taught historically concerning the sanctity of life; we have not considered carefully the teaching of the church fathers of the first five centuries; we have not listened carefully to the pattern of sound teaching of our greatest theologians and ethicists of the last century.

So, as I write, I hope to correctly handle the word of truth about abortion. I want to do it prayerfully and with sensitivity, knowing that there are those who will read this who may have had an abortion. Some may have struggled in desperation about the decision to have an abortion. Others may have had a family member or friend who has had an abortion. Some may yet struggle with that decision in the future.

As we consider an issue that has been painful, heart-wrenching, and life-changing for millions of women, we must always address it with compassion and in the spirit of Christ. Not to do so would be an egregious contradiction. On

the other hand, we must not allow the painfulness of the issue or a binding political correctness to mute a passionate teaching and defense of the truth about this critical moral issue. Therefore, we must be equipped to engage in conversation about this difficult topic in a loving and informed way.

ABOUT ABORTION

The Consequences of *Roe v. Wade*

THIS GENERATION OF Christians should understand the sweeping nature of the *Roe v. Wade* decision and what it actually brought about in America. Until the turbulent and revolutionary 1960s, there was very little public support for abortion in America. This all changed with the urban unrest that accompanied the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, and the widespread dissemination of the birth-control pill. As women pressed for political and economic equality, they also felt they should exert new control over their own reproductive destinies. Abortion offered what seemed like plausible answers to problems such as unwanted children, overpopulation, child abuse, juvenile delinquency, and welfare costs. The groundwork was being laid for 1973. It was in that year that the United States Supreme Court found a virtually *unrestricted right* for women to choose abortion in its monumental and tragic *Roe v. Wade* decision.

The *Roe* decision on January 22, 1973 and the companion *Doe v. Bolton* decision overturned two state laws (*Roe* in Texas and *Doe v. Bolton* in Georgia) that prohibited abortion. With an expanded understanding of the term “a mother’s health,” the decisions were the precedent for the removal of all meaningful limits on abortion throughout the entire nine months of pregnancy.

What this generation does not fully realize is the scope of the decision—*Roe* struck down laws prohibiting abortion in most states. Prior to the *Roe* decision, New York allowed abortions, but its legislature had voted to restore legal protection to unborn children. However, the action was blocked by a governor’s veto. In 1972, Michigan and North Dakota voted to reject proposals to loosen their abortion laws. The *Roe* decision and its companion trumped the laws of those states and the existing laws in most other states, creating a sweeping national policy that took precedence over the laws of any state in America at the time. This was not a benign decision reflecting a gradual liberalizing trend in America about abortion. It was a radical departure from the practice in America at the time.

Criticism of *Roe v. Wade*

THIS GENERATION SHOULD know that the *Roe* decision has been sharply criticized by eminent legal theorists as seriously flawed jurisprudence, which is one reason many believe it should be reversed.

In his dissent in *Roe*, Supreme Court Justice Byron White strongly criticized the ruling as an exercise in “raw judicial power.” Noted legal scholar Archibald Cox of Watergate fame said the reasoning of the court in *Roe* was an embarrassment. Yale law professor John Hart Ely said that *Roe* was “a very bad decision . . . It is bad because it is bad constitutional law, or rather because it is *not* constitutional law and gives almost no sense of an obligation to try to be.”¹ Edward Lazarus, former clerk to Justice Harry Blackmun who authored the *Roe* opinion, says that “*Roe*, as constitutional interpretation, is virtually impossible to defend.”² Few today are aware of these devastating critiques.

In 1992, in its *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision, the Supreme Court reaffirmed *Roe*. However, three justices said they were doing this not so much because the original case was rightly decided, but simply because it had been the law for a long time and many had come to rely on its availability. In response to such questionable logic, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops challenged the ruling, saying, “If one realizes the decision was wrong, it is doubly wrong to keep imposing it on the country.”³

In his dissent in *Casey*, Chief Justice William Rehnquist noted that in the previous two decades the Supreme Court had “overruled in whole or in part thirty-four of its previous constitutional decisions.” So those who are concerned by our abortion epidemic in America should realize that a reversal of *Roe* would not be unprecedented in terms of the Court’s history.

Many of today’s generation may not realize that eminent scholars, theologians, and ethicists believe the Court made a serious mistake when it first considered, then decided to reject, the precedent about abortion found in the Hippocratic Oath, the generally accepted ethical standard for the medical

profession. The Hippocratic Oath clearly opposes abortion by saying. “I will not give a pessary [suppository] to a woman to cause abortion.” This belief was at the heart of medical ethics since the fourth century B.C. This ancient ethic came to be accepted not only by Jews and Christians, but also by Arabs, medieval doctors, Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars, and scientists of the nineteenth century.

For the Court to ignore the Hippocratic ethic on abortion, wrote theologian Harold O. J. Brown, was “to reject the very heart of our ethical tradition, of principles common not merely to Judeo-Christian religion in the narrow sense, but the Western Civilization as a whole.”⁴ I am confident most Christians today are unaware of this fact.

Christian churches in America are slowly, but surely, coming to understand the flawed, tragic character of this sweeping Court decision. It is not something to be celebrated, but rather, lamented. It is bad law—and its result has been to give us more than 55 million lost lives since its passage. I believe this realization about the flawed character of the Court’s ruling in *Roe* would help more Christians challenge the abortion culture in America and speak out for change. Unfortunately, on the true nature of *Roe*, neither our churches nor our courts have done as well as they should in rightly handling the word of truth about abortion.

