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Lutheran Support for the Pro-Life Movement: A Case of Faith without Works?

Peter J. Scaer

When we look at Lutheran support for the pro-life movement, how far from the truth would it be to say that we are speaking of a case of faith without works? In convention after convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod passes pro-life resolutions by large majorities, verging on unanimity. On paper, we are a tiger. Yet, speaking from personal experience and listening to others, I can say that pro-life groups across the nation often find themselves frustrated with us. They know our pro-life stance, but they do not see us on the front lines, at the rallies or the care centers. Over the years, I have attended numerous LCMS churches, but seldom have I heard the life issue from the pulpit or in Bible studies.

Now, why is this? Is it possible that we have been living in an abortion culture for so long that we have become desensitized to how much it has affected us? While I do not have definitive answers to this vexing issue, I offer here a few observations, as well as a few modest suggestions.

I. The Intellectual Embrace of Abortion

I was at a garage sale some time ago and happened upon an issue of *Reader's Digest*, published in May 1966, the month of my birth. *Reader's Digest* was to me a slice of apple pie. With its folksy stories and mildly amusing anecdotes, it captured a kind of Norman Rockwell vision of America. Feeling nostalgic, I purchased the issue and began to browse. Scattered throughout were ads for "Nudit," a moustache remover for women, "Prunes: the Energy Breakfast Fruit," Emily Post's revised book on etiquette, and even an ad for "Lutheran Brotherhood Insurance." In a decade marked by tumult and upheaval, *Reader's Digest* represented a kind of safe haven, where polite Americans, Lutherans included, could go for gentle humor and wisdom.

Or, at least, that's what I thought. As I made my way down the table of contents, the title of one article jumped out at me: "Let's Speak Out on Abortion," written by none other than Lawrence Lader, co-founder of the

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National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL).¹ As both a political activist and the movement's leading intellectual, Lader authored an influential book, simply titled *Abortion*, in which he argued that the so-called right to privacy that protected birth control (*Griswold v. Connecticut*, 1965) should logically be applied to abortion.² For good reason, Betty Friedan called Lader "the father of the abortion movement."³

An astute strategist, Lader framed the abortion issue in ways that would appeal to middle America's values and fears. His *Reader's Digest* article begins dramatically with the story of an intruder who forces himself into the home of Denver housewife and then gags and assaults her, resulting in pregnancy.⁴ Lader then tells of a mother pregnant with a deformed baby, followed by a report of back alley abortions performed with wire hangers. All of these cases, Lader argues, are good reasons to legalize so-called "therapeutic abortion." A wonderful con artist, Lader paralyzes the reader with fear and then performs his sleight of hand. The term "therapeutic abortion," used originally to speak of saving the life of the mother, opens the door to any physical or emotional malady a woman might face, including what Lader terms "the worn-out mother syndrome."⁵

While Lader dramatizes the plight of the woman in distress, he soft-pedals the abortion procedure, calling it the "simplest and safest" of all

¹ Lader (in)famously organized a demonstration of women pushing empty baby strollers on Mother's Day. He was especially active in churches, organizing ministers who referred patients to abortion clinics.

² Lawrence Lader, *Abortion* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1966). He also authored an unlikely sequel in which he told the story of abortion's political progress leading up to the *Roe v. Wade* decision: *Abortion II* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

³ Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, served as the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and, with Lader and Bernard Nathanson (who later became a pro-life activist), was one of the co-founders of NARAL. NARAL's mission statement was as follows: "NARAL, recognizing the basic human right of a woman to limit her own reproduction, is dedicated to the elimination of all laws and practices that would compel any woman to bear a child against her will. To that end, it proposes to initiate and co-ordinate political, social, and legal action of individuals and groups concerned with providing safe operations by qualified physicians for all women seeking them regardless of economic status" (National Abortion Rights Action League Records, 1968-1976; MC 313. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University. <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch00781> (accessed November 26, 2013).

⁴ Lawrence Lader, "Let's Speak Out on Abortion," *Reader's Digest* (May 1966): 82.

⁵ Lader, "Let's Speak Out on Abortion," 85.

operations."⁶ According to Lader, a "tiny instrument" is used to "scrape the walls of the womb." He adds, "Performed under anesthesia, the operation is painless, and the patient is rarely kept in the hospital more than one night."⁷ Part of the strategy was, of course, to divert attention from the child and minimize the significance of each life. Lader minimizes, for example, the value of fetal tissue, asking, "Does it possess any more sanctity than an appendix or any other human tissue that is commonly excised when the mother's health is threatened?"⁸ One wonders why few saw the contradiction in Lader's claim that abortion was merely the removal of tissue, while the same time claiming that it was necessary to protect the health of the mother.

Lader leaves no stone unturned in his advocacy of abortion. To soothe fears of promiscuity, he writes: "Many of those who insist on the status quo are concerned with the erosion of moral barriers, believing that any liberalization of abortion law would increase promiscuity, particularly in the case of the single girl. This argument is hardly borne out by reality." Legalizing abortion would make abortion safe, not more frequent, argues Lader. "Moreover, real morality is not something that can be based on fear."⁹

Ever the sensitive counselor, Lader reminds us that if a child is not killed, he may suffer. "Meanwhile those who insist that unmarried motherhood is in every case morally preferable to abortion ignore the human cost." As Pearl Buck argued throughout her career, the child bears alone the total burden of his illegitimate birth—even if happily adopted, he may carry a stigma and the burden of psychic damage all his life. The logic is frightening, but typical. It would be better to kill the child than stigmatize her. Children who are not adopted supposedly "wither away in institutions from lack of sufficient love and care. Or, kept by grandmothers or aunts while the mother works, these unwanted children become the flotsam of our depressed neighborhoods making up the core of our problem youth, the prime candidates for delinquency, perversion and jail."¹⁰ Lader, who had previously warned about stigmatized children, now refers to them as potential perverts and criminals. In Lader's world, children have no inherent worth apart from the opinion of others. Thus, he could proclaim that with birth control and abortion our society would be on the

⁶ Lader, "Let's Speak Out on Abortion," 83.

⁷ Lader, "Let's Speak Out on Abortion," 83.

⁸ Lader, *Abortion*, 102.

⁹ Lader, *Abortion*, 233.

¹⁰ Lader, *Abortion*, 233.

verge a new dawn, what he called "The Century of the Wanted Child."¹¹ Never once does he explain why an unwanted child should have to pay for another's lack of desire.

Lastly, Lader addresses the issue from the religious perspective. He speaks of it as "a theological thicket." As was typical, abortion proponents played a game of divide and conquer, marginalizing the Roman Catholic Church, which was by far the strongest opponent of birth control and abortion. The Catholic hierarchy, claims Lader, would prefer that both mother and child die than that an abortion be performed to save a mother's life. Knowing the power of flattery, Lader then notes that the National Council of Churches in Christ had made exceptions for legal abortions when the health or life of the mother was at stake, which as Lader says with a smile, "sets Protestant thinking far in advance of most state laws."¹² And finally, he ends with a gloriously religious proclamation: "The great awakening of society's responsibility will come only with the recognition that family limitation is in fact an affirmative, creative policy."¹³

So it was that Lader peddled the abortion agenda to middle-class suburbia, injecting his poison into the hearts and minds of many Americans, Lutherans included. Perhaps, though, Lader should not get too much credit for originality. His arguments for abortion are, by and large, similar to those made to promote birth control earlier in the twentieth century. This was no accident. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, Lader "stumbled into the abortion issue while working on a biography of Margaret Sanger."¹⁴ Indeed, Lader viewed his life's mission as a natural extension and culmination of Sanger's work. The final chapter of *Abortion* begins with two quotes from Margaret Sanger. "The most far-reaching social development of modern times," Margaret Sanger declared in 1920, "is the revolt of woman against sex servitude."¹⁵ And again, he quotes Sanger, "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously

¹¹ Lader, *Abortion*, 155–166.

