

## ARTICLE 14

# The Sanctity of Human Life

We believe that all human life belongs to God. Each person is created in the image of God and ought to be celebrated and nurtured. Because God is Creator, the author and giver of life, we oppose all actions and attitudes which devalue human life. The unborn, disabled, poor, aging, and dying are particularly vulnerable to such injustices. Christ calls the people of all nations to care for the defenceless.

God values human life highly. Ultimate decisions regarding life and death belong to God. Therefore, we hold that procedures designed to take life, including abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide, are an affront to God's sovereignty. We esteem the life-sustaining findings of medical science, but recognize that there are limits to the value of seeking to sustain life indefinitely. In all complex ethical decisions regarding life and death, we seek to offer hope and healing, support and counsel in the context of the Christian community.

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Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7; Exodus 20:13; Job 31:15; Psalm 139:13-16; Amos 1-2; Matthew 6:25-27; 25:31-46; John 10:11.

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COMMENTARY

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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 (Genesis 1:26-27). “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 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 (Genesis 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 Peter 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 makeup. "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (Romans 9:20; see also 21; Isaiah 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" (Genesis 3:19; see also Ecclesiastes 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" (Genesis 3:22). While human life is sacred, death is inescapable. Our span of life is short and full of trouble and sorrow (Psalm 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 (Matthew 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 (Ecclesiastes 12:7), while the physical component reassumes its original form (Genesis 3:19). It is because we hope for a resurrected body that our earthly body is given a value beyond its temporal existence (1 Corinthians 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 Thessalonians 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"

(Matthew 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” (Matthew 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 honour God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Jesus carefully instructed his disciples about the value of children (Matthew 18:2-4, 13-14). Further, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in Christ’s church (Galatians 3:28). In bestowing His blessing on humans, God does not distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Believers are exhorted by James not to discriminate between rich and poor (2:1-11). “Love your neighbour as yourself” (James 2:8; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 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 (Exodus 21:22-25; Job 31:15; Psalm 139:13-16; Isaiah 44:24; 49:1-6; Jeremiah 1:5). Abortion does not honour 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 (Deuteronomy 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 Samuel 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 (Proverbs 31:6-7), although Jesus specifically refused even this on the cross (Matthew 27:48).

Active euthanasia must be distinguished from what is perhaps inappropriately labelled “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” (Ecclesiastes 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 (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 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 Corinthians 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 (Galatians 6:2). We need to mourn with those who mourn (Romans 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 (Philippians 1:10; Romans 12:2). It is the church as a community that tries to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10) as it searches the Scriptures together, speaks truthfully to one another, and submits to one another (Ephesians 4:15; 5:21).

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## PASTORAL APPLICATION

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As Christians, we acknowledge God as the giver and sustainer of life. The biblical account of creation reminds us that it is God who first breathed life into human form and called it good. Christians have understood this statement to mean that God values human life, and that the nurture and care of physical life is a part of the stewardship mandate given by God.

In our technological society, the giving and taking of life is often understood to lie primarily within human jurisdiction. Increasingly, both birth and death are events to be managed. Issues such as genetic engineering, the use of fertility drugs, and the ability to sustain a heartbeat even though brain function has ceased have complicated what once seemed to be the natural cycle of life and death. This article seeks to help the church wrestle with the complicated sanctity of life issues its members face, both personally and professionally.

### **Celebrating and Nurturing Individuals**

Congregations and pastors perform a number of symbolic acts to celebrate life. Births, anniversaries, educational or professional achievements, as well as other special occasions are frequently acknowledged with flowers, cards, or public announcements. But the care and nurture of life must move to a deeper level if it is to significantly impact those in our care.

Nurturing the individual is a discipleship task. Opportunities should exist within the church for every individual to grow from where they are to where God wants them to be. Small group gatherings for Bible study, prayer, and support can often provide intimate settings for the nurture of spiritual and emotional life. Personal visitation and prayer by pastoral staff is also important for the nurture of individuals within the congregation. The care and nurture of children and young people are an extension of Jesus' love for children and his desire that all come to know the Father.

