

## A GOSPEL WITHOUT LIFE?

Is it possible to preach the Gospel without mentioning the dignity of human life and those practices that threaten human life (e.g., abortion and euthanasia)? Rather than offering the Gospel of Life as advocated by John Paul II, might a church-school teacher, lay speaker, pastor, district superintendent, or bishop present the Gospel, plainly and simply, without life?

Of course, it is possible to try. It happens with regularity. Many United Methodist laity and clergy, who are charged to teach and preach in local churches, carefully avoid even the mention of life, abortion, euthanasia, and other related issues. Some charged to teach and preach consciously avoid these matters. They studiously censor their own presentations to keep them free of human-life issues. Others' avoidance of these concerns is unconscious. Formed mainly by the formerly prestigious media, they simply do not think to address concerns connected to human life. Whether the avoidance is conscious or not, the result is the same: classes and congregations are consistently denied the Church's Biblical, traditional instruction and proclamation on matters related to human life, especially to human beings in their most vulnerable conditions.

Two popular reasons are offered for the studied, conscious avoidance of human-life issues by the Church's teachers and preachers.

First and most famously, teachers and preachers avoid human-life issues, because such issues have the potential of stirring up disagreement, even controversy, in the congregation. Here it is assumed that disagreement and controversy in the congregation are to be avoided like the plague. After all, congregational peace—understood as the avoidance of all conflict—is taken to be the greatest good, or one of the greatest goods, in the local church.

Second, teachers and preachers often claim an evangelistic reason for not bringing up human-life issues in their lessons and sermons. They simply want to present Christ, and Christ alone, for the sake of winning new converts. They reason: Christ, in His time, will straighten out new converts on matters related to human life; but in the meantime, these issues should not be explicitly mentioned in the congregation's evangelistic witness.

### IN RESPONSE

While these reasons for avoiding human-life issues are

quite understandable, they are based on false hopes. One of the false hopes is congregational peace, and the other is evangelistic effectiveness.

Those who believe that congregational peace is achieved by avoiding difficult topics, such as abortion and euthanasia, are mistaken. When United Methodist churches discover that their teachers and preachers are consistently avoiding matters that are of enormous concern to the Church and society at large, they are likely to become restless. Lacking solid theological instruction on human-life issues from their authorized teachers and preachers, some in the congregation will tend to take such matters into their own hands. To the best of their abilities, they will teach against the studied silence and moral relativism of their leaders. Other laity will disagree in kind. Conflict then develops and spreads. And some pro-life people will eventually leave the church. The hoped-for peace in the congregation becomes conflict throughout the congregation. So an unintended consequence of avoiding human-life concerns is congregational discord. The peace sought becomes the conflict endured.

Intending maximum evangelistic outreach, some teachers and preachers ignore life, abortion, and euthanasia in their public presentations. However, some of those who hear these evangelistic lessons and sermons are heavy with guilt from past violations of the dignity of human lives. Some in the congregation have been involved in abortion. Others have not properly cared for severely ill or dying relatives (and/or friends). They know, in their heart of hearts, that they were wrong in what they did. Avoiding abortion and euthanasia, well intentioned evangelistic teachers and preachers deny some of their hearers the God-given forgiveness, even deliverance, that the Gospel promises. So another unintended consequence of avoiding human-life concerns is evangelistic postponement, if not failure.

But return to the question in the title of this article: is there a gospel without life? We could say that, because it is taught and preached so often, there really is such a gospel. However, this gospel—a gospel without life—is not really the Gospel. A gospel without life is another gospel. A gospel without life is a gospel that has been cobbled together to suit our own purposes, while ignoring divine purposes. A gospel without life is not received from the prophets and the apostles.

The Gospel—the Gospel—centers on Jesus Christ,

the Word who became flesh. In becoming flesh, Jesus Christ dignified human life at each stage of human development. That is, God the Father loved humanity enough to send His Son to experience each stage of human life—from conception to death. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ was conceived, so He became an embryo inside the Blessed Virgin Mary; therefore, He dignified human life at the embryonic stage. Our Lord was an unborn child in Mary's womb, and so He dignified the unborn child. Jesus was an infant in arms, a toddler, a running child, a teen, a young adult, and an adult; therefore, He invested immeasurable dignity in all of these ages of the human being. And our Lord suffered and died, thereby dignifying the human being's suffering and dying. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, experienced all of human life, from womb to tomb, for our sake, for our salvation. This is Gospel truth, the Gospel's truth. And this Gospel truth contains moral truth

about how those informed and formed by the Gospel should rightly recognize the dignity of all human beings—even very young human beings, even suffering human beings, even dying human beings. This moral truth is directly challenged by the

practices of abortion and euthanasia. This moral truth deserves loving, winsome presentation in occasional Sunday lessons and sermons, as the Biblical texts require.

