

## LIGHT TO THE DARKEST CORNERS

“Like Jesus, it is not enough to reserve our message for those who will readily receive it and to pursue victories only in those places where we are likely to win. We must persist in those places where our message is rejected. We must bring light to the darkest corners.”  
—Bishop Michael Burbidge

[Bp. Burbidge of the Catholic Arlington (VA) Diocese preached to 6,000 at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC on January 18, the night before the 2024 March for Life. (Steven Ertelt, [LifeNews.com](https://www.lifewatch.org), January 19, 2024)]

## KEEP THE CANDLE BURNING\*

This year, 2024, will be an extraordinarily difficult year. While preaching recently, a faithful United Methodist pastor stated that 2023 had been “stinky.” Then he implied that 2024 would probably smell even worse. Considering the persistence of the culture of death, the lack of reliable leadership throughout society, government, and the Church, the contentious divisions everywhere, the combat in the presidential race, the political jousting winding up in politicized courts, the unwillingness of governmental offices and officials to abide by the rule of law, the resurgence of anti-Semitism, the economic struggles and uncertainties, the continuing removal of Judaism and Christianity from public life, education (primary, secondary, and “higher”) which has lost its way, and the churches’ heresies and schisms, we must agree with the aforementioned preacher.

So, what then must we do?

Place a candle in one of your front windows, and keep it beaming 24-7. Let that little light remind you (and perhaps others who drive and walk by your residence) that God so loved this world that He came to us as a baby born to Mary. That baby boy became a man, a carpenter, a rabbi. That rabbi suffered death upon a cross for the sins and salvation of the world, and He was raised from death to demonstrate that salvation based on His death is true, is reality. The risen Savior now reigns as Lord over the cosmos—although His rule over this world is often hidden and disputed. One day He will return in power and glory to set all things right.

The light shining in your window will remind you, and others, that this world is not trapped and condemned by a deep and deadly darkness. For “[t]he light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5, NRSV)

Keep the candle burning. The darkness will not overcome it. It will remind you and others: Jesus Christ is risen and is Lord! So we can trust Him. We can obey Him each day. We can live faithfully without fear. (PTS)

\*Every edition of the Commentary Podcast ends with the challenge, “Keep the candle burning.” During this time of rising anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Israel activism, Commentary’s challenge is a good word to offer—not only to the Jewish community but also to the Church.

## 2024 LIFEWATCH SERMON “THE NEIGHBOR RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU”

by Rev. Nathanael Fugate

Scripture Lesson: Luke 10:25-37

*“I could never understand how one can love one’s neighbors. It’s just one’s neighbors, to my mind, that one can’t love, though one might love those at a distance.”*

*“The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular.”*

--Fyodo Dostoevsky (1821-1881), *The Brothers Karamazov*

My two boys have a plethora of weapons in their toy chest. Foam swords, nerf guns, shields, and even a broken clothes hanger—which apparently makes for the best imaginary bow and arrow—are all part of their armory. They use these weapons to wage war against all of the monsters, dragons, and of course “bad guys” who threaten our home. It is not uncommon to see my second child in the backyard, wildly swinging away with sticks in both hands, as he fights off what I can only imagine are hordes of these so-called “bad guys.” Typical six-year-old boy behavior!

The category of “bad guy” is a useful one for children for many reasons. It is good for children to begin to understand that there is evil in the world. It is good for them to be cautious of “bad guys,” because not everyone in the world seeks their good. It also gives some needed predictability to the world. “Good guys” do good things, and “bad guys” do bad things—usually! That is a helpful framework for children as they learn how they themselves should act. Perhaps this is why my kids are always asking who the “bad guys” are, when we watch a movie. They are even more pleased when they can identify who the “bad guys” are without our telling them.

While useful for children, the art of categorizing people into groups seems to be a habit we do not grow out of as adults. For most of human history, we have excelled in putting our fellow human beings into groups to justify inhumane behavior towards them. From Namibia to Nanking, from Rwanda to Cambodia and Darfur, history is rife with human beings doing unspeakable things to one another while justifying their actions.

### **Lawyer v. Jesus**

This is true in the passage of Scripture known as The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. An expert in the Law comes to test Rabbi Jesus. The lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, as cunning as ever, turns the question back on the lawyer and asks him what the Torah says. Relying on Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, the lawyer gives the correct answer: to love God with everything we have, and to love our “neighbor” as ourselves.

