

A WORD ABOUT FINANCES: **Gracias!**

2014 LIFEWATCH SERMON: “A Consistent Ethic of Hospitality: Including the Unborn in Our Inclusiveness” by Bishop Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

I want to reflect on three aspects of our witness on behalf of the sanctity and sacredness of life: a coherent social teaching, a consistent ethic of hospitality, and a compassionate witness to and for life.

A Coherent Social Teaching

United Methodists are blessed with a rich and deep theological tradition. We believe that every person is created in the image of God. We acknowledge that human sin disfigures this divine image. The result is alienation, confusion, and estrangement. We confess our need to repent, to turn toward God. In the language of the parable, to repent is to come home to the father's house (Luke 15). That turning, an act of faith, and itself one dimension of the work of God's grace, is met with an unconditional love, the saving (justifying) grace of God. We are saved by grace and not by our works, lest any of us should boast (Ephesians 2). We respond to this gift of saving grace by continuing on the journey toward becoming more like Christ. In this process, the image of God is restored. God is love, and we respond by loving God and loving our neighbor. Our response, again empowered by the grace of God, is sanctification. This is the call to holiness, which is both personal and social in its expression.

This rich and deep theological tradition is profoundly Biblical and finds expression for us in the writings of John and Charles Wesley and their ancestors. In the truest and highest sense, it could be described, to borrow a phrase from the Yale theologian Hans Frei, as a “generous orthodoxy.”

Our present ecclesial crisis is rooted in the reality that our theology (what we teach, what we preach, what we

believe) is often neither generous nor orthodox. Our current incoherent social teaching is the result of the present theological chaos. We are polarized, and here we mirror the culture, as Methodists so often do, and the result is a division into two theological camps.

One camp has a theology of convenient grace and social holiness: everyone has dignity, although here there are unconscious limitations, which we will explore later, and we are called to change the world. In its extreme form this can be an ideology totally void of boundaries, and it leads to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace,” and what H. Richard Niebuhr defined as “Christ without a cross.” In its practical expression, the outcome is a kind of works-righteousness. This works-righteousness is a difficult path, because the world resists all of our efforts to bring about change, and a malaise or depression ensues. This depression, in the words of a wise church consultant, is killing the mainline church in the United States.

Another camp has a theology of repentance, justifying grace, and personal holiness. If every person simply said and meant the words of the sinner's prayer, all would be well with our souls. This orientation takes one aspect of the evangelical movement and separates it from the necessary social and contextual realities that shape us and call for our engagement, a calling that runs like a thread from the eighth century prophets to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to the Letter of James to the journals of John Wesley.

These theological camps align comfortably (and conveniently) with two dominant political movements, which find institutional expression in the political parties of the United States. But neither captures the fullness of our rich and robust theological tradition as Wesleyans, which includes a grace that is more pervasive than we can imagine, in space and time, and a holiness that is more comprehensive than we are inclined to grasp.

The recovery of a coherent theology of grace and holiness, and a rejection of the partisan captivity of the church, could lead us to a coherent social teaching. The dictionary defines coherence as having clarity and

intelligibility and the quality of holding together. We have a clear and generous orthodox theological tradition as United Methodists. We are in desperate need of a coherent social teaching.

A Consistent Ethic of Hospitality

What would a coherent social teaching look like? I want to argue this morning that it would look something like the tradition, found in the Roman Catholic Church, of a “consistent ethic of life.” As the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin noted, “we must be consistent in our respect for and protection of human life at every stage and in every circumstance.” (Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Volume One [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000], p. 433) I do wonder if Methodism could abandon its present partisan political captivity and join the evangelical and catholic consensus in regard to life. In our heritage, we are in fact a movement that holds together evangelical and catholic sensibilities.

This consistent ethic represents a continuum from conception to death, from the individual to creation, from interventions in and support of the lives of unborn children and their pregnant mothers, trafficked and enslaved young people, endangered coal miners, incarcerated young men on death row, tortured prisoners of war, the dignity of the aged, and the fragile ecosystems upon which we all depend.