¹² Lader, *Abortion*, 233.

¹³ Lader, *Abortion*, 237.

¹⁴ Douglas Martin, "Lawrence Lader, Champion of Abortion Rights, Is Dead at 86," *New York Times*, May 10, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/10/nyregion/10lader.html?_r=0 (accessed November 19, 2013). Indeed, in 1960 Lader had written *Margaret Sanger and the Fight for Birth Control*, to which he added a companion biography, written especially for children, entitled *Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of Birth Control*.

¹⁵ Lader, *Abortion*, 167.

whether she will or will not be a mother."¹⁶ Lawrence Lader, the father of the abortion movement was, intellectually, the son of Margaret Sanger, the mother of the movement to legitimize birth control.

II. Margaret Sanger, Birth Control, and Planned Parenthood

The sixth of eleven children, Margaret Sanger was born in 1883 in Corning, New York. Her father was an atheist, and her mother, a supposedly frail and submissive woman, lost her life to tuberculosis at the age of forty-eight. After her mother died, Sanger came to resent her father, whom she considered a "tyrant" and a "monster."¹⁷ Her revulsion, however, did not prevent her from making his leftist political views her own.

Indeed, she began her career as a radical leftist and anarchist, launching a newspaper in 1914 titled *Woman Rebel* under the masthead, "No Gods, No Masters." The young editor urged women "to look the whole world in the face with a go-to-hell look in the eyes; to speak and act in the defiance of convention."¹⁸ She spoke specifically to women living in poverty whose health was jeopardized by child bearing. With an ear for the dramatic, she writes, "Women whose weary pregnant, shapeless bodies refuse to accommodate themselves to their husbands' desires, find husbands looking with lustful eyes upon other women, sometimes upon their own little daughters of six or seven years of age."¹⁹ She warned against the emptiness of religion, while her co-conspirator Alice Groff declared that "the marriage bed is the most degenerating influence in the social order."²⁰

In the years that followed, Sanger traveled to Europe, where her life's work came into greater focus. During her time in England, she met Havelock Ellis, a world renowned sex expert with whom she had an affair and from whom she learned the liberating power of the sexual experience. Not surprisingly, Sanger attached herself to the free love movement, and in time divorced her first husband and moved into an open marriage and a

¹⁶ Lader, *Abortion*, 167.

¹⁷ Margaret Sanger, *The Autobiography of Margret Sanger* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 42-43.

¹⁸ David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 1.

¹⁹ Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931), 48.

²⁰ Alice Groff, "The Marriage Bed," in *The Woman Rebel* 1, no. 5 (May 1914), 39.

long series of lovers, including such luminaries as eugenicist H. G. Wells.²¹ For Sanger, birth control held the key to fulfillment. Sanger compared the husband-wife relationship to that of priest and his congregation: "How he guards her lest she receive a word, inspire a new thought, and rebellion. How closely he keeps her within the boundary of his own, like a priest who watches and weeds the young ideas to keep them forever within the enclosure of the church."²² For Sanger, the Christian church and traditional marriage had become prisons jealously guarded by priests and husbands. In order to save women from the shackles of marriage, Sanger would need to subvert the churches. Of her struggle, she writes, "Slowly but surely we are breaking down the taboos that surround sex . . . in the so-called Christian communities."²³

If Sanger had any religion, it was sex made possible and free by the sacrament of birth control. In *The Pivot of Civilization*, she writes of birth control as "an ethical necessity" that will bring "control over the primordial forces of nature." While St. Paul spoke about mutuality in marriage, Sanger proclaimed a message of radical autonomy, "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother."²⁴ Indeed, one cannot help but be struck by Sanger's religious fervor as she envisions a time when the church would fall away and a new paradise would open up to the sexually liberated woman. She predicted that "interest in the vague sentimental fantasies of extra-mundane existence would atrophy . . . for in that dawn men and women will have come to the realization, already suggested, that here close at hand is our paradise, our everlasting abode, our Heaven and our eternity." Sanger imagined a new reality in which there would be no heaven, except that which we create on earth. She writes, "Through sex, mankind may attain

²¹ For a brief summary of Sanger's personal life, see Madeline Gray, *Margaret Sanger* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979). See also, Donald De Marco and Benjamin Wiker, *Architects of the Culture of Death* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), esp. 292-294. Her open marriage to Three-in-One Oil magnate J. Noah Slee proved especially beneficial, as he subsequently bankrolled her political activism.

²² Margaret Sanger, *Journal*, November 3-4, 1914, quoted in Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 27.

²³ Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969; originally published by Sanger in 1922); <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1689/1689-h/1689-h.htm> (accessed November 15, 2013).

²⁴ Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 92.

the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, which will light up the only path to paradise."²⁵

Havelock Ellis, Sanger's sexual guide, was influential in another way, for it was he who advised Sanger to moderate her tactics. In one letter, he counseled, "It is no use, however, being too reckless and smashing your head against a blank wall." In order to change the law, one "needs skill even more than one needs strength."²⁶ Previously, Sanger had worked for socialist and communist causes, arguing that birth control would ennoble the working class no longer to "produce children who will become slaves to feed, fight and toil for the enemy—Capitalism."²⁷ Sanger came to realize that this type of message was doomed to failure.

Thus, Sanger began to sell her movement to polite society. Disturbed by the Democratic party's ties to the Roman Catholic Church, she began to work with wealthy Republicans.²⁸ Masterfully playing a game of divide and conquer, Sanger played on the fears of Protestants who were beginning to feel outnumbered in cities like Boston and New York. Instead of peddling a workers' revolution, Sander now promoted birth control as a way to cleanse society of its waste products. Taking her message to the middle and upper classes, Sanger sold birth control as a tool with which to weed humanity's garden. In *Pivot of Civilization*, for instance, she calls immigrants and poor people "human weeds, reckless breeders . . . human beings that should never have been born."²⁹ She promoted birth control as a method "to create a race of thoroughbreds."³⁰ Sanger wrote, "More children from the fit, less from the unfit—that is the chief aim of birth control."³¹ Her goal was a better society through eugenics, so that America would no longer "multiply racial handicaps." Sanger held forth a grand vision of the new American melting pot: "We shall see that it will save the precious metals of racial culture, fused into an amalgam of physical perfection, mental strength, and spiritual progress."³² Indeed, it is not without

²⁵ Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*.

²⁶ Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 30.

²⁷ Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 110.

²⁸ As Kennedy notes, "In the 1930s, Mrs. Sanger found that argument especially well-received among those who opposed New Deal welfare legislation." *Birth Control in America*, 117.