This is a fairly elementary interaction. Jesus is certainly not unique in saying these are the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:36-39), or that by doing these two things one would gain eternal life. Hillel the Elder, another great rabbi of the time, had said nearly the same thing a few decades before Jesus’ ministry. In

converting a Gentile to Judaism, Hillel said, “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation” (Shabbat 31a:6). Jesus simply affirms what was already a well established and accepted idea within the Jewish community of the time.

The lawyer, the Scriptures say, then feels a need to justify himself. He asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) Is he wanting to justify asking such a basic and well-trod question? Perhaps. However, it is more likely that he is wanting to justify his own actions when judged by the Law. This is, after all, a discussion of how to inherit eternal life, which is a pretty important deal! If you knew the basis for your attainment of eternal life was based on how you love your “neighbors,” would you not want to clarify exactly who those people are? After all, there are some people or groups of people that every one of us has not loved as ourselves at one point or another in our lives.

This second question is a much more fascinating question because it is a question that did not have a consensus answer. This second question is a category question based on semantics and interpretation of the Torah. In Leviticus 19:18, the Hebrew word used for “neighbor” is most commonly translated as “friend” or “companion,” and in a weaker sense as “fellow citizen” or “another person.” Given that the first half of verse 18 states, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against *any of your people*” (emphasis added), it might be reasonable to assume that “neighbor” literally means “your fellow Jewish citizen.” If this is the meaning of the text, then the Jews could still follow the whole Torah and exclude other categories of people—for example, the non-Jewish Samaritans or the oppressive Romans. In other words, they could exclude those whom it would be onerous to actually love.

Most likely this was the justification the lawyer was seeking. Not a justification of his question, but a justification of his treatment of others. If his definition of “neighbor” was narrow enough to exclude the Roman occupiers, then he would not have to worry about his actions towards them conforming to how he would treat himself. This would not be an uncommon reading, as Avot D’Rabbi Natan 16:4, a Talmud commentary on Leviticus 19:18, states: “So if he behaves as your people, you should love him. And if not, you should not love him.” The same idea is posited a thousand years later by Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, who says: “If he is your neighbor, that is, he is a good person like you. But if he is wicked, it is then written [Proverbs 8:13], ‘Fear of the LORD is hating the wicked.’” That would certainly be a convenient reading of the Torah for a Jew living under occupation! However, it is not the interpretation of Jesus.

Jesus tells a parable that would put the other readings of the text to the test. Again, you have to love how Jesus turns the tables during this interaction with a religious leader. The lawyer comes to test Jesus, but instead Jesus is, in turn, testing the lawyer’s and his fellow rabbis’ reading of the Scripture.

### **That Good Samaritan**

We all know this parable quite well. A man is robbed and left for dead. Then a priest and a Levite pass by him

*“[The United Methodist Church] has found a way to categorize a group of people in such a way that it can treat them in ways that nobody wants to be treated.”*

without offering aid. Now if you are like me, reading the New Testament from the perspective that the religious leaders are the antagonists in the story, then your first response to the parable might be to say, “Hurrah, Jesus! Show those hypocritical religious leaders for what they are!” To be sure, Jesus does call out religious leaders for their hypocrisy plenty of times. But remember Jesus is answering a category question here. If “neighbor” in Leviticus 19:18 is a “fellow citizen” or someone who “behaves as your people,” then we would expect both the priest and the Levite to help here. The fact is that neither does help should raise some big red flags that Jesus is going to do something interesting.

Jesus does indeed do something interesting. He picks an individual who does not fit any of the previous categories: a Samaritan. A Samaritan would not be a friend or companion, because we know from John 4’s recounting of the woman at the well that Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other. From that same story in John, it is clear that the Samaritan was not someone who “behaves as your people” because he had wildly different beliefs on the worship of God. The Samaritan certainly would not have been a “fellow citizen” since Samaritans were not Jews at all. So none of the categories would compel this Samaritan to offer aid to the roadside victim.

Yet the Samaritan does indeed offer aid. Surprisingly, he offers aid over and above the call of duty. It is at this point that Jesus does something truly fascinating. Instead of answering the original question, “Who is compelled by Torah to treat the wounded man as a neighbor?,” Jesus turns the whole framework on its head and asks a new question: From the perspective of the wounded man, who acted like a neighbor? The obvious answer is the one that is given, “The one who showed mercy.” (Luke 10:37) Jesus affirms this answer and tells the lawyer that if he wants to inherit eternal life, he should “[g]o and do likewise.” (Luke 10:37)

When broken down, Jesus’ answer seems somewhat disappointing. His answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?,” is: “The one to whom you could show mercy,” or to put it another way, “The one you could love as yourself.” Why, it is almost as if Jesus disagrees with the whole idea of categorizing people! Who is my neighbor? Is it not those who look like me, believe like me, are civil toward me, act like me, or any other exclusionary box I could dream up? No! My neighbor is anyone to whom I could show mercy.