A consistent ethic of life cuts across our political proclivities and moves us to the deeper level of values and principles. The gospel is always on the side of life because God is the creator of life, Jesus comes so that we may have life, and the Holy Spirit descends to renew the face of the earth. The gospel always stands in judgment on our tribal affiliations, because our God is not a tribal god, but the One God who created the universe and each of us in His image.

For our purposes, what would it mean for a consistent ethic of life to shape a consistent ethic of hospitality? In the past year, I have reflected in public settings on a missional hospitality with gay and lesbian Christians in a sermon at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Orlando, on our call to be hospitable to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are immigrants among us at Asbury Theological Seminary (see “God Has Bid All Humankind: Generous Orthodoxy and Our Mission with Gays and Lesbians in The United Methodist Church” and “Learning to Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: Immigration and a Scriptural Imagination” at www.flumc.org), and now on what a consistent ethic of hospitality might mean if it were to include the unborn.

Would not our rhetoric of inclusion be more coherent, possess more integrity, and become more cruciform if it

were to include all of the strangers, in the language of Matthew 25, whom we are called to welcome?

What would it mean to reframe the conversation around a consistent ethic of hospitality? I have recently returned to a spiritual classic written by Henri Nouwen entitled Reaching Out. He traces one of the movements of the spiritual life as the journey from hostility to hospitality. He describes it a a painful search, full of difficulties, and yet, he insists, that “it is possible for men and women and obligatory Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.” (Image: New York, 1975, p. 65) A consistent ethic of hospitality would call us to welcome the unborn as the stranger. Nouwen continues, “This is our vocation, to convert the hostis into hospes, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.” (p. 66)

Two comments. First, we must acknowledge the complexity in calling women to be agents of hospitality (in making space for the unborn) when they have often been the victims of brutal hostility. We must confess this as a context that is present more often than is acknowledged, and violence toward women demands our systematic, communal, and individual responses. And second, we might hear Nouwen’s reflection on hospitable space as not only a reference to the unborn child but also the needed discussion that could lead us to a different place in our individual discernments, in our community ministries, in our denominational polity, and in our communication with the culture.

An aside. In preparation for this sermon, I read carefully, again, the paragraph in The Book of Discipline that was present in 1988, when The Durham Declaration was drafted, and in 2012, the most recent edition. That section (now 161J) has expanded in twenty-five years from one paragraph to nine. It is more nuanced, and yet it is an imperfect statement. We have not adequately examined what it says about creation, covenant, and context; and we would benefit from the language of gifts instead of rights. While there are aspects of this work in progress for which I give thanks (encouragement of adoptions, lament of high abortion rates, opposition to late-term abortion, affirmation of crisis pregnancy centers), still it could be more coherent with who we are. It lacks an ecclesiology, and thus the statement is silent on the role of Christian community in welcoming children; and it fails to reflect on the contexts of violence and poverty that shape the lives of expectant mothers across the planet.

I realize that writing (and revising or not) The Book of Discipline can itself be a hostile act, and perhaps to acknowledge this is one step in the way forward. If Nouwen’s identification of the movement from hostility to hospitality, and the challenge in our social teaching to be more consistent and coherent is one that we are willing to embrace, it may bear fruit in a compassionate witness to life.

Please remember to pray and fast for the ministry of Lifewatch on the first Tuesday of every month.

A Compassionate Witness to Life

What would this compassionate witness to life look like? We certainly begin with the goodness of creation, which we affirm every time we baptize a child. Having professed God as creator of heaven and earth, we rejoice that “we are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth, through water and the spirit. All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.” (from The United Methodist Hymnal [Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989], p. 39) In this liturgy, creation has merged into covenant; the visible sign of each is the baptismal water, itself essential to life, from the moment of conception; for Jesus, we remember, was “nurtured in the water of a womb.” (p. 42)

A compassionate witness to life names these gifts of God. But it incorporates, as well, that we are people who have at times preferred death to life. And so we renounce our sin, “the spiritual forces of wickedness...the evil powers of this world.” (p. 40) The needed conversation about advocacy for the unborn must take these into account.

