

**Professor Stanley Hauerwas**

# Abortion, Theologically Understood

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## Foreword

Serious theological and moral reflection during a session of a United Methodist annual conference is about as rare as a March snow at Cape Hatteras. The word is *rare*, not *impossible*.

During the 1990 meeting of the North Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, rarity (reflection, that is, and not snow) became reality. At the invitation of the Evangelical Fellowship of the N.C. Conference, Professor Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches theological ethics at Duke University Divinity School, lectured on abortion and the church. Hauerwas' lecture was delivered on the second night of conference, a tropical June 14th, in the Science Auditorium of Methodist College. Since Hauerwas' presentation was not a part of the "official" agenda of the conference, he did not begin speaking until the official program of the day had ended--at approximately 10:00 p.m. What follows is an edited text of the lecture that theologically and morally challenged a group of North Carolina Methodists to reconsider the problem of abortion from within the faith and life of the Church. It is hoped that this lecture will serve as a starting point for strengthening our churches' ministries with regard to abortion.

Thanks is due Ms. Carole L. Stalnaker, the Secretary of St. Peter's United Methodist Church in Morehead City, North Carolina, for her faithful labor in transcribing the lecture. Thanks also to the Pastor of St. Peter's Church, The Reverend David A. Banks, who, as President of the Evangelical Fellowship, oversaw many of the logistics in setting up this important and unique event.

Reverend Paul T. Stallsworth, President  
Taskforce of United Methodists  
on Abortion and Sexuality  
Lent 1991

**Professor Stanley Hauerwas**

## Abortion Theologically Understood

You are blessed indeed to be here, listening to this, at this time of the night . . . Since you have had a long day at annual conference, I will try to be as brief as I can.

I'm going to start with a sermon. Every once in a while you get a wonderful gift. About a month ago a former student, who is now a Presbyterian minister, mailed to me a copy of a sermon on abortion. This evening I could not do better than read you this sermon and then give you an ethical commentary on it. [The author of the following sermon is The Reverend Terry Hamilton, formerly the Chaplain of Queens College, Charlotte, NC, and now of Kansas City, KS.]

### TEXT AND SERMON

The text for the sermon is Matthew 25:31-46. I will be reading from the Revised Standard Version.

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my

brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'"

As a Christian and a woman, I find abortion a most difficult subject to address. Even so, I believe that it is essential that the church face the issue of abortion in a distinctly *Christian* manner. Because of that, I am hereby addressing not society in general, but those of us who call ourselves Christians. I also want to be clear that I am not addressing abortion as a legal issue. I believe the issue, for the church, must be framed not around the banners of 'pro-choice' or 'pro-life,' but around God's call to care for the least among us whom Jesus calls his sisters and brothers.

So, in this sermon, I will make three points. The first point is that the Gospel favors women and children. The second point is that the customary framing of the abortion issue by both pro-choice and pro-life groups is unbiblical because it assumes that the woman is ultimately responsible for both herself and for any child she might carry. The third point is that a Christian response must reframe the issue to focus on responsibility rather than rights.

### **Gospel, Women, and Children**

Point number one: the Gospel favors women and children. The Gospel is feminist. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus treats women as thinking people who are worthy of respect. This was not, of course, the usual attitude of that time. In addition, it is to the women among Jesus' followers, not to the men, that he entrusts the initial proclamation of his resurrection. It isn't only Jesus himself who sees the Gospel making all people equal, for Saint Paul wrote, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

And yet, women have been oppressed through recorded history and continue to be oppressed today. So when Jesus says, 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40), I have to believe that Jesus includes women among 'the least of these.' Anything that helps women, therefore, helps Je-

sus. When Jesus says, 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me,' he is also talking about children, because children are literally 'the least of these.' Children lack the three things the world values most-- power, wealth, and influence. If we concern ourselves with people who are powerless, then children should obviously be at the top of our list. The irony of the abortion debate, as it now stands in our church and society, is that it frames these two groups, women and children, as enemies of one another.

### **The Woman Alone**

This brings me to my second point: the issue as it is generally framed by both pro-choice and pro-life groups is unbiblical because it assumes that the woman is ultimately responsible both for herself and for any child she might carry. Why is it that women have abortions? Women I know, and those I know about, have had abortions for two basic reasons: the fear that they cannot handle the financial and physical demands of the child, and the fear that having the child will destroy relationships that are important to them.

An example of the first fear, the inability to handle the child financially or physically, is the divorced mother of two children, the younger of whom has Down's syndrome. This woman recently discovered that she was pregnant. She believed abortion was wrong. However, the father of the child would not commit himself to help raise this child, and she was afraid she could not handle raising another child on her own.