Jesus knows how prone human beings are to categorize others into groups in order to justify treating them poorly. In order to combat that proclivity, Jesus

refuses a categorical answer altogether. No, the Jews do not get to exclude the Samaritans, the Greeks, or even the oppressing Romans from the mandate to love their neighbors as themselves. If one is able to show mercy to a person, then that person is a neighbor. Even a “bad guy.”

### **What about the Unborn and Us?**

In theory, this should be the basis of all our social holiness in the world. In practice, this is rarely the case. As our society becomes more and more polarized, we create categories into which we put people to justify our abusive treatment of others. We use terms like Conservative and Progressive, Republican and Democrat, Oppressor and Oppressed, Moral and Immoral, Authoritarian and Socialist, to justify treating people in ways that we would be aghast at, if we were treated in the same way.

This justification of horrendous actions is most prominent in our society when it comes to unborn children and their mothers. Particularly The United Methodist Church has developed a nuanced code to talk about the unborn as human beings with sacred worth while justifying why the church can support the legal option to kill these same people. To put it another way, the church has found a way to categorize a group of people in such a way that it can treat them in ways that nobody wants to be treated. (See the current [Book of Discipline](#), Paragraph 161K.)

After all, it is not difficult to imagine how we, in the unborn’s position, would want to be treated. If I was weak, mostly immobile, and lacking any kind of autonomy, would I want someone more powerful to kill me? Absolutely not. If I was poor or a burden on others, or if I had an extra chromosome or my conception was violent, would I want to be killed? No, I still would not want others to kill me. Would I want others more powerful to speak up for my survival? Yes, of course! It does not take great flights of imagination to know how I, in the position of the unborn, would want to be treated.

### **The Greatest Challenge: Love Our Actual Neighbors**

But you knew all of that. Right? After all, you are currently reading this sermon because you have signed up for the [Lifewatch](#) newsletter or because you have sought out the Lifewatch website to read or listen to it. That, in and of itself, leads me to believe that I am, as they say, preaching to the choir. I hope that the discussion above exhorts you to continue to make dismantling the practice of abortion a top, if not the top, priority in the year 2024. If you are reading this, then it is reasonable to think that you are already well situated on this train—or at least you have one foot off the platform.

With that in mind, I want to end by carefully considering the ways we, in the Church, fail to live up to Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves. I know of a congregation where a young, promiscuous, and unwed woman announced she was pregnant during a worship service’s prayer time. The response to the announcement was a quiet murmur within the church and many side-eyed glances at the woman throughout the

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

service. To some extent, the reaction was understandable. This was a church committed to supporting traditional Christian teaching on human life and sexuality. The people knew this was not a best-case scenario, and they were correct. Sex outside of marriage is not good, and a child born to a single mother is going to face many challenges. This was not the ideal situation.

It was amazing how traditional Christian precepts fell apart when the church members were tested by a personal, non-ideal situation. Where the church says that this child is of incredible sacred worth, who ought to be celebrated, regardless of the situation of its conception. Sadly, this church treated the new life as if the little one was an unfortunate mistake, or worse, a problem they now had to deal with. Where the church says that this woman is infinitely valuable, worthy of respect, care, and protection, and a top priority in ministry, this congregation immediately shunted her into the category of “immoral,” so that they could think of and treat her differently. They did not have to love her, as themselves, because this new label excluded her and her child from the rank of neighbor.

It is here that Dostoevsky’s quotations ring the truest. It is easy to love humanity, the unborn, and their mothers at a distance. I can write sermons, articles, and social-media posts declaring the evils of abortion and the blessedness of life. I can give lectures and create podcasts on the best arguments against abortion, and I can train others to be proficient in those arguments. I can love the category of the unborn and their mothers, in theory, with all my heart. All of this is well and good. But the real test is how I love my neighbors when they are right there in front of me. That includes me loving and leading a congregation (like the one described above) that forgets, hopefully for a short season, how to love the unborn child and mother in its midst.