The moral theologian David Gushee insists: “All who care about life’s sacredness must understand the factors that motivate thousands of women to seek an abortion today, and these must be addressed systemically....In the United States, as long as our cultural sexual ethic is so libertine, as long as our social safety net is so fragile, as long as the relationships between men and women are so tenuous, and as long as poverty and hopelessness continue to enfold at least half of the population, demand for abortion will be high, especially among those whose bodies and spirits bear the costs of most of our other social dysfunctions.” (The Sacredness of Life [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013], p. 359)

We can and must pay more attention to contexts, among them the violation of sexual boundaries, violence, and poverty; and we need not pit these against one another.

A compassionate witness to life never forgets that it is God who gives us “the freedom and power...to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” (The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 40) One of the remarkable insights of William Abraham, in The Logic of Evangelism (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), is that we do not place morality prior to initiation, conversion, or baptism. Morality—the desire to love God and neighbor, or to attend to the General Rules in the Wesleyan tradition—is made possible through the gift of grace and is a necessary consequence of that gift.

And so a child is born and through grace is baptized into the Christian community. The Great Tradition of generous orthodoxy affirms that at least one meaning here

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is that these children are not our own: they are gifts of God, and they are also the responsibility of the community.

Our witness to life can take the form of protest, and that is standing against a body of law in the church and the society. What I am calling for is a renewed engagement with

the very ground of the argument—that followers of Jesus, the One who came to give us life, are called to take up his cross and live cruciform lives, which occur whenever we find ourselves in relation to “the least of these.” The least of these, named in Matthew 25, represent a continuum of persons who find themselves at the fragile intersection of life and death. The justice of this text is aligned with its judgment upon the disciples, ourselves included.

To offer a compassionate witness in word and in action is to come alongside persons in their season of greatest vulnerability. The mission of a radically inclusive church must include the unborn in our inclusiveness. If grace is extended to all, a sign of this divine gesture is welcoming life into communities that have learned the way of the cross, that are journeying from hostility to hospitality.

The protest that is needed in a violent, fragmented, and fragile world is the formation of communities of character, where the reality of grace and the possibility of holiness are taught and lived, where individual rights are tempered by membership in the body of diverse gifts. A theology of abundance and not scarcity moves us to boldly testify that these gifts are sufficient for our human flourishing, and indeed the flourishing of every unborn child.

The sanctity of life is so important, and thus we must discover a coherent way, as United Methodists, of bearing witness, in the language of the New Testament, of “giving an account for the hope that is within us.” (I Peter)

A coherent social teaching could lead us to embrace a consistent ethic of hospitality, for indeed we are members of the one Body; and when one suffers, all suffer, and when one rejoices, all rejoice (I Corinthians 12). And a consistent ethic of hospitality is possible only as it is set within the context of a compassionate witness to and for life, which we believe to be a gift, a fragile and sacred trust.

May God help us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bp. Carter is the resident bishop of the Florida Area of The United Methodist Church. He preached this sermon at the recent Lifewatch Service of Worship, which took place on January 22, 2014 at Simpson Memorial Chapel in The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC.♥

RELATING DOCTRINE TO DISCIPLINE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

There is a very real possibility of a number of church trials—most of which involve “gay marriage”—taking place across The United Methodist Church in America. Because of the possibility of these trials, this is a particularly good time to consider how The United Methodist Church’s doctrine relates to The United Methodist Church’s discipline.

Throughout Methodist history, the phrase “doctrine and discipline” (or “doctrines and discipline”) has been common. Before there was a Book of Discipline every four years, there was a Book of Doctrine and Discipline every four years. This phrase, “doctrine and discipline,” provides a constant reminder that our church’s foundational understanding of the Christian faith (doctrine) is related to our church’s most basic practices in ordering our life together (discipline).

Presently, in the air that United Methodists in America breathe, there is the strong presumption that the clergy and laity of The United Methodist Church can do anything we want in The United Methodist Church, as long as we are doing it in the name of “grace” or “love.” “Grace” and “love” are the magic words that, when uttered, cause the doctrine and discipline of the church to go wobbly and then go away, so that those who are speaking the magic words can indeed believe and do whatever they want. Again, that seems to be the operative assumption of many in contemporary United Methodism.