Exposing False Arguments

THIS GENERATION SHOULD be fully aware of the questionable, poorly-reasoned, and misleading arguments that were used during the era of the *Roe* decision. It will be instructive and illuminating to revisit some of the arguments made in support of unrestricted abortion during the *Roe* era.

First, pro-abortion advocates insisted that a woman has a right to do as she chooses with her own body. This oft-heard claim sounded fair, reasoned, and sensitive to women's concerns. It became, for many, an unquestioned, self-evident maxim, and remains so today. It's the phrase that when used in public debate, tends to trump all other issues. It has become the statement meant to end any further discussion, with the assumption there is no counter argument to be offered.

It took considerable time before some began to question whether or not the claim was, in fact, true. Gradually, the more people thought about it, the less certain many became that a woman has an absolute, uninhibited right to do whatever she chooses with her own body. For example, a woman does not have the right to commit suicide, to appear nude in public places, to willfully spread a communicable disease, to take drugs while pregnant, or to engage in prostitution.

A closer look reminds us that no persons have freedoms that are absolute. We forget that most all of our freedoms, regardless of who we are, are limited freedoms. Furthermore, if the fetus growing in the womb is, in fact, unborn human life, it is a far different matter than one's having problematic tissue that might need to be removed. More and more believe that we are talking about human life, not just a bodily appendage.

Americans were told the availability of abortion would reduce the number of unwanted children, thus reducing child abuse. This made abortion sound helpful, practical, beneficial, and even compassionate. The intent seemed good. Who would not want to reduce the abuse of vulnerable, helpless children? But in time, we learned more about child abuse. A study of some five hundred battered children revealed that 90 percent of abused children were the result of planned

pregnancies.¹ Dr. Philip G. Ney said his study indicated that the liberalization of abortion laws actually increases the incidence of child abuse. The reason, says Ney, is that “Permissive abortion diminishes the social taboo against aggressing the defenseless. By devaluing human life, abortion ... diminishes the value of caring for children.” The reduce-child-abuse argument sounded practical, perhaps even noble, but was, in fact, simply without merit—a part of the mythology of the ’70s.

Americans were told repeatedly by abortion rights advocates that legalized abortion would reduce the number of illegal abortions. With great conviction, we were told we would finally be able to reduce the much-cited horror of illegal, back-alley abortions. That, too, sounded like a positive good. One may not favor abortion, but certainly most everyone would want to help put an end to the horror of back-alley, coat-hanger abortions. But again, facts began to dispute that claim. Eminent pediatrician Dr. C. Everett Koop, who was named Surgeon General of the United States in 1982, wrote that in every country where abortion on demand had become a legal right, illegal abortions had increased rather than decreased.²

Another frequently heard argument was that abortion should be seen as a duty we all share to prevent the unwanted or possibly deformed infant from entering a hostile world. After all, we were told, every child deserves to be a wanted child. And at the time, most everyone joined in hoping that children being born into our world would be wanted and loved. However, there is an important difference between an unwanted pregnancy and an unwanted child. One study among Swedish women who delivered their babies after considering an abortion, showed that 84 percent were glad they had not terminated their pregnancy.³ Some admitted it was inconceivable that they had ever even considered such an option. Many of us who have served as pastors have seen that beautiful dynamic, when an unwanted pregnancy develops in time into a much-wanted and dearly loved newborn.

The truth is, after forty years of living with the *Roe v. Wade* decision, during which time our nation has witnessed the cataclysm of more than 55 million abortions, many Americans have gradually realized that we were presented with specious arguments—sounding logical, plausible, and good—but which were questionable and even misleading. It appears that for years now, America’s pro-abortion advocates have been using arguments and reasoning based largely on emotion, partial truths, and highly questionable claims. Many of the popular arguments justifying abortion simply do not stand up well under careful scrutiny. Forty years of *Roe* and more than 55 million abortions later, it is quite

remarkable that a majority of Americans are still opposed to unrestricted abortion!

In 2005, the late Richard John Neuhaus cited a Harris Poll that reported opposition to abortion was at its highest level in twenty years.⁴ Answers to one question in the poll were striking. The poll asked, “In general, do you think that abortion should be legal or illegal during the following stages of pregnancy?”⁵ The choices were the first three months, the second three months, and the third three months. Seventy-two percent said abortion should be illegal in the second trimester and 86 percent say it should be illegal in the third trimester.

Neuhaus also cited a Zogby Poll that asked if abortion should be legal after the unborn child’s heart has begun to beat. Sixty-one percent said no, it should not be legal in such cases. We know that a heartbeat can be detected twenty-two days after conception.

In February of last year, Ross Douthat, columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote that the most recent Gallup poll on abortion revealed that a combined 58 percent of Americans stated that abortion should either be “illegal in all circumstances” or “legal in only a few circumstances.” He also noted a May 2009 Gallup Poll that was the “first Gallup poll to show a slight pro-life majority.”⁶ These figures are highly significant. They suggest a remarkable, increasing opposition to abortion, despite forty years of America’s permissive abortion culture.