An example of the second fear, the fear of destroying relationships, is the woman who became pregnant and was told by her husband that he would leave her if she did not have an abortion. She did not want to lose her husband, so she had the abortion. Later, her husband left her anyway.

In both of these cases, and in others I have known, the woman has had an abortion not because she was exercising her free choice but because she felt she had *no choice*. In each case the responsibility for caring for the child, had she had the child, would have rested squarely and solely on the woman.

### **Reframing With Responsibility**

Which brings me to my third point the Christian response to abortion must reframe the issue to focus on responsibility rather than rights. The pro-choice/pro-life debate presently pits the right of the mother to choose against the right of the fetus to live. The Christian response, on the other hand, centers on the responsibility of the whole Christian community to care for 'the least of these.'

According to the Presbyterian Church's *Book of Order*, when a person is baptized, the congregation answers this question: 'Do you, the members of this congregation, in the name of the whole Church of Christ, undertake the responsibility for the continued Christian nurture of this person, promising to be an example of the new life in Christ and to pray for him or her in this new life?' We make this promise because we know that no adult belongs to himself or herself, and that no child belongs to his or her parents, but that every person is a child of God. Because of that, every young one is our child, the church's child to care for. This is not an option. It is a responsibility.

Let me tell you two stories about what it is like when the church takes this responsibility seriously. The first is a story that Will Willimon, the Dean of Duke University Chapel, tells about a black church. In this church, when a teen-ager has a baby that she cannot care for, the church baptizes the baby and gives him/her to an older couple in the church that has the time and wisdom to raise the child. That way, says the pastor, the couple can raise the teen-age mother along with the baby. 'That,' the pastor says, 'is how we do it.'

The second story involves something that happened to Deborah Campbell. A member of her church, a divorced woman, became pregnant, and the father dropped out of the picture. The woman decided to keep the child. But as the pregnancy progressed and began to show, she became upset because she felt she could not go to church anymore. After all, here she was, a Sunday School teacher, unmarried and pregnant. So she called Deborah. Deborah told her to come to church and sit in the pew with the Campbell family, and, no matter how the church reacted, the family would support her. Well, the church rallied around when the woman's doctor told her at her six-month checkup that she owed him the remaining balance of fifteen hundred dollars by the next month; otherwise, he would not deliver the baby. The church held a baby shower and raised the money. When the time came for her to deliver, Deborah was her labor coach. When the woman's mother refused to come and help after the baby was born, the church brought food and helped clean her house while she recovered from the birth. Now the woman's little girl is the child of the parish.

This is what the church looks like when it takes seriously its call to care for 'the least of these.' These two churches differ in certain ways: one is Methodist, the other Roman Catholic; one has a carefully planned strategy for supporting women and babies, the other simply reacted spontaneously to a particular woman and her baby. But

in each case the church acted with creativity and compassion to live out the Gospel.

In our scripture lesson today, Jesus gives a preview of the Last Judgment. 'Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:34-40).

We cannot simply throw the issue of abortion in the faces of women and say, 'You decide and you bear the consequences of your decision.' As the church, our response to the abortion issue must be to shoulder the responsibility to care for women and children. We cannot do otherwise and still be the church. If we close our doors in the faces of women and children, then we close our doors in the face of Christ.

## **AN ETHICAL COMMENTARY**

I wanted to read that sermon because I suspect that most of you ministers have not preached about abortion. You have not preached about abortion because you have not had the slightest idea about how to do it in a way that would not make everyone in your congregation mad. And the reason that you have not known how to preach a sermon on abortion is that you thought that you would have to sate up the terms that are given by the wider society.

Here you see a young minister who knew how to cut through the kind of pro-choice and pro-life rhetoric that is given in the wider society. She preached a sermon on abortion that derives directly from the Gospel. Her sermon is a reminder about what the church is to be about when addressing this issue in a Christian way. That is the primary thing that I want to underline this evening: the church's refusal to use society's terms for the abortion debate, and the church's willingness to take on the abortion problem *as church*. This sermon suggests that abortion is not a question about the law, but about what kind of people we are to be as the church and as Christians.