However, The United Methodist Church has real doctrine and real discipline. As for doctrine, The Book of Discipline (2012) plainly lists, in Paragraph 104. Section 3, “Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules:” (1) “The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church,” (2) “The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church,” (3) “The Standard Sermons of Wesley,” (4) “The Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament,” and (5) “The General Rules of the Methodist Church.” “The Articles of Religion,” “The Confession of Faith,” and “The General Rules” appear near the front of The Book of Discipline and in full. “The Standard Sermons” and “The Explanatory Notes,” in contrast, can be found in sources that The Book of Discipline spells out.

Again, these five (5) documents make up the operative doctrine of The United Methodist Church. So these documents hold a privileged place in United Methodist faith and life. Indeed, the Constitution of The United Methodist Church specifically protects “The Articles of Religion” and “The Confession of Faith” from a General Conference attempting to edit or eliminate them (Section III.Restrictive Rules: Paragraph 17.Article I and Paragraph 18.Article II).

In The Book of Discipline, it is obvious that first

the doctrinal topics are laid out, and the disciplinary (or organizational and practical) portion follows. Again, church doctrine appears first, and only then does church discipline appear. That is how doctrine and discipline are ordered in The Book of Discipline.

The question becomes, how does church doctrine relate to, or guide, church discipline? To answer that question, we will take one official source of doctrine in The United Methodist Church, “The Articles of Religion,” and see how the Articles relate to the church’s life and practice.

The Articles Historically Honored

“The Articles of Religion” have been essential to The United Methodist Church from its beginnings, in North America, to the present. In Decision 1185, the Judicial Council authoritatively makes this exact point: “The General Conference of 1808 provided the First Constitution of The Methodist Episcopal Church and established the Articles of Religion as the Church’s explicit doctrinal standard. This First Restrictive Rule of the Constitution enacted in 1808 prohibited any change, alteration, or addition to the Articles of Religion themselves and stipulated that no new standards or rules of doctrine could be adopted by the General Conference that were contrary to the present existing and established standards of doctrine.” That was noted above.

In Decision 1185, the Judicial Council also notes the “constitutional” nature of the Articles of Religion in this way: “...there is the matter of the Articles of Religion and the role they have in the Constitution and law of the Church... In Decision 358 the Judicial Council ruled that the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, and the General Rules, while not specifically a part of the Constitution, are basic documents in the life and structure of our Church... Therefore, for the purposes of this case, it is consistent with our precedent to treat the Articles of Religion as ‘constitutional’ in importance and application...”

“The Articles of Religion” and the Disciple of the Church

Given the historical and constitutional importance of “The Articles of Religion” in The United Methodist Church, how should those charged with the last word about the church’s discipline—the Judicial Council and temporary judicial officials of the church—look on, and be guided by, these Articles?

First, the jurists of the church should hold “The Articles of Religion” in high regard and deference—since the Articles were declared by the Judicial Council to be of constitutional status. As Decision 1185 puts it, “it is consistent with our precedent to treat the Articles of Religion as ‘constitutional’ in importance and application...”

Second, vis-a-vis church doctrine in “The Articles of Religion,” the Judicial Council is committed to practice a self-denying, hands-off approach. Decision

59 of the Judicial Council states: "It is the opinion of the Judicial Council that the Judicial Council was not set up as an interpreter of doctrine but as an interpreter of law from the strictly legal standpoint." And as Decision 358 notes, "[t]he Judicial Council, historically, has refused jurisdiction over questions which demand of it theological interpretations."

Third, the Judicial Council, guided by the Restrictive Rules of the Constitution, is charged to protect "The Articles of Religion" as they now read. That is, the Judicial Council should make sure that "[t]he General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine." (Paragraph 17. Article I.)

This brief historical and constitutional review makes clear that The United Methodist Church officially mandates that "The Articles of Religion" be remembered, respected, and protected by the church, with the help of judicial officials, in its faith and life. In other words, The United Methodist Church has ordered its life to remember, respect, and protect "The Articles of Religion" so that those Articles can help to guide the church, particularly early in its history (but extending to the present), toward "doctrinal integrity" and away from "heresies" (Paragraph 103, p. 57).

