



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 14 [MB Confession of Faith]

The Sanctity of Human Life

COMMENTARY

Christians have traditionally upheld the doctrine of the sanctity of life, but we must interpret it carefully. The biblical account of creation describes life as a property which comes from God. God gave life to all organic forms of creation. But man and woman are uniquely described as being made in the image of God and are given rule over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-7). “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

The Creation Account

Regarding the sanctity of life, several things follow from the creation account in Genesis. First, life is a gift from God. Second, man and woman have value, along with all of creation, because God imputes value on all that He has created. Third, the value of man and woman is distinct from that of the rest of creation because they are created in the image of God, a triune God who establishes a covenant relationship with them, and who sees relationships as central to being human. Here it is very important to note that it is not just biological existence in itself that makes human life sacred—there is a qualitative requirement. It is life in relationship with God and other human beings that is sacred.

A fourth reality that follows from the creation account is that human life is also distinctive in being given responsibility to rule over and care for the rest of creation (see Psalm 8). Fifth, it is God who gives human life value and transcendent worth. It is not something that we acquire or earn. Man and woman had worth before they did anything. The sanctity of life is independent of the value that can be placed on a person by virtue of efforts, accomplishments, talents, or any other measure.

The Fall

The story of creation is followed by the story of the fall. As a result of sin, life is full of pain and suffering—childbearing is painful and work is now by the sweat of the brow (Gen. 3:16, 19). To be human is to suffer. “Human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward,” Job reminds us (5:7 NRSV). God in His sovereignty can bring good even out of suffering. Jesus suffered and died that we might be saved. Christians are to rejoice that we can participate in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 4:13).

One other dimension of suffering needs to be noted. There is no such thing as a perfectly formed human being. We all suffer, some more than others, because of various defects. The sacredness of human life is not contingent on having a perfectly formed body. Human life must be seen as sacred, with warts, defects, and all. Christians are called to accept God’s sovereign will in giving each of us our basic make-up. “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” (Rom. 9:20; see also 21; Isa. 29:16; 45:9).

The curse after the fall also included the pronouncement that there would be an end to life: “for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19; see also Eccl. 3:19-20, 12:6-7). The Lord God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden lest they “take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22). While human life is sacred, death is inescapable. Our span of life is short and full of trouble and sorrow (Ps. 90).

The fact of death raises a central question as to the value of human life from an earthly perspective. In Matthew 10:26-31 Jesus advises us not to be afraid of those who have the power to kill our bodies. “Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (v. 28). Jesus also calls us to take



up his cross, even to the point of losing our life as he did (Matt. 16:24-26). The cross has redefined the value of earthly human life, just as it has redefined the issue of death—our salvation was brought about by the death of Jesus. Giving up one’s life for the sake of Jesus Christ can therefore be seen as a Christian ideal.

Redemption and Resurrection

The story of the fall is followed by the story of redemption which culminates in a resurrection life. We must therefore be careful that we do not misinterpret the principle of the sanctity of life in terms of seeing our human earthly life as an absolute good. We do live on after death, and this adds another dimension to the sacredness of human life. The individual’s personhood is not destroyed by death, but instead returns to the Creator (Eccl.12:7), while the physical component reassumes its original form (Gen. 3:19). It is because we hope for a resurrected body that our earthly body is given a value beyond its temporal existence (1 Cor. 15). We must be careful not to think only in terms of physical bodies and the sacredness of biological life. The significance of the resurrection is found in the reestablishing of a relationship with God and with all the saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

New Testament Perspectives

Jesus repeatedly affirms the value of human life. He warns us against worry, encouraging us to look at the birds of the air who are fed by the heavenly Father, and then reminds us that we are “much more valuable than they” (Matt. 6:26). And later Jesus becomes even more specific: “Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:30-31). Paul specifically addresses the status of our bodies, reminding us that we are the temples of the Holy Spirit and that we are not our own. “Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:20).

Jesus carefully instructed his disciples about the value of children (Matt. 18:2-4, 13-14). Further, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in Christ’s church (Gal. 3:28). In bestowing His blessing on humans, God does not distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Believers are exhorted by James not to discriminate between rich and poor (2:1-11). “Love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39). Human beings have equal value, according to the Scriptures, and thus the principle of the sanctity and dignity of life should extend to all.

Moral Implications

Abortion:

Abortion involves the refusal of a divine gift of human life. It is a betrayal of God’s intention for creation. Although abortion is not specifically referred to in the Bible, there are frequent Old Testament references indicating reverence for life in the womb (Exod. 21:22-25; Job 31:15; Ps. 139:13-16; Isa. 44:24; 49:1-6; Jer. 1:5). Abortion does not honor God’s sovereignty over human life.

Euthanasia:

What is often referred to as active euthanasia is wrong because it violates the principle of the sanctity of life and fails to acknowledge that it is ultimately up to God to determine the time of our death (Deut. 32:39). This is clearly illustrated in the story of the Amalekite who killed Saul after he had been fatally wounded. Saul requested this because he was in the throes of death, and the Amalekite saw “that he could not survive,” so he killed him. Nonetheless, David had this man punished (2 Sam. 1:1-16). Active euthanasia is not the answer to imminent and painful death. Instead, we must accept suffering and pain as an inevitable part of life after the fall, asking God to give us the grace to suffer with dignity. Scripture does, however, accept administration of the soporific aid to someone in great agony of death (Prov. 31:6-7), although Jesus specifically refused even this on the cross (Matt. 27:48).

Active euthanasia must be distinguished from what is perhaps inappropriately labeled “passive euthanasia.” Death is a consequence of the fall and needs to be accepted as a normal part of a broken world. “There is a time for everything ... a time to be born and a time to die” (Eccl. 3:1-2). Christians must



beware of the “tyranny of the possible” in medical science. There are times when it is quite appropriate to refuse extraordinary measures to preserve or prolong life.

Suicide and Assisted Suicide:

Suicide too needs to be seen as a violation of the sanctity that God places on human life. It can be seen as a violation of the sixth commandment, as it may plausibly be seen as murder of oneself. Life needs to be appreciated as a gift from God. We did not choose to be born. Nor should we choose to bring about our own death. God alone, the author of life, has absolute dominion over our lives (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 1: 5). Hence no human being possesses the right to dispose of life on his/her own authority. It is equally wrong to assist someone in committing suicide.

Suicide, however, must be distinguished from the sacrificing of one’s life for another person or for the cause of Jesus Christ. Our Lord laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11), and some of his followers are called to do the same.

The despair and suffering that often are a precursor to suicide need to be seen in proper biblical perspective. Life after the fall is invariably full of suffering and pain. But there is meaning in suffering and pain. Christ calls us to join him in bearing the suffering and pain that resulted from the fall (2 Cor. 1:5). The frequently heard secular slogan of dying with dignity needs to be replaced with a Christian call to suffer with dignity. We need to help each other bear the pain that life often brings (Gal. 6:2). We need to mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15).

This communal dimension to bearing suffering and pain also extends to the way in which we as Christians make the complex ethical decisions surrounding life and death. Where ethical issues are not clear-cut, we are called to practice discernment (Phil. 1:10; Rom. 12:2). It is the church as a community that tries to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph. 5:10) as it searches the Scriptures together, speaks truthfully to one another, and submits to one another (Eph. 4:15; 5:21).