“One can love one’s neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it’s almost impossible,” says Ivan in [The Brothers Karamazov](#). In many ways, Ivan’s words are correct. To offer category-less mercy, as Jesus commands, is nearly impossible. Nearly impossible because the ones to whom we could show mercy are broken and sinful, immoral and hypocritical, and come with more baggage than we can handle. Nearly impossible because to do so is to suffer and risk ourselves for people who do not deserve our help. Nearly impossible because we ourselves are totally depraved and deprived of the power we need to show mercy to others. Nearly impossible, but not quite, because “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness.” (2 Peter 1:3) We are able to do it through God’s powerful work in our lives. And we ought to start with these mothers and children.

I would submit that if you or your local church is not generously giving to your local crisis pregnancy center, which offers feasible alternatives to abortion, then you are

*“If you are fitting mothers into unsavory categories so that you can treat them differently than you would treat yourself, then you are passing by on the other side. Unplanned or unwanted pregnancies ought to be the easiest and most foundational place that the Church shows mercy.”*

passing by on the other side of the road. If you are not responding to the news of new sacred life in the way you would want people to respond to news of your own conception, then you are passing by on the other side. If you are fitting mothers into unsavory categories so that you can treat them

differently than you would treat yourself, then you are passing by on the other side. Unplanned or unwanted pregnancies ought to be the easiest and most foundational place that the Church shows mercy. If we cannot get that right, I do not think we have much hope of any real social holiness.

Let us be the Church that lives out the Word of God toward the neighbors right in front of us. Let us be the Church that offers mercy as Christ first offered mercy to us. In doing so, may we bring glory to our heavenly Father, the author of all our lives. Amen.

*Rev. Nate Fugate is the pastor of Shreve Community Church in Shreve, OH. An elder in the Global Methodist Church, he is married to Holly, and they are blessed with four children. Both Nate and Holly witness for life. Note the Fugate article “United Methodists Should Support Dobbs Decision” (September 28, 2022), which was a Daily Digest Commentary posted on the United Methodist News Service website. A video of Rev. Fugate preaching this sermon can be found on the Lifewatch website. ♥*

## **ABORTION BY THE NUMBERS AND IN THE HEADLINES**

- **“65,464,760 Babies Have Been Killed in Abortions Since Roe v. Wade in 1973”** (Steven Ertelt, [LifeNews.com](#), January 17, 2024)
- **“Planned Parenthood, America’s Biggest Abortion Biz, Has Received \$7.9 Billion in Taxpayer Funding”** (Connor Semelsberger, [LifeNews.com](#), December 15, 2023)
- **“Hidden Epidemic: Nearly 70% of Abortions Are Coerced, Unwanted or Inconsistent with Women’s Preferences”** (David C. Reardon, Katherine Rafferty, and Tessa Longbons, [lozierinstitute.org](#), May 15, 2023)
- **“65 Abortion Centers Have Closed Since Dobbs, Saving Thousands of Babies from Abortion”** (Steven Ertelt, [LifeNews.com](#), December 5, 2023)
- **“Overturning Roe v. Wade Has Already Saved 32,000 Babies from Abortion”** (Kim Schwartz, [LifeNews.com](#), November 28, 2023)
- **“Pro-Life Pregnancy Centers Have Helped 1 Million More Women Since Roe Overturned”** (Theresa Olohan, [LifeNews.com](#), December 15, 2023)
- **“Report: Pro-Life Pregnancy Centers Provided \$358 Million in Services Last Year”** ([CatholicVote.org](#), CV News Feed on December 15, 2023)
- **“Poll Shows Abortion Support Has Dropped Since Dobbs Decision”** (Michael New, [LifeNews.com](#), December 11, 2023)

- “New Poll Finds 66% of Americans Want Pro-Life Laws Limiting Abortion” (Steven Ertelt, [LifeNews.com](#), January 18, 2024)

These positive trends, regarding life over abortion, are appearing throughout American society. Thanks be to God: for providence, for Christians who are serving mothers (and fathers) and children in need, and, most of all, for hopeful, brave mothers (and fathers) living by faith and welcoming their children.♥

## PRO-CHOICE RELIGION IS NOT CHRISTIANITY

In America today, pro-choice religion is alive and well. It does not have its own denominational structure. Instead, this religion invades and inhabits the various communions of American Christianity.

Pro-choice religion proposes to each and every person: “You and your choices are of ultimate importance. In making your choices, you are not to be restricted by the Bible, by Church tradition or teaching, by natural law, by legislated law, by claims of right and wrong. Only what you want matters. So by following whatever you desire, you decide what is best for you. No qualifications. No worry about sin. No fretting about forgiveness. Just choose what you want to choose. Do what you want to do. Be who you want to be. The bottom line is this: You choose; therefore, you are.”