The bottom line is this: According to its history, Constitution, and Discipline, The United Methodist Church intends that "The Articles of Religion" be in play, at all times, throughout the faith and life of the entire Church—without interference from the Judicial Council and other judicial bodies. Therefore, United Methodist institutions, missions, ministries, laity, and clergy should hear and heed the Articles. That is, United Methodist institutions, missions, ministries, laity, and clergy should never seek to avoid these Articles or resist their claims.

What Article XXII Provides

The United Methodist Church is constitutionally committed to being informed and formed by "The Articles of Religion." Mostly, the Articles assert the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. But at times, the Articles go beyond doctrinal claims. For example, "Article XXII—Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches" states a doctrine of church rites and ceremonies, and then it seems to venture into a more disciplinary direction: it proposes a way to discern a penalty for one who (through "private judgment") has broken the rites and ceremonies of his church, for one who has gone against God's Word. The pertinent, more legal, section of Article XXII reads: "Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant

"When bishops declare opposition to their church's teaching and practice, it is little wonder that their church's faith and life are put at risk."

to the Word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, that others may fear to do the like, as one that offendeth against the common order of the church, and woundeth the consciences of weak brethren." Again, this particular Article seems to

begin in church doctrine and end in church law. Even so, for the reasons stated in the historical and constitutional review above, this entire Article should be heard and heeded by the entire church at all times.

It should be noted that this Article is reinforced by "Article XIII—Public Worship" of "The Confession of Faith" (Paragraph 104, p. 74); Article XIII states, in part: the public worship of the Church should be "in accordance with the order and Discipline of the Church." So, both Article XXII of "The Articles of Religion" and Article XIII of "The Confession of Faith" declare that, while the Church has a wide variety of worship services, those that are inconsistent with God's Word and the church's Discipline are to be disallowed.

Article XXII's more legal portion self-evidently sets forth (that is, in a way that does not require interpretation) two claims: (1) for breaking the church's rites and ceremonies, a public penalty ("rebuke" is the word used by the Article) should follow; and (2) the penalty must be proportionately effective, to deter others from involvement in future disallowed services, so that (i) "the common order of the church" will not again be harmed, and (ii) "the consciences of weak brethren" will not again be wounded.

Article XXII not only suggests that a penalty, for breaking the rites and ceremonies of a church, is in order, but also that such a penalty should be effective in its results. It could be said that this Article provides a framework for discerning if a penalty is in order (that is, when a rite or ceremony breaks God's Word [Article XXII] or violates church Discipline [Article XXIII]) and a further framework for discerning how such a penalty should be considered effective (that is, deters others from breaking the church's rites and ceremonies so that church order and distressed consciences can be protected in the future).

With regard to Article XXII's framework for determining a penalty, this objection might be raised: if the church were to "[rebuke] openly [one who had, by a church trial, been found guilty of violating the church's rites and ceremonies], that others may fear to do the like," the church would be ordering its life by fear. The assumption is that fear should never be a part of life, among the laity and the clergy, in the church. At first, this objection makes sense. However, upon closer consideration, it does not stand up. The fear, which is explicitly mentioned by Article XXII, is best understood

as respect. That is, laity and clergy are to respect the church, its doctrine and its discipline, and behave accordingly. If some laity and clergy are dedicated to changing something in the church's discipline, such change should be attempted in the church's legislative realm (that is, at General Conference). These attempts would demonstrate respect for the church's common life and discipline. Change-minded laity and clergy should not neglect and then violate the church's discipline. That shows disrespect for the church, its common order, and its members. The remedy for one who disrespects the church is indeed fear; again, that indeed fear should be understood as respect for the church, its doctrine, and its discipline.

Since Article XXII's legal section is self-evidently understandable, it does not rely on judicial interpretation at a later date to become useful. Therefore, this Article can be taken as "constitutional" in importance and application" (Decision 1185) and applied to relevant, contemporary cases. Obviously, this Article can be exceedingly helpful in The United Methodist Church's present, judicial challenges regarding "gay marriages."