Abortion forces the church to recognize the fallacy of a key presumption of many Christians in this society--namely, that what Christians believe about the moral life

is what any right-thinking person, whether he or she is Christian or not, also believes. Again, that presumption is false. I want to underwrite what I call the Tonto Principle of Christian Ethics. The Tonto Principle is based on the Lone Ranger and Tonto finding themselves surrounded by 20,000 Sioux. The Lone Ranger turns to Tonto and says, "What do you think we ought to do, Tonto. Tonto replies, "What do you mean *we*, white man?" We Christians have thought that when we address the issue of abortion and when we say "we," we are talking about anybody who is a good, decent American. But that is not who "we" Christians are. If any issue is going to help us discover that, it is going to be the issue of abortion.

### **Beyond Rights**

Christians in America are tempted to think of issues like abortion primarily in legal terms such as "rights." This is because the legal mode, as de Tocqueville pointed out long ago, provides the constituting morality in liberal societies. In other words, when you live in a liberal society like ours, the fundamental problem is how you can achieve cooperative agreements between individuals who share nothing in common other than their fear of death. In liberal society the law has the function of securing such agreements. That is the reason why lawyers are to America what priests were to the medieval world. The law is our way of negotiating safe agreements between autonomous individuals who have nothing else in common other than their fear of death and their mutual desire for protection.

Therefore, rights language is fundamental in our political and moral context. In America, we oftentimes pride ourselves, as Americans, on being a pragmatic people that is not ideological. But that is absolutely false. No country has ever been more theory dependent on a public philosophy than America.

Indeed I want to argue that America is the only country that has the misfortune of being founded on a philosophical mistake--namely, the notion of inalienable rights. We Christians do not believe that we have inalienable rights. That is the false presumption of Enlightenment individualism, and it opposes everything that Christians believe about what it means to be a creature. Notice that the issue is *inalienable* rights. Rights make a certain sense as correlative to duties and goods, but they are not inalienable. For example, when the lords protested against the king in the Magna Charta, they did so in the name of their duties to their underlings. Duties, not rights, were primary. The rights were simply ways of remembering what the duties were.

Christians, to be more specific, do not believe that we have a right to do with our bodies whatever we want. We

do not believe that we have a right to our bodies because when we are baptized we become members of one another; then we can tell one another what it is that we should, and should not, do with our bodies. I had a colleague at the University of Notre Dame who taught Judaica. He was Jewish and always said that any religion that does not tell you what to do with your genitals and pots and pans cannot be interesting. That is exactly true. In the church we tell you what you can and cannot do with your genitals. They are not your own. They are not private. That means that you cannot commit adultery. If you do, you are no longer a member of "us." Of course pots and pans are equally important.

I was recently giving a talk at a very conservative university, Houston Baptist University. Since its business school has an ethics program, I called my talk, "Why Business Ethics Is a Bad Idea." When I had finished, one of the business-school people asked, "Well goodness, what then can we Christians do about business ethics?" I said, "A place to start would be the local church. It might be established that before anyone joins a Baptist church in Houston, he or she would have to declare in public his or her annual income." The only people whose incomes are known in The United Methodist Church today are ordained ministers. Why should we make the ministers' salaries public and not the laity's? Most people would rather tell you what they do in the bedroom than how much they make. With these things in mind, you can see how the church is being destroyed by the privatization of individual lives, by the American ethos. If you want to know who is destroying the babies of this country through abortion, look at privatization, which is learned in the economic arena.

Under the veil of American privatization, we are encouraging people to believe in the same way that Andrew Carnegie believed. He thought that he had a right to his steel mills. In the same sense, people think that they have a right to their bodies. The body is then a piece of property in a capitalist sense. Unfortunately, that is antithetical to the way we Christians think that we have to share as members of the same body of Christ.

So, you cannot separate these issues. If you think that you can be very concerned about abortion and not concerned about the privatization of American life generally, you are making a mistake. So the problem is: how, as Christians, should we think about abortion without the rights rhetoric that we have been given--right to my body, right to life, pro-choice, pro-life, and so on? In this respect, we Christians must try to make the abortion issue our issue.

## Calling a Spade

We must remember that the first question is not, "Is abortion right or wrong?," or, "Is this abortion right or wrong?" Rather, the first question is, "Why do Christians call abortion *abortion*?" And with the first question goes a second, "Why do Christians think that *abortion* is a morally problematic term?" To call abortion by that name is already a moral achievement. The reason why people are Pro-choice" rather than Pro-abortion" is that nobody really wants to be pro-abortion. The use of *choice* rather than *abortion* is an attempt at a linguistic transformation that tries to avoid the reality of abortion, because most people do not want to use that description. So, instead of *abortion*, another term is used, something like *termination of pregnancy*. Now, the church can live more easily in a world with "terminated pregnancies," because in that world the church no longer claims power, even linguistic power, over that medically described part of life; instead, doctors do.