Many of us will recognize these things as a part of normal pastoral care. When we think further about the implications of the sacredness of life, we must open our eyes to the ways in which this care can be further expressed. Making our church facilities accessible to those with physical disabilities, for example, acknowledges their place within our congregations. Providing and maintaining equipment for the deaf and hard of hearing can be a significant ministry to an often overlooked group of people. Objecting to building codes which require wheelchair access is not only a poor witness

to the community, but also suggests that the church wants only “whole” people. Likewise, to teach against abortion while failing to provide a place for the disabled child within our Sunday school program suggests that we are unwilling to see the image of God within each person. Intentionally withholding ministry from certain populations of people may be a grievous sin against God, who longs for all people to know Christ.

The teaching and preaching ministries of the church are excellent opportunities to influence the attitudes of those around us toward others. Care should be given in the kinds of stories and sermon illustrations we use. Making women, teenagers, the elderly, or any ethnic or social group the butt of jokes is usually inappropriate and will be noted by those in the audience. The dignity of life should extend to all. However, we should also be cautious about the present-day preoccupation with the rights of the individual. The dignity of human existence is God-given, not self-imposed, and we invite all people to actively participate in the family of God.

### **Opposing Actions and Attitudes Which Devalue Human Life**

Expressing opposition can be a necessary and valuable part of the church’s witness to the world. Appropriate forms of opposition may vary with each situation and should be discussed within the church community. Consider degrees of opposition on a continuum. One extreme is to do nothing. Praying, contributing resources, voting for appropriate candidates or issues where laws are involved, and writing letters to the editor or to government officials are ways to increase active opposition without being physically present. Counselling unwed mothers, protesting legally at life-devaluing sites or retailers, and even adopting a child are instances of more personal involvement. There are times when opposition could mean breaking human laws through civil disobedience. Individuals should not make such decisions without prayer within the context of the church community.

At the end of the continuum is opposition that breaks God’s law. Committing murder, for instance, by killing an abortion doctor adds wrong to wrong. We also do well to remember Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount when he extends the prohibition against murder to the hatred of one’s brother or sister. Characterizing political leaders, or anyone who holds differing opinions, as evil or stupid reflects poorly on the church’s witness.

### **Caring for the Defenceless**

Caring stems from compassion, and compassion is the work of God in human hearts. Emphasizing God’s tenderhearted mercy and grace toward all can be done through preaching and teaching, by prayer and example. Exposure to the plight of the defenceless through mission and service trips,

media presentations, and personal testimonies increases awareness of the need for the application of God's mercy and grace.

Acts of caring that channel God's mercy and grace inside the church include prayer in public worship, communicating respect in speech and print, and remodelling facilities to make them accessible to everyone. The church itself becomes defenceless, in a sense, as a captive audience when it gathers. Regulating the public address system to enhance worship and to avoid hearing damage, being sensitive to visiting individuals and groups to ensure that content and presentation are appropriate, and making considerations for all believers present to participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper reflect an attitude of caring for the defenceless.

The Church extends caring beyond its walls by sending regular financial support to agencies that meet specific needs locally and globally, and by encouraging individuals to participate with such agencies to meet needs. Caring is also extended when individuals of the church become involved in such activities as volunteering in clinics, retirement centres, and safe houses, offering foster care, and providing home maintenance and other services to the aged and disabled. These outward acts are as valuable to the body of Christ as involvement within the church.

### **Decisions Regarding Life and Death**

To state in the confession that "ultimate decisions regarding life and death belong to God" reminds us of the opportunity the church has to witness to the high value of life and God's sovereignty over it. While the issue of murder is easily seen as wrong, other decisions regarding life and death may be less clear.

### **Medical Issues:**

Pastors, counsellors, and medical personnel are called to help individuals and families sort out complex medical decisions. This must be done with care, recognizing that such decisions are often made in times of crisis. As Mennonite Brethren, we do not condone determining the time of death through an act of euthanasia. At the same time, helping to determine when to stop aggressive medical procedures can be an act of compassionate care for both the dying and for those who stand alongside. There are times when it is quite appropriate to refuse treatment (for example, when disease is already widespread), or to reject the use of artificial life-support systems. These kinds of decisions are best made in community—with the individual, the family, the physician, and a praying church family cooperating and seeking a wise decision.