To avoid this Gospel, the Gospel, the Gospel of Life, in the hope of serving other goals—even respectable goals such as congregational peace and evangelistic outreach—is to adopt another gospel. Call it a gospel without life. This gospel without life does indeed lack life.

On the other hand, the Gospel of Life offers life. Abundant life. (PTS) ♥

## 2005 ANNUAL CONFERENCES AND BEYOND

Reading through reports on the 2005 Annual Conferences, one is struck by how relatively few of the conferences passed resolutions that relate to life and abortion. (Since abortion has been the most controverted issue in American political life for over thirty years, one would think that more conferences would be offering public witness on the matter.) According to reports received thus far, six Annual Conferences passed life-and-abortion-related resolutions.

The Florida Annual Conference passed a resolution that commends Paragraph 161K of The Book of Discipline (which is entitled "Ministry to Those Who Have Experienced an Abortion") to local church leaders and ministerial candidates, and calls on the conference's

"congregations, pastors, and lay leaders to enter into dialogue with Christ-centered ministries that provide counseling for women—and men—who experience pain because of a past abortion and to prayerfully consider how we may serve such ministries with our moral, spiritual, and material support." Similar resolutions were passed by the Arkansas Conference, the Illinois Great Rivers Conference (which added concern for suffering from miscarriages), the North Georgia Conference (which added encouragement for premarital abstinence), and the North Indiana Conference. The North Indiana Conference resolution also requires the conference to send a copy of Lifewatch's "Where Can I Go for Help and Healing?" brochure to "every active and retired elder, local pastor, and diaconal minister" within its boundaries.

In addition, the Louisiana Conference approved a resolution that expresses serious concern about the

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a pro-abortion political lobby, and that asks the conference to "pray and reflect on our continued participation by our church with the RCRC." The North Georgia Conference and the Arkansas Conference also adopted the RCRC resolution. Briefer than the Louisiana

version, the Arkansas resolution noted that the lack of unity among United Methodists on abortion should lead Arkansas Methodists to "prayerfully reflect" on continued denominational endorsement of RCRC. (John Lomperis, "Good News: Annual Conferences Pass UMAction Resolutions," updated on July 5, 2005, [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org))

Given the fact that many Annual Conferences are experiencing a kind of post-General Conference, anti-resolutionary fatigue, the passage of these resolutions might well be remarkable. At the same time, Lifewatch knows that far more is going on in United Methodist conferences and congregations, with regard to life and abortion, than meets the journalistic eye. Pastoral conversations and Christian conferencing, Sunday school lessons and Sunday morning sermons, are continually addressing the Gospel of Life in ways that are direct and indirect, bold and subtle. By faith, we know that God's Word regarding life is going forth among God's people called United Methodist.

Lifewatch encourages you, in good faith and with good courage, to continue being a part of the service of the Gospel of Life. (PTS) ♥

## BISHOP WHITAKER COMMENTS ON MRS. SCHIAVO

Just a couple of days before the death of Mrs. Terri Schiavo, Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker, the resident bishop of the Florida Area of The United Methodist Church, posted an excellent statement on the case of Mrs. Schiavo. (See [www.flumc.org](http://www.flumc.org), and then go to the

*"He became an embryo inside the Blessed Virgin Mary; therefore, He dignified human life at the embryonic stage. Our Lord was an unborn child in Mary's womb, and so He dignified the unborn child."*

bishop's materials.) Entitled "Terri Schiavo: Killing or Letting Die or Letting Live?," Bp. Whitaker instructs his readers in some basic lessons of moral theology.

Bp. Whitaker begins his statement: "The tragic ordeal of Mrs. Terri Schiavo causes most of us to engage in moral reflection on that borderland of human existence where there has to be a decision about killing, letting die, or letting live.

"A fundamental moral principle consistent with faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ is to always care rather than kill. In 1991 the Ramsey Colloquium of the Institute on Religion and Public Life (named after the late Paul Ramsey, a United Methodist ethicist) issued a declaration titled 'Always to Care, Never to Kill.' The declaration says, 'In relating to the sick, the suffering, the incompetent, the disabled, and the dying, we must learn again the wisdom that teaches us always to care, never to kill. Although it may sometimes appear to be an act of compassion, killing is never a means of caring.'

"On the basis of 'always to care, never to kill,' we would never give moral approval of physician-assisted suicide or active euthanasia. Approval of techniques to terminate the lives of the dying would distort the purpose of physicians to care for persons and open the way to destroy the lives of the disabled.