One of the interesting cultural currents that is involved is the medicalization of abortion. It is one of the ways that the medical profession is continuing to secure power against the church. Ordained ministers can sense this when they are in hospital situations. In a hospital today, the minister feels less power than the doctor, right? My way of explaining this is that when someone goes to seminary today, he can say, "I'm not into Christology this year. I'm just into relating. After all, relating is what the ministry is really about, isn't it? Ministry is about helping people relate to one another, isn't it? So I want to take some more Clinical Pastoral Education courses." And the seminary says, "Go ahead and do it. Right, get your head straight, and so on." A kid can go to medical school and say, "I'm not into anatomy this year. I'm into relating. So I'd like to take a few more courses in psychology, because I need to know how to relate to people better." The medical school then says, "Who in the hell do you think you are, kid? We're not interested in your interests. You're going to take anatomy. If you don't like it, that's tough."

Now what that shows you is that people believe incompetent physicians can hurt them. Therefore, people expect medical schools to hold their students responsible for the kind of training that's necessary to be competent physicians. On the other hand, few people believe an incompetent minister can damage their salvation. This helps you see that what people want today is not salvation, but health. And that helps you see why the medical profession has, as a matter of fact, so much power over the church and her ministry. The medical establishment is the counter-salvation-promising group in our society today.

So, when you innocently say "termination of pregnancy," while it sounds like a neutral term, you are placing your thinking under the sway of the medical profession. In contrast to the medical profession, Christians maintain that the description "abortion" is more accurate and determinative than the description "termination of pregnancy." That is a most morally serious matter.

You must remember that, morally speaking, the first issue is never what we are to do, but what we should see. Here is the way it works: you can only act in the world that you can see, and you must be taught to see by learning to say. Again, you can only act in the world that you can see, and you must be taught to see by learning to say. Therefore, using the language of abortion is one way of training ourselves as Christians to see and to practice its opposite--hospitality, and particularly hospitality to children and the vulnerable. Therefore, *abortion* is a word that reminds us of how Christians are to speak about, to envision, and to live life--and that is to be a baptizing people which is ready to welcome new life into our communities.

In that sense "Abortion" is as much a moral description as "suicide." Exactly why does a community maintain a description like "suicide"? Because it reminds the community of its practice of enhancing life, even under duress. The language of suicide also works as a way to remind you that even when you are in pain, even when you are sick, you have an obligation to remain with the people of God, vulnerable and yet present.

When we joined The United Methodist Church, we promised to uphold it with "our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service." We often think that "our presence" is the easy one. In fact, it is the hardest one. I can illustrate this by speaking about the church I belonged to in South Bend, Indiana. It was a small group of people that originally was an E.U.B. (or Evangelical United Brethren) congregation. Every Sunday we had Eucharist, prayers from the congregation, and a noon meal for the neighborhood. When the usual congregation would pray, we would pray for the hungry in Ethiopia and for an end to the war in the Near East, and so on. Well, this bag lady started coming to church and she would pray things like, "Lord, I have a cold, and I would really like you to cure it." Or, I've just had a horrible week and I'm depressed. Lord, would you please raise my spirits You never hear prayers like that in most of our churches. Why? Because the last thing that Christians want to do is show one another that they are vulnerable. People go to church because they are strong. They want to reinforce the presumption that they are strong.

One of the crucial issues here is how we learn to be a people dependent on one another. We must learn to

confess that, as a hospitable people, we need one another because we are dependent on one another. The last thing that the church wants is a bunch of autonomous, free individuals. We want people who know how to express authentic need, because that creates community.

So, the language of abortion is a reminder about the kind of community that we need to be. Abortion language reminds the church to be ready to receive new life *as church*.

### **The Church as True Family**

We, as church, are ready to be challenged by the other. This has to do with the fact that in the church, *every adult*, whether single or married, is called to be parent. All Christian adults have a parental responsibility because of baptism. Biology does not make parents in the church. Baptism does. Baptism makes all adult Christians parents and gives them the obligation to help introduce these children to the Gospel. Listen to the baptismal vows; in them the whole church promises to be parent. In this regard the church reinvents the family.

The assumption here is that the first enemy of the family is the church. When I taught a marriage course at Notre Dame, I used to read to my students a letter. It went something like this, "Our son had done well. He had gone to good schools, had gone through the military, had gotten out, had looked like he had a very promising career ahead. Unfortunately, he has joined some eastern religious sect. Now he does not want to have anything to do with us because we are people of 'the world.' He is never going to marry because now his true family is this funny group of people he associates with. We are heart-sick. We don't know what to do about this." Then I would ask the class, "Who wrote this letter?" And the students would say, improbably some family whose kid became a Moonie or a Hare Krishna." In fact, this is the letter of a fourth century Roman senatorial family about their son's conversion to Christianity.