²⁹ Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*.

³⁰ Margaret Sanger, *Birth Control Review* 5, no. 11 (November 1921): 2.

³¹ Sanger, *Birth Control Review* 3, no. 5 (May 1919): 12.

³² Sanger, *Women and the New Race*, 45.

reason that after World War II, Nazi leaders claimed to have been influenced by ideas imported from America.³³

Indeed, there was a racist undertone to the movement. In her own biography, Sanger tells of her experiences offering over a dozen lectures to various chapters of the Ku Klux Klan.³⁴ As Sanger wrote elsewhere, "We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population . . . [but it may occur to] any of their more rebellious members."³⁵

Sanger also began to advocate birth control as an answer to the world's supposed problem of overpopulation. Thomas Malthus, and those who followed him, taught that children were not a blessing but a burden on the planet. Many, influenced by Malthusian notions of overpopulation and limited resources, openly worried that the planet was reaching a breaking point. Sanger capitalized on this fear by promoting her movement globally in places like Europe and Japan, saying that overpopulation threatened domestic prosperity and was one of the major causes of war. The key, of course, was birth control.

Finally, Sanger advocated birth control as way to plan a family that was happy, healthy, and wealthy. She has become forever tied to the sinister axiom, "Every child a wanted child."

Sanger, was of course quite successful in her endeavors. Having founded the "American Birth Control League" in 1921, and then having served as the first president of Planned Parenthood, Sanger's vision took hold in society and became part of the American culture. While Sanger began her career as an outlaw, her movement triumphed magnificently, so much so that when Planned Parenthood went international, its honorary co-chairs were Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Many of the Protestant churches that at first had opposed her completely fell under her spell. The rebel was now regnant.

³³ Edwin Black, "The Horrifying American Roots of Nazi Eugenics," *History News Network* (September 2003), <http://hnn.us/article/1796> (accessed November 26, 2013).

³⁴ Sanger, *The Autobiography of Margret Sanger*, 366–367.

³⁵ Margaret Sanger commenting on the "Negro Project" in a letter to Dr. Clarence Gamble, December 10, 1939. <http://smithlibraries.org/digital/files/original/d6358bc3053c93183295bf2df1c0c931.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2013).

III. Smitten: Sanger in the LCMS

For a particularly interesting example of Sanger's influence, consider the work of LCMS theologian Alfred Rehwinkel.³⁶ It is no coincidence that Rehwinkel's book title contains the names of both the organization and the movement founded by Sanger. On the back cover of *Planned Parenthood* we read, "Dr. Rehwinkel is eminently qualified to discuss planned parenthood. He was among the few who pioneered open discussion of planned parenthood and has followed its developments for 20 years."

Rehwinkel was, in fact, a great admirer of Sanger. The fourth chapter of his book is titled "The Planned Parenthood Movement, Its Struggle for Recognition, and Its Status in America Today." Here Rehwinkel introduces us to his heroine, claiming that Sanger "happily married, was the mother of three children, but later in life separated from her husband, but was not divorced until years later."³⁷ In reality, Sanger, was involved in the free-love movement early on, had many, many affairs, both during and after her first marriage, and entered into a second marriage with the proviso that it be open. Her own children described her as an indifferent and largely absentee mother, often uncomfortable in their presence.³⁸ Sanger's views of marriage as a degenerating and enslaving institutions were widely known; indeed, she had thoroughly documented them herself.³⁹

Despite Sanger's views on marriage and family, Rehwinkel focuses on her sympathy for the poor and downtrodden. He speaks of how Sanger "saw the poverty, the misery, the desperation of weakened pregnant women, the appalling housing conditions, the devastating effect of the criminal abortionist."⁴⁰ Sanger's catalog of suffering would seem to match St. Paul's. Rehwinkel writes, "Very few men or women had the courage to

³⁶ Alfred M. Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood and Birth Control in the Light of Christian Ethics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959). Rehwinkel (1887-1979) taught theology at Concordia College (Edmonton), served as president of Saint John's College (Winfield, Kansas), and finally taught as a professor at Concordia Seminary (Saint Louis).

³⁷ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 32.

³⁸ Supposedly, Sanger suffered from a "nervous malady" whenever she had to take care of her children and thus spent very little time with them. Her son Grant said, "Mother was seldom around. She just left us with anybody handy, and ran off we didn't know where." Gray, *Margaret Sanger*, 61.

³⁹ We should add Sanger's life story was well-known in LCMS circles. In *For Better Not for Worse*, Walter A. Maier noted Sanger's association with the free love movement, as well as her militant atheism. See Walter A. Maier, *For Better Not for Worse: A Manual of Christian Matrimony* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing house, 1935).

⁴⁰ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 33.

share with her the odium of public disapproval, though they might share her general ideas. She was harassed by law enforcement agencies, repeatedly suffered imprisonment, and even her husband had to go to jail for a considerable time merely for having handed to an investigator a pamphlet published by his wife on the use of contraceptives."⁴¹ Rehwinkel, however, does not mention that Sanger wanted to eliminate not only poverty but also the poor and the weak. Consider Sanger's words in *Pivot of Civilization*: "Every single case of inherited defect, every malformed child, every congenitally tainted human being brought into this world is of infinite importance to that poor individual; but it is of scarcely less importance to the rest of us and to all of our children who must pay in one way or another for these biological and racial mistakes."⁴²

Rehwinkel shared Sanger's concern for overpopulation, writing that "unless some solution is found, the world is rapidly rushing on toward the greatest economic crisis in history, and the standard of living throughout all the world will be brought down to the level, or even below the level, of the hungry peasants of India and Egypt."⁴³ Whatever one thinks of Rehwinkel's advice, it is hardly consonant with Christ's teaching about mammon and children; it is, in fact the same type of rhetoric used by Sanger to win over an aspiring middle class.

Like Sanger, Rehwinkel promoted birth control as a means of bettering society: "Again, society may demand the curtailment or control of pregnancy in cases where the parents are suffering from economic or industrial disability and are either unwilling or incapable of supporting their offspring."⁴⁴ "Economic disability," of course, could mean simply that a family was poor. Rehwinkel also seems to treat pregnancy as a type of ailment that could endanger health. He writes, "A woman does not reach her full physical and psychological maturity until about the age of twenty-two or twenty-three. Pregnancy and childbirth are a great drain on the vitality and the health of the woman."⁴⁵

The way Rehwinkel organizes his thinking is illustrative of his dependence on Planned Parenthood propaganda. Take for instance, his chapter on "The Practice and Methods of Birth Control in the History of the Human Race." Addressing the topic of abortion, he breaks it down in

⁴¹ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 35.

⁴² See Sanger, "Women and the Future," chapter 12 in *Pivot of Civilization*.

⁴³ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 14.

⁴⁴ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 12.