Doctrine > Discipline

To conclude, this must be said and said strongly: The Book of Discipline, at no point, restricts (in part or in full) the authority of "The Articles of Religion" in the church. Actually, the Discipline does everything in its power to protect the Articles, their constitutional standing, their influence on and in the church. Therefore, whether the Articles are declaring doctrinal content or suggesting legal remedy in the event of a ceremonial breach (as in Article XXII), they are not to be silenced by judicial action. Rather, the Articles are to be heard and heeded by The United Methodist Church throughout its faith and life.

So, back to the main issue of how the church's doctrine relates to the church's discipline. We can deduce, from the above comments, that doctrine comes before discipline. Indeed, more strongly, it can be declared that doctrine guides discipline—not the other way around. And that is as it should be. If communal discipline determined ecclesial doctrine, the doctrine would be forever changing, unreliable, and compromised. The doctrine would become so accommodated to cultural winds that The United Methodist Church would drift from being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic with the Church universal. (Paul T. Stallsworth)♥

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON UNITED METHODISM TODAY

• What is the duty of all United Methodists, members and clergy, at this time and place? It might be summed up in this way: obey God's Word and abide by the church's Discipline. And when there is disagreement in The United Methodist Church about what is (and what is not) God's Word, we continue to abide by The Book of Discipline, its doctrines, its prescriptions and proscriptions, its processes and procedures. In other words, a disagreement in the

church about God's Word does not give those who dissent from the church's teaching the right to disregard the church's Discipline. United Methodists, who disagree about God's Word and who abide by their church's Discipline, can then work through their disagreements (using Christian conferencing) to arrive at resolution. That resolution may involve United Methodists leaving their church. This pastor hopes not. The point is this: disagreement over God's Word does not give United Methodists the right to disregard the church's Discipline. That is a prescription for chaos.

• For years there has been a struggle within The United Methodist Church about homosexual conduct and "gay marriage." But all of a sudden, this struggle has intensified and perhaps reached a boiling point of some kind. Why? Bishops. A few United Methodist bishops have identified with those who wish to overturn historic Christian teaching on human sexuality. Bishop Talbert participated in the "marriage" service for two men in Alabama. Then, following the church trial of Rev. Frank Schaefer, three or more bishops have noted that they believe historic Christian teaching, and current United Methodist teaching, on human sexuality are "discriminatory" against LGBT people. When bishops declare opposition to their church's teaching and practice, it is little wonder that their church's faith and life are put at risk.♥

LETTERS/COMMENTS

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YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

• Please remember to support Lifewatch regularly with your prayers and your gifts. A gift can be given in two ways. First, you can send a check to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. And second, you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. Thank you, in advance, for all of your faithful and generous responses.

• Christopher Hitchens, may he rest in peace, was not a nice man. He was intellectually rambunctious. He was always casting about for a way to be contrary. In "Christopher Hitchens: A Contrarian Remembered" (www.firstthings.com, On the Square, December 18, 2013), Andrew Doran recalls: "In a debate moderated by Ben Stein, Hitchens ventured off on his staple attack against any religions—here, the Abrahamic faiths—that would demand the sacrifice of a child. Stein interjected to ask whether Hitchens, in consequence, regarded himself as 'a member of

the pro-life movement.' As Hitchens collected his thoughts, chuckles could be heard. To the surprise of the audience, Hitchens responded in the affirmative. 'I've had many quarrels with my fellow materialists and secularists on this point,' he said, adding that if the concept of a child had any meaning, then so did 'unborn child.' 'All the discoveries of embryology,' he continued, 'which have been very considerable in the last generation or so, and of viability, appear to confirm that opinion—which is...innate in everybody, is innate in the Hippocratic Oath, is instinct in anyone who has ever watched a sonogram. And so, yes, is my answer.' Here again Hitchens was a man of the left, champion of the weak, and contrarian." Thanks be to God for the many surprises in this world.