From the beginning we Christians have made singleness as valid a way of life as marriage. This is how. What it means to be the church is to be a group of people called out of the world, and back into the world, to embody the hope of the Kingdom of God. Children are not necessary for the growth of the Kingdom, because the church can call the stranger into her midst. That makes both singleness and marriage possible vocations. If everybody has to marry, then marriage is a terrible burden. But the church does not believe that everybody has to marry. Even so, those who do not marry are also parents within the church, because the church is now the true family. The church is a family into which children are brought

and received. It is only within that context that it makes sense for the church to say, "We are always ready to receive children. We are *always* ready to receive children." The people of God know no enemy when it comes to children.

### **From the Pro-Life Side: When Life Begins**

Against the background of the church as family, you can see that the Christian language of abortion challenges the modern tendency to isolate moral dilemmas into discrete units of behavior. If that tendency is followed, you get the questions, "What is really wrong with abortion?," and "Isn't abortion a separate problem that can be settled on its own grounds? And then you get the termination-of-pregnancy language that wants to see abortion as solely a medical problem. At the same time, you get abortion framed in a legalistic way.

When many people start talking about abortion, what is the first thing they talk about? When life begins. And why do they get into the question of when life begins? Because they think that the abortion issue is determined primarily by the claims that life is sacred and that life is never to be taken. They assume that these claims let you know how it is that you ought to think about abortion.

Well, I want to know where Christians get the notion that life is sacred. That notion seems to have no reference at all to God. Any good secularist can think life is sacred. Of course what the secularist means by the word *sacred* is interesting, but the idea that Christians are about the maintenance of some principle separate from our understanding of God is just crazy. As a matter of fact, Christians do not believe that life is sacred. I often remind my right-to-life friends that Christians took their children with them to martyrdom rather than have them raised pagan. Christians believe there is much worth dying for. We do not believe that human life is an absolute good in and of itself. Of course our desire to protect human life is part of our seeing each human being as God's creature. But that does not mean that we believe that life is an overriding good.

To say that life is an overriding good is to underwrite the modern sentimentality that there is absolutely nothing in this world worth dying for. Christians know that Christianity is simply extended training in dying early. That is what we have always been about. Listen to the Gospel! I know that today we use the church primarily as a means of safety, but life in the church actually involves extended training in learning to die early.

When you frame the abortion issue in sacredness-of-life language, you get into intractable debates about when life begins. Notice that is an issue for legalists. By that I

mean the fundamental question becomes, How do you avoid doing the wrong thing?

In contrast, the Christian approach is not one of deciding when has life begun, but hoping that it has. We *hope* that human life has begun! We are not the kind of people that ask, Does human life start at the blastocyst stage, or at implantation? Instead, we are the kind of people that hope life has started, because we are ready to believe that at this new life will enrich our community. We believe this not because we have sentimental views about children. Honestly, I cannot imagine anything worse than people saying that they have children because their hope for the future is in their children. You would never have children if you had them for that reason. We are able to have children because our hope is in God, who makes it possible to do the absurd thing of having children. In a world of such terrible injustice, in a world of such terrible misery, in a world that may well be about the killing of our children, having children is an extraordinary act of faith and hope. But as Christians we can have a hope in God that urges us to welcome children. When that happens, it is an extraordinary testimony of faith.

### **From the Pro-Choice Side: When Personhood Begins**

On the pro-choice side you also get the abortion issue framed in a context that is outside of a communitarian structure. On the pro-choice side you get the question about when the fetus becomes a "person," because only persons supposedly have citizenship rights. That is the issue of *Roe vs. Wade*.

It is odd for Christians to take this approach since we believe that we are first of all citizens of a far different kingdom than something called the United States of America. If we end up identifying persons with the ability to reason--which, I think, finally renders all of our lives deeply problematic--then we cannot tell why it is that we ought to care for the profoundly retarded. One of the most chilling aspects of the current abortion debate in the wider society is the general acceptance, even among anti-abortion people, of the legitimacy of aborting severely defective children. Where do people get that idea? Where do people get the idea that severely defective children are somehow less than God's creation? People get that idea by privileging rationality. We privilege our ability to reason. I find that unbelievable.