⁴⁵ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 10.

this way: 1) Embryonic and fetal abortion, depending on whether a child is aborted before or after the fourth month; 2) Spontaneous Abortion (miscarriages); 3) Therapeutic Abortions (by "therapeutic abortion" is meant the removal of the unborn new life by competent physicians and in conformity with the existing laws of a state or country in order to save the life of the pregnant mother); 4) Criminal Abortion. "By 'criminal abortion' is meant one that is produced voluntarily and intentionally in violation of the law in order to terminate an undesirable pregnancy by a married or unmarried woman."⁴⁶

Here, as elsewhere, Rehwinkel receives and imparts the wisdom of Planned Parenthood without critique. To be sure, doctors did distinguish between "embryonic" and "fetal" abortion, but is there a theological distinction? This would have been the place for Rehwinkel to assert that all life is precious from the moment of conception, even as Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and so became a human being. But he does not. Likewise problematic is Rehwinkel's category of "Criminal Abortion." Does this not imply that if it were to be made legal, then it would be somehow less of a sin? The term "therapeutic abortion" is likewise problematic, as we have seen in the work of Lawrence Lader. It is one thing to say that abortion may be morally justified to save the life of the mother. But Rehwinkel notes that some physicians were already advocating laws that

permit a legal abortion to preserve a woman's future health if she has a disease likely to be aggravated by a pregnancy. Also to eliminate grossly defective children and to guard an emotionally unbalanced woman from a possible mental breakdown. Some doctors even go so far as to advocate that therapeutic abortion be permitted to spare a woman a shame resulting from an illegitimate child or from the consequences of rape or incest."⁴⁷

Having placed these opinions on the table, one would expect Rehwinkel to argue the Christian position that the life inside the womb is a child, created by God, and is precious no matter the circumstances of the conception. One might also expect a strong rebuke against those who advocated abortions for children with birth defects or in cases of rape and incest. Certainly, he should have addressed the issue of shame. But Rehwinkel is silent. He offers only a weak summary: "If a therapeutic abortion becomes imperative to save the mother's life, such an operation cannot be regarded as a violation of the Moral Law."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 21.

⁴⁷ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 22.

⁴⁸ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 22.

It is also striking that Rehwinkel, rather than embracing natural law, seems to fight against it. For instance, he argues that birth control is part of man's dominion over nature. He writes, "As a creature of God, man is at the same time subject to the law of nature, and lord and master over it. He is free to control, to modify, and to change nature to serve his own purpose."⁴⁹ Then, he applies what appears to be a kind of colonialist mindset to the human body, adding that "the history of human civilization is a record of man's conquest, control, and modification of nature to serve his own best interest."⁵⁰ If Rehwinkel had meant that men have built dams for the sake of irrigation, one could understand his point, but in the context of speaking about the human body, his argument is subversive. There is nothing here approaching a theology of the body or an appreciation of natural law. This neglect of the natural law would later put the Lutherans at a great disadvantage as they began to speak out in the public square on issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

Whatever one thinks of Rehwinkel's work, a prophet he was not. In the latter part of the work, he addresses the fear that a contraceptive society will result in a shrinking population. Assuring his readers, Rehwinkel writes, "Birth control is not intended to limit families to one, two, or three children . . . Planned parenthood and normal-sized families are not mutually exclusive terms. When conditions warrant it, there are, and there always have been and can be, families of many children, within the concept of birth control."⁵¹ Certainly that is not the message of the book cover, which displays the perfect couple with their one, perfect child, nor was this Sanger's message. In *Woman and the New Race*, the title of one of the chapters says it all: "The Wickedness of Creating Large Families." Indeed, Sanger writes, "The most serious evil of our times is that of encouraging the bringing into the world of large families. The most immoral practice of the day is breeding too many children."⁵² Had Rehwinkel, an expert on Planned Parenthood, not read Sanger's books? Or, perhaps he thought he could offer a Christian version of Sanger's philosophy.

In retrospect, we can see that Sanger's vision became reality; she proved the true prophet. The birthrate in countries infected by Sanger's philosophy, including places like Japan, Europe, and the United States, is drastically low, to the point of being unsustainable, and has become an increasing cause for concern. Indeed, within our own church body, we

⁴⁹ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 89.

⁵⁰ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 89.

⁵¹ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 104.

⁵² Sanger, *Women and the New Race*, 57.

hear the constant refrain, "Where are the children? Why aren't there more young people?" Our own aging church body appears to be yet another dead fruit of Sanger's religion.

As to those who wondered whether the use of contraceptives would lead to sexual immorality, Rehwinkel proved again a poor prophet. He writes, "But Christians are not made virtuous or kept from violating the Moral Law of God by fear of physical or social consequences. Christians do not lead a moral or decent life because of pressure from without but are led by motives from within . . . It is not the business of the church to make people virtuous by fear or by force."⁵³ This same argument, as we have already seen, was later would be used by to promote the legalization of abortion.⁵⁴

What is clearly lacking, one can say in hindsight, is wisdom. The book of Proverbs warns not simply about sin, but about entering into situations where bad things are almost sure to happen. So now we know the reality every pastor faces, for there is hardly a couple today that does not co-habitate before marriage. Even more, Rehwinkel's advice is painfully naïve and other worldly. While he speaks about a Christian's individual moral choice, he has nothing to say about what such behavior will do to society. He says nothing of young people who will be encouraged to use contraceptives, only to find that they sometimes do not work. He says nothing about what this uncoupling of sex and marriage would do to the institution of marriage, or what would become of the children.⁵⁵ Instead, as we see in the Planned Parenthood literature, the issue is simply framed as an individual moral choice.

While Rehwinkel draws heavily from the reasoning of Sanger, it is also true that he argues directly against abortion in a number of places. He calls abortion "a universal evil among all peoples of the world" and then labels "willful abortion" a sin.⁵⁶ In answer to the question "Do the principles applicable to the use of contraceptives also apply to the practice of abortion?" Rehwinkel offers "an emphatic no."⁵⁷ He speaks against "criminal abortion," saying, "Since it is the willful destruction of human life, it must be placed in the category of murder. Christians will not burden their conscience with this crime."⁵⁸ Yet, even here, Rehwinkel's thinking is

⁵³ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 103.

⁵⁴ See n. 9.

⁵⁵ Walter A. Maier, *For Better Not for Worse*, 399–400.

⁵⁶ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 23–24.

⁵⁷ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 93.

⁵⁸ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 93.

affected by Sanger's vision; he appears more concerned with the conscience of the one having an abortion than he is with the life of the child. This type of thinking, as we shall see, became widespread, even in our own church body, where abortion was talked about in terms of conscience and as a personal and private decision. Soon, of course, there would be no such thing as a criminal abortion, and Christians would in fact, have abortions in great numbers.

IV. Birth Control: A Trojan Horse

The fact that a LCMS theologian as well regarded as Alfred Rehwinkel could write the book that he wrote reveals the sad truth that many Lutherans of that time were seasoned and softened for the advent of legalized abortion by first drinking the birth control Kool-Aid. Children came to be viewed as a decidedly mixed blessing, with financial ramifications. Mother Theresa once supposedly quipped, "How can you say there are too many children? That is like saying there are too many flowers."⁵⁹ Not so Rehwinkel's book or the thinking in the church that was becoming prevalent at that time.

In retrospect, Rehwinkel's book appears to be little more than a Christian endorsement and commercial for Planned Parenthood. Every age has its blindspots, and none of us knows precisely what the future holds. Nevertheless, Rehwinkel's advice is haunting. He urged confused women to go to the experts: "Attention may also be called to planned parenthood clinics found in most of the larger cities of the United State. They are staffed with professional personnel to serve with expert advice and aid. In most cases they will be listed in the telephone directory under "Planned Parenthood Association."⁶⁰ Sadly, many took his advice, and still do.

