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The Sanctity of Life in the Lutheran Confessions

Michael Salemink

Lutherans bring a distinctive accent to both Christianity and culture. Our enthusiastic appreciation for God’s grace proves especially poignant where they intersect. The sanctity of life represents one such sensitive pressure point. Dialogues (debates, even!) about surprise pregnancies or terminal diagnoses often involve anxiety and anger, to which courageous and compassionate gospel joy and hope can apply salve and antidote. Indeed, celebrating the worth and purpose of every human being, particularly the vulnerable or marginalized “least of these,” lies very near the heart of the Church’s witness and mission. And the value God’s love gives to all members of our race has occupied a significant place in Lutheran doctrine and practice since the beginning. The confessors who formulated the foundational documents that comprise the Book of Concord derived an advocacy for the sanctity of life from the Holy Scriptures themselves.

Martin Luther directly condemned abortion. His lectures on Genesis state, “How great, therefore, the wickedness of human nature is! How many girls there are who prevent conception and kill and expel tender fetuses, although procreation is the work of God!”¹ and, “For those who pay no attention to pregnant women and do not spare the tender fetus become murderers and parricides.”² In his pastoral tract, “Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage” (1542), he makes it clear that he considers a fetus both a human being and a precious treasure: “One must make a distinction between them [Christian mothers] and those females who resent being pregnant, deliberately neglect their child, or go so far as to strangle or destroy it.”³ He then proceeds to speak at length of the possibility and promise of the child’s everlasting salvation even before birth.

Martin Chemnitz, a prominent theologian and leader in the second generation of Lutheran reformers, likewise instructed against ending unborn lives. His *Loci*

¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45/1544–54), in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 4:304, hereafter AE.

² Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45/1544–54), AE 5:382.

³ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45/1544–54), AE 43:247.

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Theologici comments and expands on Philip Melancthon's textbook *Loci Communes*, and in explaining the Fifth Commandment ("You shall not murder"), he writes, "Pertinent here also are those things which hinder conception, Gen. 38:9; likewise, the matter of destroying the fetus in the womb, Ex. 21:22."⁴ Even advocating abortion amounts to the same level of violation: "They who give aid or approval or add injuries of their own, whether by advice, command, betrayal, or false witness, are also involved in this first kind of homicide."⁵

Both Luther and Chemnitz contributed documents that became Lutheran Confessions. Luther authored the Small and Large Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles. Chemnitz not only participated in the committee that prepared the Formula of Concord, but he also proved instrumental in compiling the original Book of Concord as the authoritative canon of confessional texts. Neither Martin specifically references abortion in those writings, and in fact the Lutheran Confessions do not address it explicitly at all. However, the Book of Concord does profess the unambiguous conviction that God invests every human life with a paramount worth and purpose that unborn human beings and impaired human bodies also possess. For the confessional Lutheran fellowship, this conclusion proscribes abortion, euthanasia, embryocide, and other attempts to use death as a solution to suffering or difficulty.

The Lutheran Confessions highly prize and praise marriage, procreation, and parenthood. Rather than a matter of convenience or preference, childbearing represents the intention and directive of God himself. The Augsburg Confession (in its Latin edition) asserts, "God created human beings for procreation" (AC XXIII 5),⁶ and the Apology echoes it: "Genesis teaches that human beings were created to be fruitful" (Ap XXIII 7).⁷ The Large Catechism elaborates,

Therefore do not imagine that the parental office is a matter of your pleasure and whim. It is a strict commandment and injunction of God, who holds you accountable for it.

But once again, the real trouble is that no one perceives or pays attention to this. Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement. . . . But he has given us children and entrusted them to us precisely

⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. Jacob A. O. Preus, Chemnitz's Works 7–8 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 8:738.

⁵ Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 8:738.

⁶ Friedrich Bente and W. H. T. Dau, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 61: "quia Deus creavit hominem ad procreationem." The German version omits this clause.

⁷ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 249.

so that we may raise and govern them according to his will; otherwise, God would have no need of fathers and mothers. (LC I 169–170, 173)⁸

Indeed, the vocation of childbearing and childrearing supersedes all other circumstances and callings: “God has given this walk of life, fatherhood and motherhood, a special position of honor, higher than that of any other walk of life under it. . . . But he distinguishes father and mother above all other persons on earth, and places them next to himself” (LC I 105).⁹ The very division of humankind into male and female serves this objective: “He created man and woman differently . . . to be fruitful, to beget children, and to nurture and bring them up to the glory of God. God has therefore blessed this walk of life most richly . . . and endowed it with everything in the world in order that this walk of life might be richly provided for” (LC I 207–208).¹⁰ Rather than decline the opportunity or despise this privilege—especially once already set in motion—couples ought to desire and delight in it: “For this reason you should rejoice from the bottom of your heart and give thanks to God that he has chosen and made you worthy to perform works so precious and pleasing to him” (LC I 117).¹¹

The Confessions acknowledge that something about humankind has become deficient. The fall of our first parents ruined the original righteousness of the divine image in which God created our kind, and original sin now passes from parents to children. The Augsburg Confession marks the instant of conception as the occasion at which this uniquely human deficiency is transmitted: “Since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin” (AC II 1).¹² The Formula of Concord affirms that in this moment the individual offspring contracts not only the deficiency but also the humanity in which the deficiency inheres: “Along with human nature . . . original sin is transmitted through carnal conception and birth from father and mother through the sinful seed” (FC SD I 7).¹³ It takes care to specify that this does not take place at birth or at some other point after conception:

⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 409–410.

⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 400–401.

¹⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 414. Ap XXIII 32, discussing 1 Timothy 2:15, speaks hypothetically about salvation through works, asserting that the works discussed in 1 Timothy 2:15 are quite different from self-chosen monasticism and other unscriptural religious practices: “Paul says that a woman is saved through childbearing. In contrast to the hypocrisy of celibacy, what greater honor could he bestow than to say that woman is saved by the conjugal functions themselves, by conjugal intercourse, by childbirth, and by her other domestic duties?” Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 252.

¹¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 402.

¹² Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 36.

¹³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 533.

For after the fall human nature is not initially created pure and good and then subsequently corrupted by original sin. Instead, in the first moment of our conception the seed from which the human being is formed is sinful and corrupted. So original sin is not something in and of itself, or something independent inside or outside of human nature. (FC SD I 28)¹⁴

Original sin actually testifies to our humanity prior to birth (or even quickening), because recognizing the embryo as sinful entails recognizing the embryo as a human being and person.

In addition, God himself continues to bring forth human nature and human creature in and through this brokenness. “For God created not only the body and soul of Adam and Eve before the fall but also our body and soul after the fall, even though they are corrupted. God also still recognizes them as his own work, as it is written, Job 10, ‘Your hands fashioned and made me, together all around’” (FC Ep I 4).¹⁵ Even this severest deficiency of sinfulness does not decrease one’s value before God or negate one’s membership in the human race and species:

It is of course true that this creature and handiwork of God is tragically corrupted by sin

Here upright Christian hearts should remember the indescribable goodness of God, that God does not cast such a corrupted, perverted, sinful *massa* immediately into the fires of hell. Instead, out of it God makes and fashions human nature as it now is, so tragically corrupted by sin, so that he might cleanse, sanctify, and save it through his dear Son. (FC SD I 38–39)¹⁶

According to the Book of Concord, both our creaturely contingency and our sinful disposition leave every human being entirely at the mercy of almighty God. Gestating embryos and incapacitated patients in their weakness exhibit outwardly the invisible spiritual condition of helplessness that besets us all. Physical limitations testify that death delivers inabilities to every body and sin imposes them upon even the most apparently proficient among us:

Just as people who are bodily dead cannot on the basis of their own powers prepare themselves or dispose themselves to receive temporal life once again, so people who are spiritually dead in sins cannot on the basis of their own strength dispose themselves or turn themselves toward appropriate spiritual, heavenly righteousness and life. (FC SD II 11)¹⁷

¹⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 536.

¹⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 488.

¹⁶ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 538.

¹⁷ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 545.

This renders even apparently autonomous and otherwise able adults no better than unconscious and immobile people: “For this reason, Holy Scripture compares the unregenerated human heart to a hard stone, which does not yield when touched but resists, or to an unhewn block of wood” (FC SD II 19).¹⁸ And “in spiritual and divine matters, the mind, heart, and will of the unrebored human being can in absolutely no way, on the basis of its own natural powers, understand, believe, accept, consider, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect, or cooperate” (FC SD II 7).¹⁹ In significant ways, the more self-sufficient we act—apart from divine intervention—the worse we end up:

For although they can control their bodies and can listen to the gospel and think about it to a certain extent and even speak of it (as Pharisees and hypocrites do), they regard it as foolishness and cannot believe it. They behave in this case worse than a block of wood, for they are rebellious against God’s will and hostile to it. (FC SD II 24)²⁰

The decisive categorical difference for the Confessions does not consist in distinguishing between born and unborn or between intelligence and ignorance. Age, appearance, ability, and origin do not impair or improve favor with God. Instead, the dichotomy between God’s child and the devil’s captive constitutes the definitive classification of humankind: “Therefore there is a great difference between baptized and unbaptized people” (FC SD II 67).²¹ And, “Before we had come into this community, we were entirely of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ” (FC SD II 37).²² This division, rather than any variances in size or time, reaches as deep as the separation of one kind of creature from another: “In order that no one might maintain that the substance or essence of the human being has to be laid aside, [Paul] declared himself what it means to lay aside the old creature and to put on the new. For he says in the following words: ‘Therefore lay aside lies and speak the truth.’ That is what it means to lay aside the old creature and put on the new” (FC SD II 81).²³

The confessors, in fact, do not disconnect human identity and dignity from redemption in Jesus Christ. They derive them directly from the paradigm of the Son of God’s incarnation. He assumed human nature and “was made man” before his birth, as the Smalcald Articles indicate: “The Son became a human being in this way:

¹⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 547.