The Church's Position

THIS GENERATION OF Christians should more clearly understand the sometimes confusing positions taken by the mainline Protestant Church in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A good example of the confusion can be seen in my own denomination, The United Methodist Church. Most of our denominational leaders would claim that our official position on abortion is that we are pro-choice. However, as one looks at our official United Methodist statement on abortion in the Social Principles of our *Book of Discipline*, the current statement has much more about it that affirms life than affirms abortion. It is not totally accurate to say the official United Methodist position is pro-choice. Let me explain why.

First, the church's statement on abortion makes this important statement: "Our belief in the *sanctity of unborn human life* makes us reluctant to approve abortion"¹ (emphasis mine). It is noteworthy that this phrase affirms belief in the sanctity of unborn human life. It makes clear that we are not dealing with mere inanimate bodily tissue. It is human life, though not yet born! That was the express intent of the author of that phrase, Dr. Paul Ramsey, when it was first placed into the *Discipline* in 1972, as we shall see later.

Our official United Methodist statement also includes several very specific prohibitive statements concerning abortion:

We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection or eugenics. We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life.²

It's important to realize that the above statement specifically opposes abortion for the reasons that are behind perhaps 95–97 percent of all abortions. By any measure, the United Methodist position weighs in strongly on behalf of life. We clearly do not support unrestricted abortion. The above portions of our

current Social Principles statement are clear enough to raise serious objections as to United Methodism being referred to as a pro-choice denomination.

Our Social Principles statement does make this affirmation in support of legal abortion: “We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures by certified medical providers.”³ However, it must be read alongside the phrase noted earlier that is critical to understanding the United Methodist position: “Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion.” Our support of the “legal option of abortion” is not without strong qualifications, as we have seen.⁴

More than twenty years ago, United Methodism’s official governing body, the General Conference, changed the wording in our Social Principles statement. The early 1976 statement included the free-standing sentence, “We support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures.”⁵ Period. But delegates changed the statement by joining two sentences which read now in the 2012 *Discipline*: “We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and *in such cases* we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures by certified medical providers (emphasis mine).”⁶ This change seemed highly significant to some of us. The statement no longer had a self-standing sentence supporting the legal option of abortion. Rather, it seemed the church was finally placing a sharp limit on abortion, that being only when life conflicted with life, that is, only when the ongoing development and birth of a baby would clearly jeopardize the physical life of the mother.

This appeared to mean much more than a woman’s experience of anxiety or stress about the prospects of having a child. It seemed to mean, rather, a real life-threatening conflict. But just moments after the vote approving what appeared to be a much more restrictive phrase, I heard the General Secretary of our General Board of Church and Society say that what had just passed was really nothing new, but was what the church had always affirmed. Sadly, the phrase “tragic conflicts of life with life” was and has been interpreted to mean about anything one wants it to mean by many of our denominational leaders.

A second example of the confusion in our denomination’s position is the membership of two of our United Methodist agencies in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). Many pro-life United Methodists believe that the membership in RCRC is incompatible with the denomination’s statement in the Social Principles.

For those who may be unfamiliar with this organization, RCRC is a national

organization that United Methodism helped start the year after the *Roe* decision. For many years, it was headquartered in the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. It affirms unrestricted abortion, including abortion as a means of birth control, as well as partial-birth abortion. Both of these procedures are forthrightly and specifically rejected in our United Methodist statement.

In the week prior to last January's fortieth anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* Court decision, a joint statement marking (actually celebrating) the anniversary was released by our United Methodist Women and our General Board of Church & Society. The joint statement was signed by two women, each being a representative to RCRC from the two United Methodist agencies. The statement says, "... we seek to be a voice crying out to prepare the way for the Lord to bring about a new era of reproductive justice for our families and communities."⁷ Their incorporation of words from John the Baptist and Isaiah 40 is stunning. To speak of abortion advocacy in the familiar biblical terms of being "a voice crying out to prepare the way for the Lord" is utterly offensive, even Orwellian.

The statement goes on to lament "the fact that women are dying and that childbirth remains one of the most dangerous endeavors a woman faces." However, there was a breathtaking omission in the statement from our two denominational representatives. There was not a word, not one, lamenting the tragedy of 55 million unborn children who were denied the first and most basic of human rights.

For many years, these two United Methodist program agencies have been challenged about holding membership in RCRC. In fact, the 2012 General Conference would almost certainly have voted to mandate the withdrawal of those two agencies had the recommendation from the legislative committee had time to be voted on in plenary session. Sadly, the General Conference ran out of time and numerous items that were passed in committee, including the mandate for withdrawal from RCRC, did not get to the floor for a vote.

The case for withdrawal from RCRC is made convincingly in the book *Holy Abortion? A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice* by Michael J. Gorman and Ann Loar Brooks. This small, carefully documented work makes a compelling case that the RCRC advances positions that are clearly contradictory to the teachings of the Social Principles in our United Methodist *Book of Discipline*. With impeccable scholarship, the authors conclude that no United Methodist person or group can affirm, at the same time, the defining purposes of RCRC and the United Methodist Church's position on abortion as found in our *Discipline*. The two are mutually exclusive.

Through their meticulous research, the authors show clearly that RCRC “presents abortion as the sacred, divinely given and sanctioned right of sovereign, isolated moral agents to practice, even as birth control, without legal restraint of any kind, without concern about the moral status of the embryo or fetus, and without any moral guidelines other than their own, internalized, pro-choice morality/deity.”⁸

Holy Abortion makes the compelling case that no United Methodist agency should hold membership in RCRC. Its policy of unrestricted abortion is simply incompatible with the official position of the United Methodist Church. Yet, two of our denominational program agencies still belong to RCRC.