"The principle of always caring does not prohibit letting the terminally ill die in dignity and comfort. The hospice movement is based upon the moral assumption that it is permissible to let the dying die, as long as they receive caring while they are dying. The statement on 'Faithful Care for Dying Persons' in the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church [[The Book of Discipline](#) (2004), Paragraph 161M] expresses the moral wisdom of limiting the use of medical technologies in care for the dying..."

After noting some of the complexities involved, Bp. Whitaker continues: "To continue to acknowledge the complexity of a case such as Mrs. Schiavo's, there is also the concern about the value of the person in a 'persistent vegetative state' to her loved ones. A person who is in a 'persistent vegetative state' is not a vegetable, especially not to those who know her and love her. The love that Mrs. Schiavo's parents and siblings have toward her, and the care they display toward her, are of immense value. It should be humbly acknowledged that no one—no physician, no ethicist, no judge, nor any other human being—can absolutely know the effect that the power of love has upon someone even as severely disabled as Mrs. Schiavo. Moreover, the love displayed by members of a family, friends, and professionals and volunteers in a hospice adds immensely to the moral dignity of our society. To Christians this kind of display of love is a witness to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Moral reflection should include consideration of the value of the love of caregivers as well as the condition of the one receiving the care.

"It seems to me that, all things considered, in the case of Mrs. Schiavo, it would be better to allow her to

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live... I believe it would be better to let her live because she is the beneficiary of abundant love...

"Serving others in love is possible only by participating in the love of God. On Easter, Christians heard again the proclamation that, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's love is stronger than death. Unless this proclamation is just a pious sentiment, it creates a people whose practices are different than those of the world. The Church's mission is not to be the chaplain to a culture of death, but to be a witness to the love of God in the world. Rather than assisting people to make living wills, wouldn't it be more fitting for the Church to tell the stories of those who have found new life in giving loving service to the disabled? Their stories show us how to practice a way of life of participating in the love of the Triune God, which is eternal life."

This is a marvelous example of a United Methodist bishop doing what a United Methodist bishop has been elected and consecrated to do: teach the Church's faith with theological precision, moral clarity, and pastoral persuasiveness. (PTS) ♥

## **BENEDICT XVI ON LIFE**

In April, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected the Roman Catholic Church's new Pope. Statements of his, written while he was still a cardinal, underline his commitment to the Gospel of Life.

For example, he declared that abortion and euthanasia are uniquely significant moral issues facing the Church and society today: "Not all issues have the same weight as abortion and euthanasia. There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion, even among Catholics, about waging war or applying the death penalty, but not, however, with regard to abortion and euthanasia." Regarding euthanasia, he added: "Scripture, in fact, clearly excludes every form of the kind of self-determination of human existence that is presupposed in the theory and practice of euthanasia."

On human cloning, he noted: "Man is capable of producing another man in the laboratory who, therefore, is no longer a gift of God or of nature. He can be fabricated and, just as he can be fabricated, he can be destroyed."

On the killing of embryos and fetuses for use in research, he stated: "When, as today, there is a market in human organs, when fetuses are produced to make spare organs available or to make progress in research and preventive medicine, many regard the human content of these practices as implicit. But the contempt for man that underlies it, when man is used and abused, lead—like it or not—to a descent into hell."

And on the dignity of all human life, he wrote: "Where man is no longer seen as one who is under the particular protection of God, there begins the barbarism which tramples on humanity. Where the sense of the

singular dignity of each person, in the light of God's design, is lost, there the project of mankind is horribly deformed, and his freedom, devoid of rule, becomes monstrous." (National Right to Life News, May 2005, p. 9)

Please remember that the above quotations are not the opinions of an academic theologian isolated from the churnings of Church and society. They represent the teaching of the man who is now Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Church catholic. (PTS) ♥

## ODEN AND ABORTION

Dr. Thomas C. Oden is one of the great theologians in The United Methodist Church—and in the Church catholic—today. The Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University, Dr. Oden is the author of many books—including Pastoral Theology and a three-volume systematic theology (The Living God, The Word of Life, and Life in the Spirit). He now serves as the general editor of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. And Lifewatch is grateful to Dr. Oden for being a member of our Advisory Board.

In 2003, Dr. Oden's Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity (HarperSanFrancisco) was published. In the book's sixth chapter, "Transforming Character," the author waxes autobiographical about his intellectual journey: "It is not a fabrication or projection that I once was a militant pacifist, a psychotherapeutic camp-follower, a sober existentialist, and a zealous advocate of women's liberation. I have served my time in all those liberation armies." (p. 90) But change was to come.