Rehwinkel's book was popular, selling 50,000 copies in three separate printings, and won over the LCMS to birth control. Rehwinkel had to have known that Sanger's well was poison; perhaps in extreme naivete he thought he could sanitize or even baptize the movement. This naivete has persisted for many years, as evidenced in Ronald Stelzer's *Salt, Light, and Signs of the Times*, published in 1993. Stelzer writes,

Movements in which Rip [Rehwinkel's nickname] had been a pioneer mover, or at least a strong supporter, were going out of control. A classic example is planned parenthood. Rip originally staked a claim

⁵⁹ These words are likely a highly paraphrased form of Mother Teresa's teachings. See Mother Teresa of Calcutta Center Online, http://www.motherteresa.org/08_info/Quotesf.html (accessed November 20, 2013).

⁶⁰ Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood*, 93.

on this Christian no man's land in order to equip God's people to make enlightened ethical decisions appropriate to the moral complexities of the modern world. Rip's survey of this untilled territory eventually became normative for most of God's people, but when secularists adopted the cause, it was without the stabilizing norm."⁶¹

Stelzer's assessment, while charitable, is off the mark. The secularists were in fact the true pioneers. It may be that Rehwinkel carried the Planned Parenthood agenda, like a Trojan horse, into the minds of our people. Or perhaps, he simply ratified a societal process that was inevitable. Either way, when Lawrence Lader led the fight for legalized abortion, our church body was unprepared for the fight.

V. The "Meddling Church": Missteps and Baby Steps

When abortion became a hot political issue in the late 1960s and early 70s, the Roman Catholic Church was nearly alone at the demonstrations and protests. What kept Bible-believing Protestants from manning the front lines? Again, by way of anecdotal evidence, we may turn to the *Reader's Digest* of May 1966. Alongside the article endorsing abortion there was another, written by conservative philanthropist J. Howard Pew, titled "Should the Church 'Meddle' in Civil Affairs?" Pew openly worried about two issues:

I am concerned that many of the church's top leaders today—especially in what are called the "mainstream" denominations—are sorely failing its members in two ways: 1) by succumbing to a creeping tendency to downgrade the Bible as the infallible Word of God, and 2) by efforts to shift the church's main thrust from spiritual to the secular. The two, I believe, are related."⁶²

Pew discusses the church's role in society and urges restraint: "To commit the church, as a corporate body, to controversial positions on which its members differ sharply is to divide the church into warring camps, stirring dissension in the one place where spiritual unity should prevail."⁶³ Pew's article explains much. Conservative Christians by and large had no taste for the 1960s radicals and their civil disobedience. Protests and picket lines belonged to the politics of the left and were activities in which law-abiding

⁶¹ Ronald W. Stelzer, *Salt, Light, and Signs of the Times* (New Haven, Missouri: Lutheran News, 1993), 219.

⁶² J. Howard Pew, "Should the Church 'Meddle' in Civil Affairs?," *Reader's Digest* (May 1966): 52.

⁶³ Pew, "Should the Church 'Meddle' in Civil Affairs?," 52.

Christians did not participate. Above all, social controversy should be avoided. What mattered was the inerrant word of God.

Lutherans, in particular, were prone to this type of thinking. Though Lutheranism was born in a type of revolution, or perhaps because of it, Lutherans have traditionally stressed obedience to earthly authorities, with government serving in *loco parentis*. As an immigrant church, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod felt a special need to assimilate. This problem became especially acute during World War I, when German Americans felt compelled to pledge their allegiance, even to the point of placing the American flag alongside their altars. Lutherans, good and obedient citizens, took to heart Paul's words: "Therefore whoever resists authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" (Rom 13:3).

Granted, Paul's words are sound teaching, but after *Roe v. Wade*, children in the womb had done nothing wrong and had a great deal to fear. Though we knew that it was important to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, Lutherans seemed less eager to hear Peter's cry that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Buying too deeply into the principle of the separation of church and state, much of conservative Christianity, Lutherans included, took the kind of advice offered by Pew and remained silent on abortion. Not wanting to become involved with social issues, and certainly not wanting to be divisive, conservatives treated abortion as a personal and moral choice. This attitude can be seen in the first baby steps the LCMS took into the abortion debate.

In 1966 Lader released both his book *Abortion* and his *Reader's Digest* article. Not ready to take up the issue directly, the LCMS chose at its 1967 synodical convention to refer the issue for study.⁶⁴ Better late than never, the 1971 synodical convention adopted a CTCR statement on abortion: *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects*. Admirably, the document holds that "1. Life is a Gift from God; 2. Human Beings are Created for Eternal Life; 3. Human Life is Created for Fulfillment; 4. Life and Death Belong to the Province of God."⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the report exudes timidity. First, the document is short, as the writers explain in its introduction, "This brevity derives from the conviction that men who are motivated by love of God and faith in Jesus

⁶⁴ The 1967 LCMS convention, held in New York City, answered the challenge with Resolution 2-28: "To refer Diaconate, Work and Leisure, Therapeutic Abortion, Sterilization, and Euthanasia for Study."

⁶⁵ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1971), 1-2.

Christ do not need a detailed set of rules to follow slavishly." Instead of offering strong guidelines or prohibitions, the document encourages readers "to inquire into the general principles given in the Word whereby they can make their own decisions and judgments on the problems of life as they arise." The document ends on a similar note:

Responsible ethical living therefore calls for making personal choices on the basis of validly established principles rather than following a detailed set of regulations in a slavish way. Accordingly, these guidelines are intended to set forth those principles of God's revelation that should guide individuals in making decisions and judgments on the question of abortion as a theological, legal, and medical problem."⁶⁶

The report lacks a prophetic tone, a clear statement, or an emphatic imperative. When the church needed a clear trumpet, she received an essay in ethics.

As was typical at the time, abortion was treated almost entirely as a personal ethical decision. Missing is a discussion of the child itself, or any serious consideration of what it means to be human, as defined by creation and the incarnation. The church, for whatever reason, was not willing to say, "Don't have an abortion." Instead, the document gives too much weight to the experts, especially the legal and medical community. Scripture is quoted as authoritative, but then, under section three, "Medical Aspects," there is a long quotation taken from the American Medical Association's (AMA) position on abortion, as well as the AMA's Judicial Council. The document, in retrospect, appears naïve, assuming that doctors and lawyers held a certain moral authority. In fact, the AMA had nothing to offer except that abortion be done by "a duly licensed physician" and "in conformance with standards of good medical practice."⁶⁷ The CTCR then notes that Christian physicians are "guided by Biblical revelation, while the non-Christian physician is not."⁶⁸

The document then claims that even if abortion is legalized, Christians will continue to act according to God's law, which declares abortion to be a sin. This was, of course, wishful thinking. The document does not take into account that legal abortion would result not only in the death of more children but also in the destruction of the faith of many involved in the procedure. The document then addresses the non-Christian: "But because the proposed permissive legislation would cause non-Christian brothers to

⁶⁶ *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects*, 4.