### Its History

This religion has been with us since Adam and Eve exercised their choices, against God, in The Garden. Even so, pro-choice religion became especially prominent, in America, among those who benefited from, preached for, lobbied for, and fought for slavery. A century after the Civil War, pro-choice religion reappeared with a vengeance—among those advocating for abortion rights.

Relying on pro-choice religion, Rev. Howard Moody, the pastor of Judson Memorial Church in New York City, started the Clergy Consultation Service (CCS) in 1967. Before [Roe v. Wade](#), CCS connected pregnant women with abortion providers. Founded in 1973 and motivated by pro-choice religion, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR) united liberal Protestants and Jews to advocate for “abortion rights.” In 1994, RCAR morphed into the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). RCRC advanced pro-choice religion by distributing pro-choice prayers, sermons, creeds, and liturgies to its constituency. In the mid-2010s, Dr. Willie Parker, MD was a rock-star representative for RCRC. He spoke the theme of pro-choice religion: “The part of you that’s like God is the part that makes a choice.” Today, on its website, RCRC proudly states: “We affirm the work of abortion care as sacred.” A contemporary proponent of pro-choice religion is Dr. Rebecca Todd Peters, a professor of religious studies at Elon University in North Carolina and a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). In 2018, she published [Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice](#). Trust women? Trust men? For Christians, would not trusting (and obeying) Christ be preferable? (Thanks to Samira Kawash, whose article “Holy Abortion” in [First Things](#)

[December 2023] provided guidance and detail for this paragraph and this article.)

Pro-choice religion can lead to some strange places. For example, consider the [Cosmopolitan Magazine](#) social-media campaign called “So How Does a Satanic Abortion Ceremony Even Work?” Its answer: “First, find a quiet space. Bring a mirror if you can. Just before taking the [abortion] medication, gaze at your reflection and focus on your personhood. Home in on your intent, your responsibility to you.

“Later, when the procedure is complete, return to your reflection. Focus again on your personhood, your power in making this decision. Complete the ritual by reciting a personal affirmation. By my body, my blood; by my will, it is done.” (Madalaine Elhabbal, “Women’s Magazine Promotes ‘Satanic Ritual Abortions,’” [catholicvote.org](#), November 30, 2023) The Cosmo crowd seems to be working awfully hard to lead women to choose to abort their unborn children and then to act on their choice.

### Differences

In truth, pro-choice religion is the dominant religion in American society. Furthermore, it could be argued that pro-choice religion is currently the official religion of the federal government. At its core, pro-choice religion asks people to make their own choices—about whether or not their unborn child will live, about what sex they want to be, about whether or not they want to die, and on and on.

Pro-choice religion is not Christianity. The two religions might share some common claims and words. However, pro-choice religion and Christianity (which can be outlined by official Methodist doctrine) are essentially opposed to each other. So pro-choice religion is not the faith of the Church catholic. Pro-choice religion is another faith.

Pro-choice religion centers on the individual, the individual’s choosing, and the individual’s choices. In this religion, God is confined to the background only to support the individual and the individual’s choices.

Mere (or ecumenical) Christianity centers on the Triune God and particularly on Jesus Christ, His embodying of the love of the Father for the world. With Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Lord at the center of the cosmos, God the Father is ready, willing, and able to forgive and transform the repentant sinner—with the help of the Holy Spirit. **But most of all, mere Christianity is about God choosing and acting for humanity—not about the individual’s choices.**

Pro-choice religion is about legitimating the moral choices of the individual. It is about “my truth.” When it comes to abortion, pro-choice religion says, “Not a problem.”

Christianity is about God transforming people to love the Almighty and the neighbor, and to live in the Church and in the world as Jesus Christ leads. When it comes to abortion, the God of Christianity says, “With my help, love and protect the little one whom I create. If you have sinned by aborting one of My little ones, repent, turn to Me; I love you and forgive you; then, sin no more.”

In Methodist circles, sooner or later, pro-choice religion will hunt you down. When it finds you, engage it and question it with the truth of the Church’s apostolic faith. (PTS) ♥

## **UNITED METHODIST DISCIPLINE: USE “UNBORN CHILD,” NOT “FETUS”**

Legislation passed by the 2012 General Conference required that the Social Principles be rewritten so that they would not be so US-centric, and be more applicable to all countries and cultures. The result was the proposed Revised Social Principles, which are now posted online and easily available. The proposed Revised Social Principles will be debated and amended, and adopted or rejected, by General Conference—which will meet in Charlotte, NC from April 23 to May 3 of this year.