Again, many today continue to affirm that United Methodism is firmly pro-choice. But a careful reading of our Social Principles statement, considering the totality of the statement, simply does not support a pro-choice position. Our official United Methodist position is *far more affirming of life* and opposes the reasons usually given for at least 95 percent of all abortions.

Early Church Fathers

THIS GENERATION SHOULD know that a pro-choice position regarding abortion is not in continuity with the teaching of the early church fathers.

The United Methodist denomination's 2008 General Conference made an important change in its official abortion statement. It needed to be made. The paragraph previously stated: "In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures."¹ Delegates wisely voted recently to remove the phrase, "In continuity with past Christian teaching." That brief phrase about continuity has been misleading, and arguably untrue (depending on how one interprets "tragic conflicts of life with life").

The fact is, if a denomination continues to claim it is pro-choice, it is not then "in continuity with past Christian teaching." Most significantly, it would not be in continuity with the strong teaching of the early church fathers. Remarkably, they were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of abortion, referring to it quite bluntly as killing and murder.

Tertullian, for example, writes in his *Apology*, "For us, murder is once for all forbidden; so even the child in the womb, while yet the mother's blood is being drawn on to form the human being, it is not lawful for us to destroy."² Clement of Alexandria, in the first major work on Christian ethics, *Paedagogus* (translated to mean "tutor"), objected to abortion, saying, "Abortion is killing human life," and pointed out that those who use abortifacient drugs to abort the embryo "abort at the same time their human feelings."³

Among the later writers of the early church, Bishop St. Caesarius of Arles wrote, "No woman should take drugs for purposes of abortion, nor should she kill her children that have been conceived or are already born. If anyone does this, she should know that before Christ's tribunal she will have to plead her case in the presence of those she has killed."⁴

Such opposition was found in both the Eastern and Western churches in the

Such opposition was found in both the Eastern and Western Churches in the early history of the church. In the fourth century, Jerome and Augustine condemned abortion, though they were uncertain as to exactly when the fetus became human.

Dr. Harold O. J. Brown summarized the early church view, writing,

Although the early Christian writers were diffident in stating that they knew exactly when the fetus became animate ... they were uniform and consistent in their condemnation of abortion. The question of the origin of the soul is a speculative, theological issue, but the question of abortion is a practical, moral one, and on it the early Church and its teachers gave a clear and unambiguous verdict.⁵

Eminent Twentieth-Century Theologians

IN THINKING SERIOUSLY about abortion, this generation of Christians should know that a pro-abortion position is not only in discontinuity with the early church fathers, it is in discontinuity with the theological giants of the Christian Church in the twentieth century.

Theologians such as the late German pastor/professor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian and pastor Helmut Thielicke, and eminent United Methodist theologian Albert C. Outler (professor of theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas for many years) affirmed the humanity of the unborn child.

One wonders who today is aware of the late Albert C. Outler's strong, prophetic words about the ominous implications of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Speaking in May of 1973, just a few months after the January *Roe* ruling, Outler said, "It has, occasionally, been explained to me somewhat impatiently, that an aging, WASP, male, theologian cannot possibly understand human realities and the human damage of unacceptable pregnancies—and therefore, that all my notions about abortion are 'academic.'" ¹ He had two equally impatient responses to such statements, one personal and the other prophetic. His personal statement with obvious impatience and understandable pathos read,

My personal sentiments in this matter root in the fact that our two children and our son-in-law were all adopted—and none of them would have seen the light of day in these new times. To tell me *now* that the social values that might have accrued to their three anguished mothers (had they aborted) would have outweighed the human and personal worth of these three persons is, I'm afraid, literal nonsense." ²

Outler continued, with words that have proven to be prophetic: "And as for my prophetic forebodings, it seems certain that in America alone, over the next few years, millions of fetal lives will be snuffed out—*with little moral outcry!*" ³ He added that there were ways of arguing that this would not be comparable to the Nazi holocaust or the tragedy in Indo-China, to which he responded, "But it

will be comparable statistically—and morally it will be even more ominous, for it will be sponsored by many whose professional ordinations are to healing and compassion.”⁴

Outler then concluded with a moving, even chilling, prophetic statement, writing

Moreover, it will have for its rationalization theories of fetal life defining it as a chattel to a mother’s private value-judgments. Who then will be surprised if our human sensitivities are still further calloused, if sex becomes yet more promiscuous—with our scruples against euthanasia crumbling and the moral cements of our society dissolving?⁵

Outler’s words, spoken in Dallas in 1973, are coming true right before our eyes in America today, everywhere we look.

I am amazed that Outler’s moving, prophetic words have not been cited, quoted, and referred to more often in the forty years since they were spoken. Unfortunately, however, United Methodism has had a history of ignoring its most theologically mature voices on issues like this.

Another renowned scholarly voice that the Christian world should have listened to more carefully was Dr. Paul Ramsey, a United Methodist layman. Ramsey was the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University, and for many years was one of the preeminent ethicists in America.