¹⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 544.

²⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 549.

²¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 557.

²² Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 551.

²³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 559.

he was conceived by the Holy Spirit without male participation” (SA I 4).²⁴ The Formula of Concord goes into detail, quoting Luther:

“Wherever Christ is according to his divinity, he is there as a natural, divine person and he is also naturally and personally there, as his conception in his mother’s womb proves conclusively. For if he was the Son of God, he had to be in his mother’s womb naturally and personally and become human. But if he is present naturally and personally wherever he is, then he must be human there, too, since he is not two separate persons but a single person. Wherever this person is, it is the single, indivisible person, and if you can say, ‘Here is God,’ then you must also say, ‘Christ the human being is present too.’” (FC SD VIII 82)²⁵

So the Large Catechism can insist on infant Baptism in extended and impassioned fashion (LC IV 47–63), and its author also contends in the Smalcald Articles, “We maintain that we should baptize children because they also belong to the promised redemption that was brought about by Christ” (SA III V 4).²⁶ One senses that he would lay the same claim upon unborn ones if only the Lord God had given such a chance and a command.

Abortion, therefore, engages in the devil’s work of sinful disobedience. Any other embryocidal practices or substances do wrong as well. The Confessions find that the same holds true for suicide, even when assisted by a physician, as the Apology stipulates, “We ought to leave our body, too, for the gospel, but it would be silly to conclude from this that it is an act of devotion to God to commit suicide and to leave our body without the command of God. In the same way, it is silly to maintain that it is an act of devotion to God to leave possessions, friends, wife, and children without the command of God” (Ap XXVII 42).²⁷ The Large Catechism attributes the impulse to end one’s own life to Satan himself: “For because the devil is not only a liar but a murderer as well, he incessantly seeks our life and vents his anger by causing accidents and injury to our bodies. He crushes some and drives others to insanity; some he drowns in water, and many he hounds to suicide or other dreadful catastrophes” (LC III 115).²⁸ Hastening the death of a parent because of age or infirmity, even if he or she requests it, even if pity moves us entirely to understand the desire, and even if medical technology mitigates most of its obvious violence, forfeits the blessings and obligations of the Fourth Commandment: “You are also to honor them by your actions, that is, with your body and possessions, serving them,

²⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 300.

²⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 632.

²⁶ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 320.

²⁷ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 284.

²⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 455.

helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble, or poor; all this you should do not only cheerfully, but also with humility and reverence, doing it as if for God” (LC I 111).²⁹

Promoting these evils incurs as much censure from the Book of Concord as participating in them. “We should not use our tongue to advocate or advise harming anyone. Furthermore, we should neither use nor sanction any means or methods whereby anyone may be mistreated” (LC I 188).³⁰ Even passively permitting them by ignoring or neglecting to oppose and intercede will not do:

In the second place, this commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so. . . . Likewise, if you see anyone who is [innocently]³¹ condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved. (LC I 189–190)³²

Finally, the Lutheran Confessions clearly and unanimously declare that the grace of God in the forgiveness of Christ Jesus offers the only effective remedy. It delivers and redeems from the demonic deception and cultural pressure to use death as a solution. It releases, relieves, and heals from the guilt and grief of having taken part in embryocide, abortion, euthanasia, and other sins against the sanctity of life: “Scripture demonstrates in many places that there is no other sacrifice for original sin or any other sin than the one death of Christ. For it is written in Hebrews that Christ offered himself once and thereby made satisfaction for all sins” (AC XXIV 25–26).³³ And,

He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. (SC II 4).³⁴

²⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 401.

³⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 412.

³¹ This word is included in the 1580 German Book of Concord but is omitted in Kolb and Wengert’s translation. See Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 412 n. 96.

³² Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 412.

³³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 70.

³⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 355.

And this alone treats and frees from the sufferings and difficulties that make these measures or any attempts to domesticate death attractive. Entrusting oneself and neighbors to the words and the ways of God as Father and Savior embraces the better way not only for survival but also for salvation: “God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!” (SC II 2).³⁵

The formulators of the Lutheran Confessions probably did not debate abortion. Nor did their doctrinal documents directly address physician-assisted suicide. Nevertheless, the Book of Concord finds the Scriptural gospel relevant to the sanctity of human life and articulates the foundational principles from which present advocacy derives. The central contention remains the same: God’s grace in creating and redeeming regards human beings as special and precious from fertilization to forever. He forbids using death as a solution to difficulties like surprise pregnancy or terminal diagnosis. And He delights to bring forth faith and hope, love and joy even amid our weakness and wickedness. Christian faith—and confessional Lutheran doctrine—receives every human life as gift and privilege to share for all eternity.

³⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 354–355.