In the proposed Revised Social Principles, “Reproductive Health and Abortion” (Paragraph K) appears under “The Social Community” section. There is one deeply troubling change that appears in the proposed principle on abortion: The word “fetus” appears twice; it jumps out at those accustomed to the standing United Methodist paragraph on abortion.

The insertion of the word “fetus” in the proposed Revised Social Principles is troubling for two reasons. First, “fetus” does not appear in the pre-revised Social Principle on abortion. That Social Principle uses the phrases “unborn child” and “unborn human life,” but it does not use the word “fetus.”

Those who drafted the Revised Social Principles did not have the right to make these significant changes. They should not have introduced this word, which is so often used by pro-choice activists and advocates, into the draft of the Revised Social Principles. Second, the word “fetus” is de-humanizing. Its use deprives the “unborn child” of personhood and the “unborn human life” of humanity. All know, or should know, this moral truth: The de-humanized are much more easily aborted than those recognized as fully human. For these reasons, the word “fetus” should be replaced by more humanizing language—before the Revised Social Principles on abortion is adopted by General Conference.

Contact members of your Annual Conference delegation who will be attending the next General Conference. Urge them to replace the word “fetus” with the phrase “unborn child” and/or “unborn human life.” (PTS) ♥

## **SAY RADICALLY FAITHFUL THINGS DURING A WORSHIP SERVICE**

Speak about God’s beautiful creation and His gift of marriage.

Speak about how, in marriage, the wife and the husband so marvelously compliment and fulfill each other.

Speak about the goodness of pets and the miracle of children.

Speak about how all children are a gift—even when they are unexpected, and even when they are less than “perfect.”

Speak about how God’s gift of a child is accompanied by God’s gift of providence over that child and that child’s family.

During a Children’s Sermon on Mother’s/Father’s Day, ask the girls and boys to listen for God calling them to become wives and husbands, mothers and fathers—all to honor God.

Speak about taking the congregation’s “children’s ministry” to the children in the neighborhood. (PTS) ♥

## **RUN YOUR RACE!**

The November 2023 election results felt like a gut punch to Americans who are committed to protecting the unborn child and mother from abortion (because the Church of Jesus Christ, from its apostolic beginning and

throughout its history, has protected the unborn child and mother from abortion). In a thoughtful response to this unsettling development, Dr. David Watson of United Theological Seminary, quotes Dr. Carl Trueman and his book [The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self](#) (Crossway, 2020): “...The task for the Christian is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but

to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them.” (p. 30)

Dr. Watson continues: “Now is not the time to throw our hands in the air or retreat into our bunkers. There are generations that depend on us. We may not see the kinds of spectacular breakthroughs for which we might hope, but that is irrelevant. We are called to be faithful, and so, as strangers in a strange land, we do what Christians have done across the centuries. We persevere. We run our race. We press on in the steady, sometimes plodding, work of everyday faithfulness. We worship the Lord our God, the Lord alone. We teach the faith. We teach people who and what they are, why their lives matter, and why the lives of others matter. We show love to those who do not love us. We pass on what has been handed on to us from the time of the apostles, and we stand on our convictions in the face of opposition.

“This is not the first time the faithful church has felt the pain of dislocation from the world around it. In fact, friction with the ambient culture is the rule, not the exception, for Christian life. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have taken up the cause of the poor, the needy, and the vulnerable. What a privilege to continue in their work. Now isn’t the time for retreat. It is the time for perseverance. There is too much at stake, too many who will live tomorrow and thus bear the consequences of what we do today.” (“The Call to Persevere: Life in the Wake of a Moral Defeat,” November 14, 2023, [firebrandmag.com](http://firebrandmag.com), an online publication) ♥

*“The insertion of the word ‘fetus’ in the proposed Revised Social Principles is troubling .... Its use deprives the ‘unborn child’ of personhood and the ‘unborn human life’ of humanity. All know, or should know, this moral truth: The de-humanized are much more easily aborted than those recognized as fully human.”*

## RUNNING INCLUDES TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE UNBORN

“We know abortion is an act of violence that ends the life of a human being in the womb.” (Jonathon Van Maren, “What We Can Learn from Pro-Life Losses,” November 17, 2023, Web Exclusives, [First Things](https://www.firstthings.com) website [[firstthings.com](https://www.firstthings.com)]) *We Methodists should say so.*

“Abortion activists claim abortion is healthcare.” *We Methodists should disagree. When abortion is treated as healthcare, one patient always lives, and the other patient always dies.*

“The only possible justification pro-lifers have for restricting abortion, after all, is that pre-born children are children....” *We Methodists should propose that to others.*

“If [pre-born children] are not [children], pro-life laws are cruel.” *We Methodists should admit that.*

“If the unborn is not a human person, no justification for abortion is necessary. However, if the unborn is a human person, no justification for abortion is adequate.” *We Methodists should declare that to be true, and then we should say a confident Amen!* (Greg Koukl quoted by Jonathon Van Maren) ♥

## GET BEYOND THE ABSTRACTIONS

Dr. Carl R. Trueman returns.