Paul Ramsey was the primary author of the statement on abortion that came before the 1972 United Methodist General Conference in Atlanta, and which was placed in the 1972 *Book of Discipline*. As the primary author of the statement, he included the phrase about our belief “in the sanctity of unborn human life” which we noted earlier. It is a powerful and unambiguous phrase.⁶

Unfortunately, during the floor debate on the statement, a delegate added a further phrase as an amendment saying, “We support the removal of abortion from the criminal code, placing it instead under laws relating to other procedures of standard medical practice.”⁷ It was done hurriedly and with too little time for debate, and it passed. Ramsey was deeply disappointed with both the process and outcome.

That amendment, Ramsey claimed, contradicted the meaning of his language which *accords life to the unborn*. That action, he said, left United Methodism with a confusing and contradictory statement on abortion.

Ramsey wrote later about that action at the 1972 General Conference: “If there is unborn human life, and if there indeed is a ‘mother,’ then abortion is not like any other ‘standard medical practice.’ Not until euthanasia or ‘neo-naticide’

becomes ‘standard.’ ”⁸ His words are poignant. The amendment had linked abortion as similar to any other “standard medical practice.” Ramsey strongly rejected any similarity.

In response to the oft-repeated phrase about “a woman’s right to choose,” Ramsey gave this impassioned testimony before the Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate: “And life-and-death decisions involving lives possessing sanctity *have never before in the history of our civil community* been believed to be a proper subject for purely privatized choices (emphasis mine).”⁹ In lay language, he was saying that a decision about human life has never been made at the whim of an individual person’s private judgment. This point is of enormous significance.

Paul Ramsey was a highly-recognized ethicist in America, but sadly, one that few Protestant church leaders, including United Methodists, have heard or heeded. Unfortunately, activists and church bureaucrats and agency staff have been more dominant in charting a denomination’s course on these kinds of controversial social issues.

Testimony on Humanity of the Unborn

THIS GENERATION OF Christians should know of the strong testimony that exists in support of the humanity of the life growing in the womb and that there is far more consensus than most Americans realize.

In its *Roe v. Wade* decision, the Supreme Court admitted that it was unable to make an accurate determination by scientific or other means as to when life begins. But while admitting that it could not settle that question, the Court went on to say by the very nature of its decision that no one enters the human community nor has any rights due him or her until viability—that is, the capability of living independently outside the womb. Thus, the Court’s ruling clearly *denied* the humanity of the fetus, while at the same time claiming it was *unable to determine* by scientific or other methods whether the fetus was human or not.

The Court actually included a critical admission, saying “If this suggestion of personhood is established, the appellant’s case [i.e., “Roe,” who was seeking an abortion], of course, collapses, for the fetus’ right to life would then be guaranteed specifically by the [Fourteenth] Amendment.”¹ I fear that most Americans never heard the Court’s admission that they couldn’t determine the humanity of the fetus, so they have simply *accepted* what the Court *implied* by its ruling—the fetus *must not be human*. Such an understanding found broad media and popular culture support, and sadly, support from many leaders in the mainline churches.

Admittedly, the question of personhood is difficult. However, there is more consensus about this than we are led to believe. In fact, as early as 1967, at the First International Conference on Abortion, which was convened in Washington, D.C., 19 out of 20 physicians—eminent scientists—joined in issuing a statement that they

could find no point in time between the union of sperm and egg ... and the birth of the infant at which point we could say that this was not a human life. The changes occurring between implantation, a six-week embryo, a six-month fetus, a one-week-old child, or a mature adult are merely stages of

development and maturation.²

One might ask, “But what about the teaching of the early church?” Here again, as we look at the great tradition of the church’s teaching, one is impressed by the weight of teaching that supports the humanity of life in the womb, a teaching about which our present generation needs to be aware. This is another area in which we have not been faithful to Paul’s exhortation to “follow the pattern of sound teaching” (2 Tim. 1:13).

The early church fathers of the first five centuries were univocal in their opposition to abortion and spoke against it as the killing of the child, as the destroying of a life. Tertullian expressed at the end of the second century, an affirmation of the humanity of the fetus, saying, “He also is a man who is about to be one; you have the fruit already in its seed.”³ Michael J. Gorman provides a thorough account of the unanimous anti-abortion and fetal life-affirming stance of the first five centuries of Christianity in his work *Abortion and the Early Church*. I confess that the testimony from the early church had a profound impact on me when I first discovered it. It is a compelling witness and needs to be heard by the church today.

One could review the centuries of church history and find similar testimony. What I have found impressive is the teaching of the great theological giants of the twentieth century. Consider just several.

Karl Barth, the great German theologian, wrote, “The unborn child is from the very first a child.... it is a man and not a thing, not a mere part of the mother’s body.”⁴ Here, with one who is a theological legend of the last century, you have no nuance or uncertainty. Germinating life is human life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was martyred during Hitler’s regime, said, “Destruction of the embryo in the mother’s womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life.”⁵ He goes on to say that to deprive this nascent human being of life is “nothing but murder.”⁶ Once again, in this universally acclaimed theologian’s mind, there was no question. Nascent life was human life.

Helmut Thielicke, a German pastor/theologian who taught at Tübingen, was pastor of a large church in Hamburg, and authored the massive three-volume *Theological Ethics* said, “Once impregnation has taken place it is no longer a question of whether the persons concerned have the responsibility for a possible parenthood; they have become parents.”⁷

These theologians are towering figures in the theological world of the

twentieth-century church. Their lifetime vocation was correctly *handling the word of truth*. They are univocal in their teaching of the humanity of unborn human life.