- Back to the matter of courage. The challenge to be courageous in proposing moral truth, in the churches and in society, faces all of us. Dr. Robert P. George—the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University and the chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom—recently declared: "... it's important for Christians not to become disheartened. We have to redouble our efforts; we have to stand fast; we have to speak out; we have to be unafraid. If we're Christians, if we're believers, we realize that it's not our job to produce the victory—that's God's job—but it's our job to be faithful; it's our job to stand up and fight, to speak the truth out loud, to refuse to be intimidated, to be willing to suffer any slings and arrows, any blows, any costs, that come for standing up for what is right and true and good. People shouldn't think that 'Well, I'm entitled to remain silent because I don't want to be known as a bigot, I don't want to be abused by friends or co-workers, I don't want to put my career prospects or social standing in jeopardy.' Christians throughout history and down to this

day have suffered martyrdom for what we believe to be the truth. Today in Africa and Asia and other places, there are people who are killed, often by methods of torture, for the Christian faith. They are willing to give up their lives for the truth. Are we unwilling to speak the truth for fear that someone will call us a bad name? That would speak very poorly of us, if in fact that is true. I'm with Pastor Harold Senkbeil who said, 'Jesus has enough secret agents. He doesn't need any more.' What Jesus needs are bold and courageous witnesses who are truly willing to speak moral truth to cultural and political power." ("On Air with Robert P. George" in Family North Carolina, Winter 2014, p. 30)

- Cardinal Francis E. George is the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago. To highlight the secularization of American society and what that might mean for the Church, he recently said: "I will die in bed, my successor will die in prison, and his successor will die as a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the Church has done so often in human history." Before such challenges, our task in our time and our place is faithfulness. Faithfulness to the God of the Gospel of Life.

- In Genesis' account of The Fall, "the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17, NRSV here and below)

Later, the serpent speaks to the woman: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (3:1)

Later still, the serpent says to the female: "'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" (3:4-5)

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Lifewatch
Taskforce of
United Methodists on
Abortion and Sexuality

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Then, of course, the woman takes some forbidden fruit, eats it, and hands a portion of it to her husband. He then eats what he is not supposed to eat.

In Genesis 3, looking back on this series of events, God says to the man: "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you..." (v. 17)

So, the man had heard God's command not to eat the specified fruit. But the man did not tell the woman, or he did not persuasively tell the woman, of God's command. Instead, the man listened to the woman and to what she wanted. This led to disobedience.

This account might be understood as a warning: when God's command is not told or taught, pressures that push otherwise, will prevail. This warning can even apply to The United Methodist Church and its responses to pressures to change its teaching on homosexual conduct and its accompanying discipline with regard to homosexual practice, ordination, and marriage. When the Council of Bishops and the bishops themselves do not teach what the Bible and the Tradition take to be God's commands on these matters, other teachings and pressures will threaten to win the day. The lesson to be learned is this: when God commands, the Church, but particularly the Church's leaders, best hear, heed, and teach what is commanded. Otherwise, confusion and disobedience are bound to arise in the Church. (In "Adam's Silence" [at www.firsttings.com/blogs/firstthoughts, December 13, 2013], Phillip Cary offers especially helpful theological analysis of Genesis 2 and 3.)

- For several years I have had the privilege of writing letters to a couple of men serving time in state correctional facilities. One of them wrote in a letter which accompanied his annual Christmas card: "You mentioned [in your last letter] your witness in the area of abortion. A very close friend of mine in high school opted to abort when she became pregnant her senior year. That decision always bothered me. Lately, it seems

like it has just become so ingrained in our culture that no one really pays it much attention. An easy escape from having to make responsible decisions." His was a most thoughtful comment, based on experience, on the most challenging moral matter in church and society.

- Please read The Declaration of Dependence, which can be found at:

declarationofdependence.org. Drawing from Biblical faith and historic leaders, it is a good, strong statement of pro-life principles. It urges unity in principles, even if various citizens who are committed to those principles prefer and pursue various political strategies. Read the document, and then consider signing it. This pastor has done both. And he hopes you will do the same.

- *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* "Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail."♥

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