We must remember that as Christians we do not believe in the inherent sacredness of life or in personhood. Instead we believe that there is much worth dying for. Christians do not believe that life is a right or that we have inherent dignity. Instead we believe that life is the

gift of a gracious God. That is our primary Christian language regarding abortion: life is the gift of a gracious God. As part of the giftedness of life, we believe that we ought to live in a profound awe of the other's existence, knowing in the other we find God. So abortion is a description maintained by Christians to remind us of the kind of community we must be to sustain the practice of hospitality to life. That is related to everything else that we do and believe.

### **Slipping Down the Slope**

There is the argument that if you let abortion start occurring for the late-developed fetus, sooner or later you cannot prohibit infanticide. Here you are entering the slippery slope argument. There is a prominent well-respected philosopher in this country named H. Tristram Englehart who wrote a book called *Foundations of Bioethics*. In the book Englehart argues that, as far as he can see, there is absolutely no reason at all that we should not kill children up to a year and a half old, since they are not yet persons. *Foundations* is a text widely used in our universities today by people having to deal with all kinds of bioethical problems.

I have no doubt that bioethical problems exist. After all, today you can run into all kinds of anomalies. For example, in hospitals, on one side of the hall, doctors and nurses are working very hard to save a five hundred-gram preemie while, on the other side of the hall, they are aborting a similar preemie. There are many of these anomalies. There is no question that they are happening. You can build up a collection of such horror stories. But listen, people can get used to horror. Also, opposition to the horrible should not be the final, decisive ground on which Christians stand while tackling these kinds of issues. Instead, the issue is how we as a Christian community can live in positive affirmation of the kind of hospitality that will be a witness to the society we live in. That will open up a discourse that otherwise would be impossible.

Now I know that you probably feel a bit frustrated by this theological approach to abortion--especially when you are trying to deal with concrete, pastoral problems, as well as the political problems that we confront in this society. In some ways what I am asking you to think about regarding abortion and the church is a little like what the Quakers had to go through regarding slavery. Some of the early abolitionists, as you know, were Quakers. Then somebody pointed out to them, there are a lot of slaveholding Friends." So the Quakers had to turn around and say, "Yes, that's right." Then they had to start trying to discipline their own ranks, and, as a result, they ended up creating a bunch of Anglicans in Philadelphia.

One of the reasons why the church's position about abortion has not been authentic is because the church has not lived and witnessed as a community in a way that challenges the fundamental secular presuppositions of both the pro-life side and the pro-choice side. We are going to have to become that kind of community if our witness is to have the kind of integrity that it must.

### **The Male Issue**

When addressing abortion, one of the crucial questions that we must engage is the question of the relationship between men and women, and thus sexual ethics. One of the things that the church has tried to do--and this is typical of the liberal social order in which we live--is to isolate the issue of abortion from the issue of sexual ethics. You cannot do that.

As this evening's sermon suggests, the legalization of abortion can be seen as the further abandonment of women by men. One of the cruelest things that has happened over the last few years is convincing women that Yes is as good as No. That gives great power to men, especially in societies (like ours) where men continue domination. Women's greatest power is the power of the No. This simply has to be understood. The church has to make it clear that we understand that sexual relations are relations of power. Unfortunately, one of the worst things that Christians have done is to underwrite romantic presuppositions about marriage. Even Christians now think that we ought to marry people simply because they are "in love." Wrong, wrong, wrong! What could being in love possibly mean? The romantic view underwrites the presumption that, because people are in love, it is therefore legitimate for them to have sexual intercourse, whether they are married or not. Contrary to this is the church's view of marriage. To the church, marriage is the public declaration that two people have pledged to live together faithfully for a lifetime.

One of the good things about the church's understanding of marriage is that it helps us to get a handle on making men take responsibility for their progeny. It is a great challenge for any society to get its men to take up this responsibility. As far as today's church is concerned, we must start condemning male promiscuity. The church will not have a valid voice on abortion until she attacks male promiscuity with the ferocity it deserves. And we have got to get over being afraid of appearing prudish. Male promiscuity is nothing but the exercise of reckless power. It is injustice. And by God we have to go after it. There is no compromise on this. Men must pay their dues. There is absolutely no backing off from that.

Christians must challenge the romanticization of sex in our society. It ends up with high school kids having sex-

ual intercourse because they think they love one another. Often we must say that that is rape. Let us be clear about it. No fourteen-year-old, unattractive women--who is not part of the social clique of a high school, who is suddenly dated by some male, who falls all over herself with the need for approval, and who ends up in bed with him--can be said to have had anything other than rape happen to her. Let the church speak honestly about these matters and quit pussyfooting around. Until we speak clearly on male promiscuity, we will simply continue to make the problems of teen-age pregnancy and abortion female problems. Males have to be put in their place. There is no way we as a church can have an authentic voice without this clear witness.