As noted earlier, Paul Ramsey believed firmly in the humanity of the life growing in the womb. In fact, he had written in 1970, prior to the 1972 General Conference and the *Roe* decision, saying, “The human individual comes into existence as a minute informational speck. . . . His subsequent prenatal and postnatal development may be described as a process of becoming what he already is from the moment he was conceived.”⁸

In response to the *Roe* decision’s sweeping claim that “the unborn have never been recognized in the law as persons in the whole sense,” Ramsey responded by saying in testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee that he believed this to be demonstrably erroneous.⁹ As support, Ramsey cited the New Jersey case of *Raleigh Fitkin-Paul Morgan Memorial Hospital v. Anderson* in 1964 as the crest of legal acknowledgement of the unborn as full legal persons.

In this particular case, without a blood transfusion, which the mother was refusing, both the mother and her child would have died unless the state intervened. Chief Justice Weintraub, writing for a unanimous State Supreme Court, wrote, “We are satisfied that the unborn child is entitled to the law’s protection and that an appropriate order should be made to ensure blood transfusions to the mother.”¹⁰ Ramsey added, “Notably in this case the humanity and rights of the unborn child prevailed over the First Amendment rights of the mother. . . . There can scarcely be stronger evidence for the recognition in our law of the unborn as a person in the whole sense.”¹¹

One of our more thoughtful United Methodist leaders Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker (now retired) wrote an *e-Review* commentary about abortion on February 9, 2009. He noted that, “There is one fact that will continue to affect public debate and personal moral reasoning, and that is *the reality that a human life begins with conception*”¹² (emphasis mine). He went on to cite novelist Walker Percy, trained as a physician at Columbia University, who wrote that “it is a commonplace of modern biology, known to every high-school student . . . that the life of every individual organism, human or not, begins when the chromosomes of the sperm fuse with the chromosomes of the ovum to form a new DNA complex that henceforth directs the ontogenesis of the organism.”¹³ Bishop Whitaker added that what we do with this biological fact will depend on our values. And more, how we apply our values “has immense consequences for unborn human beings, ourselves and our culture.”

Once again, there is far more scholarly opinion supporting the humanity of

Once again, there is far more scholarly opinion supporting the humanity of the life growing in the womb than most Christians in America realize.

The Precautionary Principle

THIS GENERATION OF Christians, who still may not be convinced of the humanity of the child growing in the womb, should know about what has been called the Precautionary Principle.¹

Let's say, just for the sake of discussion, that we might not know with certainty whether the fetus is human life or not. How then should we proceed? What working principles might possibly guide us in deciding whether to allow abortions? One such powerful and compelling principle is called the Precautionary Principle. Consider the following anecdote.

A building is to be demolished as part of a program to construct free housing for the poor. Millions of dollars and many months of labor have gone into preparations for the demolition of the building. Any additional delays will result in spiraling costs for all involved.

The building has been inspected to ensure no one is inside. Demolition day arrives. But just moments before the explosive charges are to be detonated, a bystander cries out that he just spotted a figure moving at a window. A dozen others saw something, too. Several say it may just have been a stray dog, certainly not a sufficient cause to delay the project any longer. But a dozen or more persons speak up to say they were watching and saw at the same window what they believe was not a dog, but a small boy.

What would be done? Would there be any doubt? If there were any chance that the life seen in the building was human, demolition would not proceed. The millions spent would count for nothing. Everyone would agree to an innate precautionary principle and not accept the risk of killing a human being.

From this hypothetical story, we draw this concluding principle: If there is a chance that the life of a *human being* were being terminated in an abortion, lack of *certainty* about the personhood of the fetus should not be used as a reason to justify allowing the abortion. Rather, the Precautionary Principle should lead us to determine that if there is a *chance* we are taking the life of a human being in

abortion, we should opt for life and not allow the procedure.

In *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged it could not say when human life began. However, it ruled as if life did not begin until viability. However, as previously noted, at the First International Conference on Abortion held in Washington, D.C., in 1967, 19 of 20 eminent physicians issued a statement saying they could see no point in time from the union of the sperm with the egg until the birth of the infant “at which we could say that this was not a human life.”² If we have *any doubt* today about the possible humanity of the child growing in the womb, should we not make every effort to err on the side of life?

Case Study: Kermit Gosnell

THIS GENERATION OF Christians should know of the recent horror story that has taken place in America—the events leading up to the trial of accused abortionist Dr. Kermit Gosnell.

Several years ago, the horrific story broke about a grand jury in Philadelphia indicting abortionist Kermit Gosnell on eight counts of murder—one for killing a pregnant woman and seven counts for killing living, viable babies. Gosnell ran Women’s Medical Society, a clinic in West Philadelphia, for a period of about twenty years. It was located in a neighborhood where it catered to a mostly poor and minority constituency.

One is sickened to read about the account. According to the 261–page grand jury report, Gosnell induced active labor and then killed “live, viable, moving, breathing, crying babies” by *cutting their spinal cords* with a pair of scissors. He called the process “snipping.”¹

According to the Associated Press, “Prosecutors described the clinic as a ‘house of horrors’ where Gosnell kept baby body parts on the shelves, allowed a fifteen-year-old high school student to perform intravenous anesthesia on patients, and had his licensed cosmetologist wife do late-term abortions.”² A forty-one-year-old immigrant from Nepal was incompetently overmedicated after a botched abortion and died in Gosnell’s office.