Encouraging people to donate organs can be a life-affirming act in the



midst of what is often personal tragedy. The decision to accept or reject an organ transplant should also be carefully considered. The giving or receiving of human organs can be understood as a matter of stewardship. As members of an affluent society with access to abundant medical resources, we may be tempted to see these resources as a part of our natural human rights. We remember again, however, that the dignity of human existence is God-given rather than self-imposed, and caution needs to be exercised in a culture preoccupied with individual rights.

Assisting people to make wise choices in their use of medical technology and resources can serve as a witness to our confidence in God's ultimate care and provision. Nurturing attitudes of gratefulness to God, who is the ultimate healer and sustainer of life, reminds us that our trust is in His care for us. While we greatly value the technology that allows us to sustain and care for life, we must not forget that this earthly life cannot be sustained indefinitely. We also witness to God's grace in the way we endure suffering and approach the end of our earthly life. Helping congregations think about these issues before the point of crisis is wise. There are many Christian doctors and medical personnel who might serve as resource persons for Sunday school classes or other study groups. Those who are suffering or in the last stages of life can be inappropriately marginalized in our congregations if we avoid these important issues.

### **Fertility Issues:**

The Old Testament charge to "be fruitful and multiply" has ethical implications for Christian couples. Many choose to see family planning as a part of responsible stewardship—not only of personal resources but also of the earth's resources. It is appropriate for pastors and counsellors to help couples think through the implications of their decisions regarding birth control methods and fertility procedures. For example, choosing birth control methods that prevent fertilization rather than methods that induce abortion reflects our belief that life is never to be regarded as waste material. It is also appropriate to call for responsible use of fertility drugs and procedures. Methods such as warehousing of fertilized eggs or the use of selective abortion to reduce the risks of multiple births seem an affront to the dignity of human life and God's design for its conception. This can be a very emotional issue for couples who are having difficulty conceiving and great care must be taken in helping couples work through these issues. It must be remembered, however, that our worth in God's eyes and our place in the Christian community are not based on our ability to reproduce. At the same time, to ignore the pain of couples who cannot conceive is to deny a very real grief.

## **Recognizing the Limits of Medical Science**

Pastors who maintain a diet of reading material covering a wide range of current topics and issues, including scientific/medical breakthroughs and treatments, will find themselves better able to recognize limits to the value and use of such findings. However, recognizing such limits and applying them to individual situations may require more discernment than any one pastor can provide. Since application in this area depends largely on individual cases, there are others such as family members and physicians that will share in the responsibility for determining these limits. Good communication and rapport with others in these settings is vital to carrying out the pastor's unique role.

The pastor's role can include assessing a person's underlying beliefs, fears, and spiritual condition, presenting appropriate Scripture, and providing assurance of God's faithfulness and promises through counsel and prayer. In cases where end-of-life decisions are being made, the pastor's role should be readily accepted and offered graciously in support of individuals and families in need.

Positions such as those on local ethics boards are often open to pastors and people within local congregations who have medical/philosophical training and experience. Such opportunities provide unique ways to bear witness to God's sovereignty in matters of life and death.

## **Offering Hope and Healing, Support and Counsel**

Churches offer hope to all through the proclamation of the gospel. This hope is effective for this life and the next. Where individuals have suffered injustice or felt the pain of life-devaluing procedures or situations, the church can do more than speak of salvation's hope to come. Hope is available already to provide freedom from guilt and shame, fear and despair. The Holy Spirit manifests such hope through the church in ministries of healing. As people are invited to receive salvation, so they should be invited to receive healing. Such healing may require confession and repentance, counsel or more medical care. The Bible calls the church to pray, and on occasion, to fast to effect healing.

Hope is evident through ministries of support and counsel. Small groups form an excellent environment for support and invite members of the congregation to participate actively in the ministry of healing. Where more intensive counselling seems necessary, the church can draw on the resources of Christian counsellors and agencies. Pastors should be clear about the limits of their personal abilities to provide counselling services. Developing good working relationships with Christian counsellors increases the ministries of the church and is an effective way to offer hope and healing to those in need.

It must be remembered that many of the decisions concerning life and death are enormously complex. The boundaries between right and wrong are often difficult to determine. We should be cautious in our approach, acknowledging the limits of our knowledge and the ultimate grace of God.