⁶⁸ *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects*, 5.

stumble, the Christian will continue to hope that the laws will reflect the teachings of Holy Scripture on this issue." Oddly, the concern is for the stumbling of the non-Christian brother rather than for the child who will be put to death by the one having an abortion. When Lutherans might have been spurred to action, they were instead only encouraged to "hope."

Strikingly, the report offers no real discussion of natural law. The CTCR concedes, "Few will question the abstract constitutional and legal right of the people to substitute for existing laws a policy of official permissiveness on the part of the state in respect to abortion."⁶⁹ The CTCR concedes that the argument against abortion is mainly, if not entirely, a biblical one. This is where a discussion of natural law should have taken place, but is absent, even as it was in Rehwinkel's discussion of birth control. Though living in a nation whose own credo is that every person is endowed by his creator with the inalienable gift of life, the document remains silent and concedes that the laws against abortion are arguably nothing more than "the religious credo of a minority or a diminishing majority."⁷⁰ Thus, the CTCR is left to say only that abortion is a sin, because God's word says so, as if that word were not based on a fundamental reality that recognizes the inherent dignity of human life.

While the LCMS was officially on record as being pro-life, that message was not always getting out to its pastors and people. In fact, for a time, the Synod sent out decidedly mixed signals. In 1976, Concordia Publishing House released two books on counseling by Eldon Weisheit: *Should I Have an Abortion?* and its companion *Abortion: Resources for Pastoral Counseling*. These books are remarkable in that they followed the Planned Parenthood template, according to which decisions about abortion should be left up to the personal decision of the woman in consultation with her doctor and trusted advisors.

Throughout the books, Weisheit recommends a sensitive approach when dealing with women struggling with the question of abortion. As Weisheit explains in his preface, "Since this is a people book, it is not to be rated as being for or against abortion."⁷¹ For Weisheit it was all about making a good decision. And so, Weisheit ends the work with this open-ended advice, "It is important for you now to make the best possible choice as you consider your own situation. But it is also important that your decision fit into the plan you see in your own life. Let this decision

⁶⁹ *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Abortion: Theological, Legal, and Medical Aspects*, 4.

⁷¹ Eldon Weisheit, *Should I Have an Abortion?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976), 11.

lead you towards your goals in life, not away from them.”⁷² With striking moral ambiguity, Weisheit offers no direct guidance, no word from the Lord. What is also notable is the kind of self-centeredness that Weisheit encourages. He speaks of “you” making the best decision, and “you considering your own situation,” and again about “your goals in life.” Weisheit’s message would have been especially soothing to those young women seeking empowerment. This message also had a ready audience in would-be grandmothers, who wanted the best for their own daughters whose goals in life surely included college and professional careers. Weisheit supposedly wrote this as a “people book,” but has precious little to say about the person who is most affected by the abortion, namely, the little child.

Consider also the advice that Weisheit gives to would-be counselors, surely many of them pastors. “The counselor needs to be aware of medical facts and resources. Where can an abortion be obtained? What is the cost? What are the circumstances? What method will be used? When must it be done?”⁷³ Now, this is remarkable. Instead, of saying that a pastor should become aware of pro-life counselors, he must instead have, presumably the name, number, and address of the local abortionist ready at hand in his Rolodex.

If the goal was to make abortion palatable for Christians, one could not find better resources than the books of Weisheit. As women make decisions concerning abortions, Weisheit encourages them to think through the implications of their choices. Weisheit writes, “If you are determined to have an abortion, go to a doctor who is well regarded in your community. He will give you proper medical advice.” As with Rehwinkel and the 1971 CTCR document, one is struck by such reliance on authority figures who are presumably wise and good. Ever the sensitive counselor, Weisenheit adds,

The experience of an abortion may make you grateful it was available or it may make you regret either the need for an abortion or the decision to have done it. Do not let yourself get into a position of always having to defend your course of action. Be willing to grow from it, knowing that growth always involves change. You have not always been right in your decisions 100 percent of the time in past decisions. Your security as a person does not depend your totally being right this time.⁷⁴

⁷² Weisheit, *Should I Have an Abortion?*, 101.

⁷³ Weisheit, *Should I Have an Abortion?*, 111

⁷⁴ Weisheit, *Should I Have an Abortion?*, 96.

With the admitted advantage of hindsight, such “advice” is beyond belief. Weisheit speaks of abortion only as a moral decision that will need wise counseling. Advising the woman that she should not beat herself up or defend herself for not scoring 100 on the test, nothing is said of the fact that her child is now dead because of her personal decision and the act of a “well regarded” physician.

Or, consider Weisheit’s questions for women who are contemplating keeping their child. “The special questions for you to face are: Will the problem that has made me consider an abortion become a problem for the child? Or will it remain a problem for me and therefore cause problems for the child? Would a baby add extra strain on me and make my problems even greater?”⁷⁵ Weisheit plays the role of the serpent, offering the possibility that not having an abortion will lead to greater pain.

Weisheit seems not to be able to help himself as he encourages women and counselors to play a game of “What If?” Eldon advises the pregnant woman to “imagine what your relationship with God would be after an abortion. Will you want to avoid Him? Will you feel a need to make up for something you have done wrong? Will you feel He has helped you through a problem?” What shameful words. Weisheit, the counselor, leaves open the option of thinking about abortion as God’s solution to one’s problem.

How were Weisheit’s books received? *Lutheran Women’s Quarterly* commended the books, calling them “open ended.”⁷⁶ Kurt Marquart, on the contrary, understood the danger of such open-endedness. In an aptly worded essay titled “Killing with Kindness,” he wrote: “Unsuspecting Christian women naturally trust that no deadly poison will be dispensed through church-related publications. The open-ended Weisheit books constitute, in the deepest biblical sense of the word, a skandolan. Good Lord deliver us.”⁷⁷ Indeed Weisheit’s books injected the Planned Parenthood poison into the mainstream of our church and are a shameful reminder of the need to be ever vigilant.

In addition to Marquart, another theologian who spoke unequivocally against abortion in those early years was David Scaer.⁷⁸ Shortly after the legalization of abortion in 1973, he spoke presciently of abortion as our

⁷⁵ Weisheit, *Should I Have an Abortion?*, 97.

⁷⁶ *Lutheran Women’s Quarterly* (Fall 1976), 24.

⁷⁷ Kurt E. Marquart, “Killing with Kindness,” *CTQ* 41, no. 1 (January 1977): 49.

⁷⁸ David P. Scaer, “Abortion: A Moment for Conscientious Reflection,” *The Springfielder* 36, no. 3 (December 1972): 180-184.

American holocaust, challenging Lutherans to stand, this time, on the right side of history. He spoke not of a moral choice, but of the inherent value of the unborn child. He argued that the one inside the womb is indeed a human being whose life is defined by the incarnation of Christ, who as the embryonic child redeemed all embryonic children. To those who speak of unwanted children, he claimed that every child is wanted by God. Though Lutherans perhaps never acted on his word, he suggested boycotts of doctors and hospitals that performed abortions, and even suggested that nurses baptize aborted children with life still in them. As he saw it, "Such actions might only be candles in the wind, but sometimes little candles have started large fires."⁷⁹ In retrospect, perhaps, not much came of this advice, though his final word is haunting: "In this matter, I would rather stand guilty for having done too much to halt it, than too little or nothing to stop it."⁸⁰

Such a principled stand was, in those early years, the exception rather than the rule. One might have hoped, for example, that good counseling and education about abortion would be found in *The Lutheran Witness*, which had long been one of the Synod's primary teaching tools. For some time, however, the magazine offered very little discussion on the matter, and sadly, at first, the advice was quite bad.