The sickening court indictment referred to Gosnell’s abortion business as a “filthy fraud” and noted that public officials failed in their oversight responsibilities of the doctor. The Pennsylvania Department of Health stopped inspecting the center in 1993, despite numerous complaints from attorneys, a doctor, and a medical examiner. The report stated, “We think the reason no one acted is because the women in question were poor and of color, because the victims were infants without identities, and because the subject was the political football of abortion.”³

For nearly seventeen years, this unprincipled abortion provider had virtually

no oversight from the appropriate public health officials. It was literally a house of horror, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described: “Semiconscious, moaning women sat in dirty recliners and on bloodstained blankets. The air reeked of urine from the flea-infested cats permitted to roam the clinic. There was blood on the floor and cat feces on the stairs.”⁴

Not only did Gosnell do late-term and partial-birth abortions and kill viable babies, in America that same year (2010, the year of his arrest) there were an additional eighteen thousand late-term abortions performed. As the sheer horror of accounts such as this are made known, the American public will continue to realize that what is considered legal today is utterly indefensible, morally.

A political leader said some time ago that abortions in America should be “safe, legal, and rare.” We’ve heard this phrase often. Abortions may be legal, but they most certainly are not rare (1.2 million a year) and neither are they safe (how many other Kermit Gosnell–like clinics might there be in America?).

Case Study: Dr. Bernard Nathanson

THIS GENERATION SHOULD know of the amazing life-transformation and subsequent witness of Dr. Bernard Nathanson, a leading abortionist of the 1970s.¹

In 1970, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, the son of a distinguished medical doctor, began running the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health in New York City. In addition to performing and giving supervision to thousands of abortions (New York was one of a few states at the time with laws allowing abortions), he became a zealous crusader and campaigner for the national legalization of abortion. He and his colleagues argued before voters, lawmakers, and judges that laws against abortion were worse than futile and thus should be opposed. He confessed later that they lied—boldly and relentlessly—about the number of women who died each year from illegal abortions, claiming the number was more than ten times higher than it actually was.

In 1973, he left the center to become chief of obstetrical service at St. Luke's Hospital Center, but he continued doing abortions. While there, however, he discovered the latest in fetal technology—the ultrasound machine. It opened the window for him on fetal development. His own personal struggle began.

By 1974, he penned a widely noticed article in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*, revealing his growing doubts about the popular view that abortion was merely the removal of an “undifferentiated mass of cells,” and not the killing of a developing human being. On abortion, he wrote, “We are taking life, and the deliberate taking of life ... is an inexpressibly serious matter.”²

By 1979, Nathanson had become convinced that what was developing within the mother's womb was, indeed, human life, from the very onset of pregnancy. This emerging conclusion was personally devastating for him to face. Referring to abortions he had either performed or supervised, he confessed to an “increasing certainty that [he] had in fact presided over 60,000 deaths.”³ In 1979, he authored (along with Richard N. Ostling—a prominent journalist with

Christianity Today and then *Time* magazine) his first book, *Aborting America*. The impact of this stunning new conviction took him out of the practice of abortion. Before long, he came to regard the procedure as unjustified homicide. In the early 1980s, he dedicated himself to the fight against abortion, the procedure for which he was once a most influential advocate, especially to persons of influence in high places. In 1985, using the new fetal imaging technology, he produced the documentary film, *The Silent Scream*, which went viral in the pro-life movement in America.

But thankfully, his story does not just end there. For all of this happened while he was an irreligious, atheistic Jew. His argument against abortion was not, he always insisted, religious in nature. It was based on scientific facts and humanitarian conclusions about the rights and dignity of human beings. He was thoroughly secular. He had been married three times, described himself as materialistic and ruthlessly ambitious, living a shallow life. He also experienced haunting and sustained guilt over his life as an abortionist, even contemplating suicide.

However, while attending a pro-life rally in New York City in 1989, he saw something that began to break through his long-held anti-religious defenses. He saw, in his words, “an intensity of love and prayer that astonished [him].” He confessed that on that day he began “for the first time in [his] entire adult life ... to entertain seriously the notion of God.”⁴

In a wonderfully moving account, Charles Colson describes the phone call that came to his office on a cold December morning in 1996. His secretary said it was Dr. Bernard Nathanson inviting Chuck and his wife, Patty, to his baptism at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, with Cardinal John O’Connor presiding. Two weeks later, Colson and his wife, welcomed by Father John McCloskey, joined others in a small basement chapel. Colson knew Father McCloskey had had a powerful student ministry at Princeton University. He had been the one who had given Dr. Nathanson the good news of God’s forgiveness and had guided him into the Christian faith.