### **The "Wanted Child" Syndrome**

There is one other issue that I think is worth highlighting. It concerns how abortion in our society has dramatically affected the practice of having children. In discussions about abortion, one often hears that no "unwanted child" ought to be born. But I can think of no greater burden than having to be a wanted child.

When I taught the marriage course at Notre Dame, the parents of my students wanted me to teach their kids what the parents did not want them to do. The kids, on the other hand, approached the course from the perspective of whether or not they should feel guilty for what they had already done. Not wanting to privilege either approach, I started the course with the question, "What reason would you give for you or someone else wanting to have a child?" And you would get answers like, "Well, children are fun." In that case I would ask them to think about their brothers and/or sisters. Another answer was, "Children are a hedge against loneliness. Then I recommended getting a dog. Also I would note that if they really wanted to feel lonely, they should think about someone they raised turning out to be a stranger. Another student reply was, "Kids are a manifestation of our love." "Well," I responded, "what happens when your love changes and you are still stuck with them?" I would get all kinds of answers like these from my students. But, in effect, these answers show that people today do not know why they are having children.

It happened three or four times that someone in the class, usually a young woman, would raise her hand and say, "I do not want to talk about this anymore." What this means is that they know that they are going to have children, and yet they do not have the slightest idea why. And they do not want it examined. You can talk in your classes about whether God exists all semester and no one cares, because it does not seem to make any difference. But having children makes a difference, and the



students are frightened that they do not know about these matters.

Then they would come up with that one big answer that sounds good. They would say, "We want to have children in order to make the world a better place." And by that, they think that they ought to have a perfect child. And then you get into the notion that you can have a child only if you have everything set--that is, if you are in a good "relationship," if you have your finances in good shape, the house, and so on. As a result, of course, we absolutely destroy our children, so to speak, because we do not know how to appreciate their differences.

Now who knows what we could possibly want when we "want a child"? The idea of want in that context is about as silly as the idea that we can marry the right person. That just does not happen. Wanting a child is particularly troubling as it finally results in a deep distrust of mentally and physically handicapped children. The crucial question for us as Christians is what kind of people we need to be to be capable of welcoming children into this world, some of whom may be born disabled and even die.

Too often we assume compassion means preventing suffering and think that we ought to prevent suffering even if it means eliminating the sufferer. In the abortion debate, the church's fundamental challenge is to challenge this ethics of compassion. There is no more fundamental issue than that. People who defend abortion defend it in the name of compassion. "We do not want any unwanted children born into the world," they say. But Christians are people who believe that any compassion that is not formed by the truthful worship of the true God cannot help but be accursed. That is the fundamental challenge that Christians must make to this world. It is not going to be easy.

Now I will take your questions.

## QUESTIONS/ANSWERS

[Because of technical problems, the original wording of the questions is not here employed. However, an attempt has been made to convey the essence of each question.]

QUESTION #1: What about abortion in American society at large? That is, in your opinion, what would be the best abortion law for our society?

HAUERWAS: The church is not nearly at the point where she can concern herself with what kind of abortion law we should have in the United States or even in the state of North Carolina. Instead, we should start thinking about what it means for Christians to be the kind of

community that can make a witness to the wider society about these matters.

Once I was giving a lecture on medical ethics at the University of Chicago Medical School. The week before the lecture the school's students and faculty had been discussing abortion. They had decided that, if a woman asked them to perform an abortion, they would do it because a doctor ought to do whatever a patient asks. So I said, "Let's not talk about abortion. Let's talk about suicide. Imagine that you are a doctor in the Emergency Room (E.R.) at Cook County Hospital, here on the edge of Lake Michigan. It's winter; the patient they have pulled out of the lake is cold; and he is brought to the E.R. He has a note attached to his clothing. It says, "I've been studying the literature of suicide for the past thirty years. I now agree completely with Seneca on these matters. After careful consideration, I've decided to end my life. If I am rescued prior to my complete death, please do not resuscitate."

I said, "What would you do?"

"We'd try to save him, of course," they answered.

So I followed, "On what grounds? If you are going to do whatever the consumer asks you to do, you have no reason at all to save him."

So they countered, "It's our job as doctors to save life."

And I said, "Even if that is the case, why do you have the right to impose your role, your specific duties, on this man?"

After quite a bit of argument, they decided that the way to solve this problem would be to save this man the first time he comes into the E.R. The second time they would let him die.