The January 1973 issue, published just one month before the Roe v. Wade decision, included a full-page book review by Oscar E. Feucht of David Mace's *Abortion: The Agonizing Decision*. The book's title was typical of the time as proponents attempted to frame the debate in terms of personal choice. In 1968, for example, Bantam published *The Terrible Choice: The Abortion Dilemma*. In 1971, Indiana University Press published *The Agonizing Choice: Birth Control, Religion, and the Law*. In his review, Feucht introduces Mace as "an internationally known authority on marriage and marriage counseling, a social scientist with a Christian frame of reference, to write this much needed book."⁸¹ Again, we see the deference given authority figures.

The book is based upon the story of a woman given the name Helen who is faced with the agonizing decision of abortion. We are brought into her inner thoughts during this terrible time. Helen wonders to herself, "Abortion is a decision to take life—only a beginning of human life, it's true, and mind you, I think this could be justified for good enough reasons.

⁷⁹ Scaer, "Abortion: A Moment for Conscientious Reflection," 184.

⁸⁰ Scaer, "Abortion: A Moment for Conscientious Reflection," 184.

⁸¹ Oscar Feucht, "Book Review of *Abortion: The Agonizing Decision*," *The Lutheran Witness* 92 (January 1973), 15.

But I've got to be very sure my reasons are good enough."⁸² Remarkably, Feucht offers no critique of Helen's assessment. Though a Lutheran, he doesn't criticize her obvious attempts at self-justification, nor does he question her evaluation of the child as "only a beginning of human life." Feucht then notes that the book encourages counseling the explores questions such as: "Keep the child? Give the child up for adoption? Abort the child? Each of these questions involves problems." So the book review reveals again a deep-seated moral ambiguity. That Feucht could recommend this book is deeply disturbing.

The emphasis on personal choice permeates Mace's book, which he concludes with this epilogue:

It doesn't really matter what Helen decided. She clearly understood her options and she made the choice to the best of her ability. It was not my task as her counselor to influence her one way or the other—only to help her freely to decide for herself. And now, you also have to decide. I cannot know what your decision will be. But it is my hope that as a result of reading this book, you now understand the issues more clearly, and this will enable you to "take your destiny in your own two hands" and to make a choice you can live with comfortably in the coming years.⁸³

Again, the advice is breathtakingly shallow and selfish, without a thought for the life of the child who will die uncomfortably and with no chance of seeing the coming years. What does Feucht in his *Lutheran Witness* review say of this work? Again, he appeals to the author's authority and expert knowledge, saying, "It comes from an internationally known authority on marriage and family life who has been a cherished contributor to Lutheran conferences on ministry to families." However cherished Mace may have been, his advice was deadly and callous, as was Oscar Feucht's review. The author, who in the previous decade had written *Everyone a Minister*, could not bring himself at this pivotal moment in history to take a stand in a lowly book review and simply say, "Every unborn child a person." This was the position marked out by *The Lutheran Witness* on the eve of the Roe v. Wade decision.

The topic of abortion appears again in July 1976 issue of *The Lutheran Witness*, coinciding with the nation's bicentennial and addressing, appropriately enough, the issue of church and state. The author of the article, certainly an authority figure, was none other than Paul Simon, the would-

⁸² David R. Mace, *Abortion: The Agonizing Decision* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 86.

⁸³ Mace, *Abortion: The Agonizing Decision*, 139.

be senator who had served as Illinois' lieutenant Governor and U.S. Congressman. Indeed, guided by a strong moral compass he had begun his career as a crusader against gambling and prostitution. In his article, Simon urged Christians to become involved in politics as part of their responsibility "to be concerned about the poor and the sick and the handicapped—and particularly the hungry," for these issues can be addressed most effectively "in the arena of politics." Abortion, the killing of the unborn, was, however, another matter. Simon writes, "Another church-state issue that is much more complicated than most people believe is the abortion issue. People with strong religious convictions are on both sides, each side claiming that if you do not support them you are violating Christian principle. Obviously, both sides can't be right." To those Christians frustrated with abortion, Simon writes, "People who write to me see this issue (and most issues) as clear cut. They often do not understand the complexities of either the legislation or the problems which our society confronts."⁸⁴ So, according to this way of thinking, if some evil or misguided Christians support abortion, all Christians should remain silent. With Christian friends like these, the unborn didn't need enemies.

But there were friends on the horizon. By the early 1980s, a prophetic voice was rising up within the LCMS, not from its elected leaders so much as from its faithful women. First on the scene was Jean Garton, whose book *Who Broke the Baby*, helped decode the euphemisms and lay bare the deceptions of the abortion movement.⁸⁵ *The Lutheran Witness* also repositioned itself as it opened its pages to this new way of framing the abortion debate. For example, in July 1982 Garton wrote "Abortion" for a continuing feature called "A Faith to Live By." Refreshingly, she spoke about abortion not simply as a moral decision, but specifically about "the unborn children and their right to life."⁸⁶ Then, in January 1983, Carolyn Blum, herself involved in "Lutherans For Life," wrote "Abortion and Apathy," in which she spoke of the unborn as "human beings," and urged readers to pray for the unborn, support pro-life education, and become politically involved. She wrote heroically, saying, "God's law is constant. His word that unborn children are valuable in His sight is still true. Man's law is changeable. The Supreme Court decision proclaimed that abortion-on-demand is legal for all nine months of pregnancy. The law can be

⁸⁴ Paul Simon, *The Lutheran Witness* 95 (July 1976): 5.

⁸⁵ Jean S. Garton, *Who Broke the Baby* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1979). See also Garton's account of the origins of Lutherans For Life below (337-341).

⁸⁶ Jean S. Garton, "Abortion," *The Lutheran Witness* 101 (July 1982), 25.

changed."⁸⁷ In November 1983, we find "A Prophetic Statement of Today's Holocaust," again authored by a woman, Robin Mueller, who wrote about abortion as a holocaust worse than Hitler's, and one for which our nation will be held accountable.⁸⁸ What is striking about these three articles, all written by women, is how forcefully they challenged the status quo, and how they framed the issue as one that needed to be countered both culturally and politically. By the early 1980s, it would seem, our church body was better prepared to tackle the abortion issue. Yet, our movement has remained slow. How might this change?

VI. Preachers Must Be Silent No More

While the Synod has over the years passed one resolution for life after another, why is it that members of our congregations have been so slow to rally to the cause? Why do the same Lutherans who sit in the pews not march in the streets or volunteer at the clinics? During my admittedly brief time in the parish, I worked to promote pro-life issues with only modest success. As part of a public expression of support for life, I recruited members to join in a "Life Chain," during which people of goodwill stood side-by-side along the streets of Indianapolis. Our congregation also offered some support to a local crisis pregnancy center founded to aid and care for pregnant women who were frightened or alone. However, I found recruiting difficult. A few people heartily joined in, but many remained silent and avoided the topic altogether. Why? Could it be that abortion has affected our fellow Christians as much as it has affected society as a whole?