After Cardinal O’Connor gave a short welcoming homily, Nathanson was escorted forward by a young woman whom Colson immediately recognized as Joan Andrews, now Joan Andrews Bell. She was a former nun who had spent five years in a Florida prison for nonviolent resistance at abortion clinics. Now, here she was, guiding one of the world’s leading abortionists to the baptismal font. Colson writes in his moving account, “We watched Bernard Nathanson—a Jew by birth, a man who had been an atheist by conviction and a brilliant but amoral doctor by profession—kneeling before the cross of Christ.”⁵

After the service, the small group went together for refreshment and fellowship. Colson describes this moving moment:

Speaking softly and with deep feeling, Nathanson thanked everyone for coming. “All I could think about while I was kneeling at the altar was my bar mitzvah,” he said. “That day I was so afraid.” He hesitated, then looked up. “Today I felt all that fear fall away. I experienced sheer grace.”⁶

Dr. Bernard Nathanson died in February of 2011. He died in the Lord. Dr. Robert George, Professor at Princeton University, wrote a beautiful tribute to his friend, “Bernie,” as he called him. George wrote that one of the lessons we learn from Bernard Nathanson’s life is “the luminous power of truth.”⁷ Luminous means to give off light, and to help things be readily understood. As he himself admitted, the edifice of abortion is built on a foundation of lies. Nathanson admitted he told those lies, indeed, he helped *invent* them, wrote Dr. George. Thankfully, Nathanson was able to shine the luminous power of truth on the darkness that surrounded the edifice of America’s culture of abortion.

Remarkably, for Nathanson, the truth about life that he observed in the mother’s womb convinced him what he was doing was morally wrong. What an amazing conclusion for one who had so many reasons to deny what was becoming apparent to him.

Then as time passed, he saw others witness to this truth. When he was exposed to their bold, unintimidated, self-sacrificial and loving witness, the light of Christian truth overcame the darkness of falsehood and deception, and he was led to faith in Christ.

Joan Andrews Bell said Bernard Nathanson was “like St. Paul, who was a great persecutor of the Church,”⁸ yet he became its great apostle. Nathanson, the abortionist, became a great witness on behalf of life and spoke passionately the rest of his days about the evil of abortion. This is a marvelous story of grace, redemption, and transformation. And it’s a story this generation desperately needs to hear.

In Conclusion

THE TEN POINTS represent a major portion of the reasons why many Christians, and other Americans for that matter, have continued steadfast in their opposition to our nation's very liberal abortion policy. Our nation's policy, by the way, is more liberal than that of most all other countries—affirming the right of virtually unrestricted abortion for any reason at any time. The result of this policy has been cataclysmic—more than 55 million abortions since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. (Yes, I have repeated that number numerous times so the sheer magnitude of it will not escape us.) The numbers are utterly tragic and are not what most Americans expected when the Supreme Court made its *Roe* decision.

Again, we are marking now four decades since that tragic decision. I believe that we have a whole new generation of Americans who are only familiar with the political debate so prevalent in today's media, but not with the *substance* of the debate in the longtime controversy. Unfortunately, many have not carefully examined much of the substantive reasoning, especially from the Christian Church's historic stand. Nevertheless, a growing number of persons (as noted in the recent *Time* magazine cover story) continue to oppose our current practice of unrestricted abortion. Thankfully, there is an increased discomfort in the land that would indicate more and more people are having serious reservations about the practice—reservations that are growing even in the midst of our liberal and very accepting abortion culture in America.

In closing, it should be said that the long tradition of the Christian Church's teaching has been to stand *against* abortion and *for* a culture of life. The gospel of Christ is, indeed, a gospel of life. I believe more and more thoughtful Americans are realizing that the arguments used in support of *Roe v. Wade* and our abortion culture have been, and remain, misleading and wrong. Many of the arguments seem to be plausible, sound, and logical when they, in fact, are really not. And the amazing growth in our understanding about fetal life through ultrasound and other sophisticated technologies adds to the compelling case for the humanity of the fetus, from conception throughout its development.

But if the reasons given above are not yet persuasive to those still wrestling honestly with the ethics of the matter, it seems that on the basis of the Precautionary Principle alone—thinking about even the *possible humanity* of the

fetus—Americans should opt for and err on the side of protecting life.

The late Mother Teresa, whose ministry saved thousands of abandoned children in India, spoke prophetic words to our nation at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., some nineteen years ago. She said,

I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?¹

Rob Schwarzwalder, the senior vice president at Family Research Council, wrote an article noting the fortieth anniversary of *Roe*, which appeared in *Religion Today* on January 28, 2013. He stated his conviction that the “continued legalized destruction of persons not yet born” is and should remain “the most urgent moral and political crisis in our country.”² He concludes with wonderful and timely words for how Christians and the church must move ahead today:

How do we go forward? Adoption clearly is essential. So are public education efforts and legislative initiatives at every level of government. The more than 2,000 pregnancy care centers around the country offer practical hope to countless women who feel trapped in a pregnancy they do not want. Shelters and clothing orchards and ultrasounds and medical care and stay-in-school programs and being taken-in by caring Christian families: these and all things related to them should be advanced by believers in Christ with energy and love.

When, today, hundreds of thousands of us march on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. ... [we] will march in grief for those lost, unborn children and women, both. We will march in hope, believing that the Author of life might yet turn our country’s heart toward a renewed commitment to the sacredness of human life. ... We will keep marching, year after year. And praying, and voting, and legislating, and informing, until from conception to natural death, every image-bearer of the living God is protected by law and welcomed into the human family.³

Oh, that it might be so, Dear God.

Merciful Father, forgive us for this great blight upon our nation. Through your Holy Spirit, convict our hearts of this great sin and lead us to deep, heartfelt repentance. Forgive us, awaken us, renew our hearts, change our minds, come and heal our land. Help us as your people, loving Lord, to keep marching, praying, caring, speaking out, voting, legislating, loving, informing, and defending on behalf of all of your children, born and unborn, in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

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