"Even though I did not know it clearly in my earlier years, I now think that my vocation has been from the beginning to become an advocate of classic Christian orthodoxy. My decision to advocate for orthodoxy evolved against the almost unanimous advice of my friends and university colleagues. I do not think that I would have learned the depth of this vocation had I not traveled this circuitous path. My vocation has grown directly from my own hunger for roots, my failed search for roots in modernity, my thirst for historical grounding beyond my former world of compulsive faddism, my native radicalism. It is perhaps an exaggeration to call this a history of suffering, but it was certainly an anguished trajectory. My early striving was essentially a moral search for virtue, goodness, and social justice. Only later did it become a recognition of God's search for me.

"A keen awareness of final judgment gives me an entirely different frame of reference for accountability. As an example of that shift in perspective, the single most decisive reversal that my new vocation required of me came in a sudden but overwhelming wave of moral revulsion against the very abortion-on-demand laws that I once advocated. In the sixties, teaching seminary ethics classes, I showed young pastors step-by-step arguments for the legitimacy of abortion. After 1973 those arguments backfired upon me as I disavowed the situation ethics on which they were based. Now my conscience calls me to be pro-choice before conception and pro-life thereafter." (p. 94, emphasis added).

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Dr. R. Kendall Soulen,  
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## THE ANNUAL LIFEWATCH BOARD MEETING (3:00 p.m.)

both on January 23, 2006 (Monday)

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## THE SURPRISING THOUGHTS OF SOME TEENS

The thoughts of teenagers on abortion and homosexuality are often overlooked—except for the occasional public-opinion surveys. After all, to many people, teenage opinions about such matters do not count for much, mainly because many teenagers cannot yet vote.

Earlier this year, I took on the task of finding out what some students at West Carteret High School—in Morehead City, NC—think about abortion and homosexuality. Preparing to ask various students what they think about these moral issues, I did not know what to expect. In short order I found myself mystified by the thinking, of some of my closest friends, on these matters.

When asked about abortion, most of the female teen respondents said they themselves would not get an abortion. At the same time, they did not care what other people thought and did about abortion. Most male teenagers did not seem to care either way. They said that, as long as they did not have to worry about becoming a teenage father, they did not care about their girlfriend getting an abortion. (The trouble is, of course, that to end undesired teenage fatherhood as quickly as possible, a young man would have to care very much about his girlfriend getting an abortion. So these guys did not care about abortion—until, that is, they want the procedure available for their pregnant girlfriends.)

I was rather disappointed by these responses from my peers. I thought they would care more about the sanctity of human life. And I really did not think things could get worse...

Until I asked them their thoughts on homosexuality. To understand fully my peers' thoughts on homosexuality, you should know that my high school, among the high schools in eastern North Carolina, has one of the largest populations of homosexual students. Even with this in mind, my classmates' replies amazed me. The responses of both male and female students included: "Go gays!" "Whatever floats their boats." "There is absolutely nothing wrong with it." Hearing these off-the-cuff responses, I was nearly speechless. I really had no idea that my peers thought like this.

Out of the group of people interviewed, there was one person who thought both abortion and homosexuality are morally wrong. A sophomore, she is a Roman Catholic. When I asked her for her thoughts, she simply replied that both abortion and homosexuality are wrong in all situations.

My findings, from my informal survey, were not what I had hoped to find. I was hoping and praying that my peers at school would hold the moral line on abortion and homosexuality. But in interviewing students at school, I found that the pro-choice and pro-homosexuality supporters strongly outnumbered those who are pro-life and pro-traditional-sexual-ethics.

From this effort I learned a couple of lessons. First, decisive moral positions on abortion and homosexuality will probably come from Christian faith. My Catholic friend made this clear. And second, I should not assume that I know what others think about these moral issues. Therefore, if the opportunity presents itself, I should ask for their thinking, offer my own (which is pro-life and pro-traditional-morality), and enter into conversation (if that would be helpful to all).

It is critically important that we Christians know Christian teaching about abortion and homosexuality, and be willing to discuss this teaching with others—even if it will not be gladly accepted by all who hear.—Heather Lewis is a member and youth leader at St. Peter's United Methodist Church in Morehead City, NC. ♥

## YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- If your congregation is assembling its 2006 church budget, please consider placing a gift to Lifewatch in the missions section. Your congregational contribution

to Lifewatch, however small or large, will help support the Lifewatch witness within The United Methodist Church and beyond. Thanks for considering, and responding to, this request.