Dr. Trueman lives up to his last name. He is, in fact, a True Man. He admirably serves truth as a professor of Biblical and religious studies at Grove City College.

On October 30, he delivered the 36th Annual Erasmus Lecture at the Union League Club in New York City. Entitled “The Desecration of Man,” his lecture can be watched as a video. (Simply google “2023 Erasmus Lecture video.” The lecture can also be read in the January 2024 issue of [First Things](https://www.firstthings.com), which is available at [firstthings.com](https://www.firstthings.com).) The lecture, watched or read, will be most edifying to you.

In his lecture, Dr. Trueman proposes that our day is “disenchanted” and “liquefied.” “Disenchanted” because it looks and sounds like references to God and God’s work have been

largely scrubbed from public life. “Liquefied” because institutions and norms have become unreliable and unpredictable; they become whatever elites want them to be. To these sobering realities, Dr. Trueman adds “the desecration of man”—that is, the disrespect of humanity and the maltreatment of mankind as if the human being is simply material to be used for various ends.

After concluding his lecture and during the question-and-answer period, Dr. Trueman made two comments that are particularly significant. One was on “gender-affirming care” and the other on abortion. Here they are.

**On gender-affirming care (starting at 54:20 on the video):** “I was talking the other week to somebody, being interviewed by a delightful, liberal journalist from St. Louis. We had a very, very friendly and happy hour on the phone. I genuinely mean that. A very, very delightful person. She was telling me about a two-year-old child she

knew who was transgender—had begun then and transitioned in her teen years.... Four- and five-year-olds do not think in terms of abstract concepts. Gender is an abstract concept.... That child was ill-served by...parents not correcting that confusion....

“On the ‘T’ [transgender] issue, I genuinely think that it is an evil for society, because of the way it is being used, children are now being used, to drive this issue, in a way that is causing catastrophic harm to children. I was pleased to see a lawsuit filed just last week, against the American Pediatric Association, by a young girl with a lot of problems, a lot of co-morbidities, who had gone to see her doctor at age 14 for being suicidal. She had been immediately put on hormone therapy. Well, that’s evil. I’m sorry. I hope that doctor is sued. Frankly, I hope [the doctor] would go to prison for that. As I was thinking about that, I thought, Where is the precedent for that kind of medical care? I think it is Josef Mengele [1911-1979, a Nazi doctor], in actions, experimenting on children. So on the ‘T’ issue, certainly among children, I am prepared to say this is real evil. We need to face it down.”

**On abortion (starting at 59:40):** “When I talk about abortion, I give the arguments [of]...Peter Singer [philosopher at Princeton University]. Then we look at Robbie George [political philosopher at Princeton University]. They are on opposite sides. But let’s imagine a scenario where Peter Singer and Robbie George are walking down Nassau Street in Princeton at one o’clock in the morning. It’s hard to imagine them doing that, but let’s say they are.... They hear a baby cry. They look over into the shop door. And there is a little baby in a crib, a newborn baby crying. And I ask the students, ‘Do you think they disagree on what to do in that situation?’ And the answer is, ‘Of course they don’t.’ And then I say to the students, ‘Why not?’ And when they think about it, they answer, ‘Because the baby is not an abstraction.’ Peter Singer is not going to say, ‘Hey, that baby is not a person

for another 24 months; we can leave it to be eaten by the feral cats.’ He is going to be looking after the baby, while Robbie George calls an ambulance and also gets the ambulance for the mother,

wherever she is. And the reason is: it is a real, concrete situation....

“What is one of the things that qualifies one for office in the Church? Hospitality. In the Presbyterian tradition, we tend to focus on the doctrinal. But actually, hospitality is one of the qualifications...because hospitality involves real people in real situations. It does not trade in abstractions.... If we are going to teach people about human dignity, we have to treat people with human dignity. And that means the people we actually hang out with.... People who you actually know, you treat with human dignity; that’s powerful. So yes, there is a place for philosophical argument, absolutely. There is a place for the Gospel. But I think it is tremendously weakened if we are not also being hospitable—opening our homes to people.”