Planned Parenthood is more than a provider of abortions; they understand that women are their customers. Birth control pills and devices are sold, with the knowledge that they will fail. According to their website, "Abortion is a safe and legal procedure." They soon add, "Abortions are very common. In fact, 1 out of 3 women in the U.S. have an abortion by the time they are 45 years old."⁸⁹ Of course, this is not simply a presentation of the facts, but a method of recruiting. If one in three women has an abortion, then it must be all right. But Planned Parenthood says nothing about the lingering pain and guilt that many feel after having an abortion.

⁸⁷ Carolyn Blum, "Abortion and Apathy," *The Lutheran Witness* 102 (January 1983): 21.

⁸⁸ Robin Mueller, "A Prophetic Statement of Today's Holocaust," *The Lutheran Witness* 102 (November 1983): 3.

⁸⁹ Planned Parenthood, "Abortion is a safe and legal way to end pregnancy." <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/abortion-4260.asp> (accessed November 20, 2013).

Some groups have stepped up to address this problem. "Silent No More," for instance, was formed by women who had abortions but now regret their decision. The problem, as I have seen it, is that women who have had abortions carry with them a special guilt. That guilt is often carried not only by the women, but often by their mothers and friends who have been complicit, even by actions as simple as driving them to the abortion clinic. Now, in one sense, no sin is greater than another. To lust is to commit adultery, and to hate is to commit murder. The good news of the gospel proclaims that all sins have been more than paid for on the cross of Calvary. Nevertheless, the fact remains that abortion does more damage to the soul and leaves behind what seems to many women a type of indelible stain, a scar that cannot be healed.

The leaders of the abortion movement are defiant. They not only deny the sin of abortion but hold it up as a virtue. Others, knowing that abortion is wrong, retreat into denial, thus shutting themselves down, which often results in a hardening of the heart. What St. Paul says of the sexual sin applies, I think, to abortion: "All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (1 Cor 6:18). The pain of abortion is therefore intensely personal, for it involves killing—within the body—one whom God has given us to nurture. Naturally, abortion carries with it much personal shame, pain, and guilt. At this point, corporate confession is helpful, but often not enough. Women need a place to confess this sin in its particularity, an opportunity to unburden themselves of what Margaret Sanger called "the dark secret" of our society. This is perhaps why, in my experience, there are many more Catholic women who have been open with their abortions, as well as their regrets, for among pro-life Catholics there is a more robust access to private confession and absolution, which is especially curative of such sin. Now, we might argue that we, as Lutherans also offer private confession and absolution for any who are particularly burdened. The problem, though, is that when a person is unaccustomed to the practice it appears frighteningly foreign, less like a means of forgiveness than a foreboding last resort. Better it would be to teach our children the practice of individual confession and absolution in younger days when the stakes do not feel so terribly high.

The other problem we face is a kind of self-imposed code of silence. I find it striking that within *The Lutheran Witness*, for the longest time, the only pro-life articles were written by women. Shepherds often feel sheepish, feeling perhaps that as men, they cannot speak about such a sensitive woman's issue. This same thinking mirrors the phenomenon in families, where mothers would take their daughters to the abortion clinic, while the

father stayed out of the situation entirely. Concerning this matter, I have corresponded with one of the co-founders of "Silent No More," the organization designed to help hurting women who now regret their abortions. She replied with this advice: "The key to helping women connect with the confessional is to have the priest actually talk about abortion from the pulpit. Those who have had abortions must be made aware of their sin, as well as Christ's forgiveness. They need also to go through a time of personal healing where they can grieve the death of their child." So, preachers must preach and speak not only of life, in some vague or abstract way, but of the person in the womb. Here, we do well to remember that abortion is not primarily a moral problem, or a personal decision; rather, it gets to the very heart of our faith in Christ, who himself sanctified all human life from the moment of conception. What we say about the unborn child is ultimately what we say about Christ, and about what it means to be human.

Part of this preaching must also be directed to the parents of teenagers. As we think of our children, we must teach them once more that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. In essence, we must speak to them of their dignity. The other, often unspoken, problem is that as parents we want our young people to achieve certain goals, including college and access to a fulfilling career. These goals must be questioned, or at least relativized. Motherhood must be held up as noble, and our obligation to our littlest neighbor must come before our devotion to career and to lifestyle as proposed by Planned Parenthood. Children are to be celebrated and welcomed.

VII. Ecumenical Boundaries: The Pro-Life Witness

The pro-life movement is decidedly ecumenical, and historically, Roman Catholics have taken the lead. But we, as Lutherans, have much to offer, for our Christ-centered witness moves us beyond morals, and even natural law, to the very incarnation of Christ, which defines our humanity and redeems all children. The one who is the Way and the Truth is also the Life. For this reason, perhaps March 25 must become for us a new Christmas, for it is at the Annunciation that our Lord's life truly began among us. Shall we not, with John, himself in the womb, leap for joy at our coming Savior, God's lamb at his littlest? Some worry that participation in such movements will turn non-Christians off. In fact, the opposite is often true.

Consider the case of perhaps the greatest American convert of the late twentieth century, Dr. Bernard Nathanson. Nathanson was, with Lawrence Lader, one of the co-founders of NARAL and headed the largest abortion

clinic in America, where over 20,000 children were aborted. Here was a man who was so confident about what he was doing that he aborted his own child. In time, he came to question intellectually the ethics of the issue. He began to speak up for life, even though he was an avowed atheist.

Having changed his mind, what changed his heart? Nathanson speaks of a pro-life demonstration he witnessed outside of an abortion clinic:

They began to sing hymns softly, joining hands and swaying from the waist. I circulated on the periphery at first, observing the faces, interviewing some of the participants, making notes furiously. It was only then that I apprehended the exaltation, the pure love on the faces of that shivering mass of people, surrounded as they were by hundreds of New York City policemen."⁹⁰

By not taking a stand, we show our apathy; we tell the world we do not care, and that they need not lose sleep. But our Lord was right when he said that they will know us by our love. Looking at the Christians praying in both sorrow and joy, Nathanson felt the "vile bog of sin and evil," and yet the experience "held out a shimmering sliver of Hope to me in the growing belief that Someone had died for my sins and my evil two millennia ago."⁹¹ The one who is forgiven much, loves much. Nathanson writes, "I am no longer alone. It has been my fate to wander the globe in search of the One without Whom I am doomed, but now I seize the hem of his robe in desperation, in terror, in celestial access to the purest need I have ever known."⁹²

Is it possible that we will be able to maintain our Lutheran faith without getting involved and taking a stand? Well, as the uterine brother of our Lord might tell us, "Faith without works is . . . abortion." And for those of us who have been born not once, but twice, that choice is simply not viable.

⁹⁰ Bernard Nathanson, *The Hand of God: A Journey from Death to Life by the Abortion Doctor Who Changed His Mind* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 1996), 192.

⁹¹ Nathanson, *The Hand of God*, 194.

⁹² Nathanson, *The Hand of God*, 202.