My sense of the matter is that secular society, which assumes that you have a right to your body, has absolutely no basis for suicide prevention centers. In other words, the wider secular society has no public moral discourse about these matters.

In this kind of a setting, Christians witness to wider society first of all not by lobbying for a law against abortion, but by welcoming the children that the wider society does not want. Part of that witness might be to say to our pro-choice friends, "You are absolutely right. I don't think that any poor woman ought to be forced to have a child that she cannot afford. So let's work hard for an adequate child allowance in this country." That may not be entirely satisfactory, but that is one approach.

QUESTION #2: Should the church be creating more abortion-prevention ministries, such as homes for children?

HAUERWAS: I think that would be fine.

I have a lot of respect for the people in Operation Rescue. However, intervention in an abortion-clinic context is so humanly painful that I'm not sure what kind of witness Christians make there. But if we go to a rescue, one of the things that I think that we ought to be ready to say to a woman considering an abortion is, "Will you come home and live with me until you have your child? And, if you want me to raise the child, I will." I think that that kind of witness would make a very powerful statement. The homes are good, but also I think that Christians should be the kind of people who can open our homes to a another and her child. A lot of single people are ready to do that.

QUESTION #3: How should the church assist a woman who was raped and is pregnant? Where is justice, in a Niebuhrian sense, for her?

HAUERWAS: First of all, I am not a Niebuhrian. One of the problems with Niebuhr's account of sin is that it gets you into a lesser-of-two-evils argument. Because I am a pacifist, I do not want to entertain lesser-of-two-evil arguments. As you know, Christians are not about compromise. We are about being faithful.

Second, I do know some women who have been raped and who have had their children and become remarkable mothers. I am profoundly humbled by their witness.

Now, stop and think. Why is it that our church has not had much of a witness about abortion, suicide, or other such matters? Let's face it, moral discourse in most of our churches is but a pale reflection of what you find in *Time* magazine. For example, when the United Methodist bishops drafted their peace pastoral, they said that most Methodist people have been pacifists or just-war people. Well that was, quite frankly, not true. I sat in on a continuing-education session at Duke right after the peace pastoral came out. I asked how many of the ministers present had heard of just war prior to the pastoral. Two-thirds of the approximately one hundred ministers indicated that they had never even heard of just war. The United Methodist Church has not had disciplined discourse about any of these matters.

Does our church have disciplined discourse--even about marriage? No. We let our children grow up believing that what Christians believe about marriage is the same thing that the wider society believes: that is, if you are in love with someone, you probably ought to get married. It is a crazy idea. Being in love has nothing whatsoever to do with their vocation as Christians.

Ministers, when was the last time you refused to marry a couple because they were new to the congregation? People should be married within our congregations if

and only if they have lived in those congregations for at least a year. After all, they are making serious promises.

Ministers, when was the last time you preached a sermon on abortion? When was the last time you preached a sermon on war? When was the last time you preached a sermon on the kind of care we ought to give to the ill? When was the last time you preached a sermon about death and dying? When was the last time you preached a sermon on the political responsibilities of Christians? The problem is that we feel at a loss about how to make these kinds of matters part of the whole church. So, in effect, our preaching betrays the church. I do not mean to put all the blame on preaching, but ministers do have a bully pulpit that almost no one else in this society has--except for television. It's not much, but it's something. At least preachers can enliven a discourse that is not alive anywhere else, and people are hungering to be led by people of courage.

One of the deepest problems about these kinds of issues is that we fear our own congregations. But as this evenings sermon makes clear, this kind of sermon can be preached. And people will respond to it. And it will enhance a discourse that will make possible practices that otherwise would not be there.

This brings me to comment on how we conduct our annual conferences. I think that the lack of discussion of serious theological and moral matters at annual conferences is an outrage. It is an outrage! This is the one place where the Methodist ministry comes together every year and yet very little serious theological and moral challenge takes place here; it is an outrage. Annual conference today is like any other gathering of people in a business organization. Of course we have Bible study and all of that, but it is pietistic. It's pietism. It's all individualism. It's about how I can find my soul's relationship with God. But God isn't just interested in our little souls. God has bigger fish to fry. If all we are interested in is our little souls, we shortchange the extraordinary adventure that the Gospel calls us to be part of.

I know that some of you wonder what this means for supporting a constitutional amendment on abortion. More important than that is what Christians owe our fellow participants--I do not want to use the word *citizens* because I do not believe we are citizens--in this funny social order that would encourage, as much as possible, the glory of what it means to protect and receive children. But how you go about doing that is not going to be easy.