- When copies of Lifewatch are returned to the Lifewatch office, because they are "undeliverable" for any reason, their addresses on the mailing list will be updated. Later, copies of the next regular issue will be mailed to the new addresses. If readers want the missed issues, please contact Mrs. Cindy Evans (P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338/(636)-294-2344/Lifewatch@charter.net), and she will mail them out as requested.
- When engaging in debates on life and abortion within United Methodism, how should we understand our opponents? Dr. Robert George, in The Clash of Orthodoxies, suggests that we remember that "[t]hey are not moral monsters. They are not Nazis or hatemongers. They are our [brothers and sisters in Christ and our] colleagues and very often our friends. Many of them are doing their level best to think through the moral issues at the heart of our cultural struggle and arrive at conclusions that are right and just. They view themselves as partisans of a culture of freedom. In most cases, they carefully and honestly argue for those choices for death (as Dworkin himself calls them) whose moral worthiness they proclaim and whose legal permission and constitutional protection they defend. As a matter of reciprocity, it is, in my view, incumbent upon us, as their opponents, to engage them in debate, to answer their arguments, and to say why they are wrong. While we must oppose them with resolution and, indeed, determination to win, we cannot content ourselves merely to denounce them, as we would rightly denounce the moral monsters who created a different

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Taskforce of  
United Methodists on  
Abortion and Sexuality

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09/01/05:

- \* Bishop Whitaker on Terri Schiavo
- \* Surprising teen thoughts on abortion
- \* Lifewatch service on January 23

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culture of death on the European continent in the 1930s and '40s." (First Things, January 2005)

- In an interview with Planned Parenthood, Bp. V. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, was asked: "...Are you pro-choice?" He responded: "Absolutely. The reason I love the Episcopal Church is that it actually trusts us to be adults. In a world where everyone tries to paint things as black or white, Episcopalians feel pretty comfortable in the gray areas. I'm sure there must be individual congregations, and certainly individuals, who are off the deep end about this issue, but for the most part, the stance that we have taken speaks to our people as a mature and adult way of dealing with this—that we protect a woman's right to choose but also say that obviously there are very deep things involved here.

"So we encourage our folks to take this very private issue seriously. We urge them to talk to their priests about it and to think through all the questions they might have. And then we absolutely stand behind a woman's right to choose. I think that's a responsible place to be." ([www.plannedparenthood.com](http://www.plannedparenthood.com))

It appears that Bp. Robinson applies his pro-choice paradigm to more than one issue.

- It is well known that The United Methodist Church maintains teaching on abortion ("Abortion," Paragraph 161J, The Book of Discipline) that is highly ambiguous. Our denomination's teaching on abortion is neither strictly "pro-life" nor rigidly "pro-abortion," but somewhat "pro-choice" and open to interpretation. Also, it is generally acknowledged that our church's General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and Women's Division/General Board of Global Ministries (WD/GBGM) co-sponsored, and participated in, the March for Women's Lives on April 25, 2004. According to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice ([www.rcrc.org](http://www.rcrc.org), April 2004), The Washington Post (April 26, 2004), Sarah Blustein in the American Prospect ([www.prospect.org](http://www.prospect.org), December 6, 2004), and an eyewitness account

(Lifewatch, June 2004), the March for Women's Lives was primarily dedicated to promoting abortion for any reason (or no reason) and abortion rights without compromise.

As is obvious from recent events, the United States Senate's confirmation process of judicial nominees has become remarkably contentious -- in large part because of the politics of abortion. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that GBCS and WD/GBGM, given their past activism in pro-choice politics, recently lobbied in save-the-filibuster campaigns ("Judge Not" by Mark Tooley, 5/27/05, [www.spectator.org](http://www.spectator.org) and "Religious Left Supported Filibusters against Bush Judge Nominees" by Mark Tooley, 5/26/05, IRD News Release).

Since the nomination of John G. Roberts to replace U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, extraordinary conflict in our nation's political culture may well be unleashed. At that time GBCS and WD/GBGM will most likely take the pro-choice side and join in the political battles at hand.

Even so, the Lifewatch community within The United Methodist Church urges the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division/General Board of Global Ministries to stay out of this political conflict. GBCS and WD/GBGM, many United Methodists believe that you have no denominational authority to join this battle. ♥

**Our Mission:**

*Out of obedience to Jesus Christ, the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality (TUMAS) "will work to create in church and society esteem for human life at its most vulnerable, specifically for the unborn child and for the woman who contemplates abortion." Therefore, TUMAS's first goal is "to win the hearts and minds of United Methodists, to engage in abortion-prevention through theological, pastoral, and social emphases that support human life."*