Again, please watch or read the entire lecture by Dr. Trueman. (PTS) ♥

*“On the ‘T’ [transgender] issue ... children are now being used to drive this issue in a way that is causing catastrophic harm to children.”*

## YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

● **Thanks to you, the Lifewatch witness continues against all odds.** Because of you, this witness to the Gospel of Life has continued for over 35 years. This witness has not been silenced. Bishops who care little about the apostolic faith of the Church catholic, denominational executives who serve a pro-choice agenda (on Christ's Church, life, and sexuality), and pastors who are skittish about proposing Christian truth that might make somebody mad—they have not stopped this witness. You and your generosity have helped keep the Lifewatch witness alive, well, and strong. Thank you!

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Our heartfelt thanks to you for your support—prayers and gifts, past and present.

● **"An Advent Challenge: Church, Name Heresy" appeared on page one, above the fold, in the last issue of Lifewatch (December 1, 2023).** It was a true and wise statement on heresy by Dr. Carl E. Braaten, a Lutheran pastor, professor, and theologian. At 94, Dr. Braaten "crossed the Jordan" on October 28, 2023—a month before Lifewatch was delivered to your mailbox or inbox. His funeral service took place at Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Sun City West, Arizona on November 25.

Carl Braaten was born on January 3, 1929 in St. Paul, Minnesota, raised a son of Lutheran missionaries in Madagascar, lettered in tennis at St. Olaf College, studied under Professor Paul Tillich at Harvard Divinity School, authored many books and countless articles, and helped found the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and started its journal Pro Ecclesia with Dr. Robert Jenson (1930-2017). Dr. Braaten was a courageous servant of the apostolic faith of the catholic Church—including its protection of innocent, defenseless human beings and its clear teaching on marriage and human sexuality.

During the funeral service, his son read this from one

of his father's books: "The message of the dying and rising of Jesus the Messiah is not the mythic part of Christianity. It is the ontological, historical truth. The apostles who encountered the crucified and risen Jesus entered into the depths of reality. The whole drama of salvation is encapsulated in the conflict and victory of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It holds within itself universal meaning and...hope for humanity in the world."

Thanks be to God for Carl E. Braaten—his life, his faith, his ministry, and his abiding witness, all of which served the crucified and risen and returning Lord, Jesus Christ.

● **Fifth Avenue United Methodist Church of Wilmington, NC** was temporarily closed by North Carolina Conference officials in March of 2023 and permanently closed by vote of the June 2023 North Carolina Annual Conference. This closure, which included the conference trustees taking over the church's property, was challenged by questions of law read by your editor, and by his Brief and Reply Brief written for the Judicial Council. On November 7, 2023, the Judicial Council let it be known that, on the basis of The Book of Discipline and prior Council rulings, it had decided to support the permanent closure of the Fifth Avenue Church.

*"The message of the dying and rising of Jesus the Messiah is not the mythic part of Christianity. It is the ontological, historical truth. The apostles who encountered the crucified and risen Jesus entered into the depths of reality. The whole drama of salvation is encapsulated in the conflict and victory of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ."*

If you would be interested in reading the Brief, Reply Brief, and/or decision, you can find the links at the People Need Jesus website ([peopleneedjesus.net](http://peopleneedjesus.net)), which is thoughtfully and faithfully managed by Dr. Chris Ritter, a Global Methodist elder, pastor, and author. Once on the homepage, go to "UM Fallout: A Compendium;" then scroll down to the notices that were "Added 11-9-2023;" there you will find the three links. Also, you can find the links at Lonnie D. Brook's Facebook page; he posted them on November 8, 2023.

Having lost in the court of the church, your editor then took his case to the court of public (or Methodist!) opinion—by writing "What I Learned from the Closing of Fifth Avenue United Methodist Church: Bishops Have Way Too Much Power" (Firebrand, an online magazine, [firebrandmag.com](http://firebrandmag.com), December 12, 2023).

All in all, powerful conference officials acting against a small local church, possibly to secure its very valuable property, is not a good look. As I wrote earlier: "The United Methodist way. The United Methodist way is conversational and communal, collegial and collaborative, with give-and-take and checks-and-balances. The United Methodist way limits the strong and lifts the weak.

"The closure of Fifth Avenue United Methodist Church violated the United Methodist way. It was a raw exercise of power....

"Our Lord spoke of rulers lording it over the ruled. Then He said to His Church: 'It will not be so among you....' (Matthew 20:25, NRSV)."



Unfortunately, it *was* so among those of us in the North Carolina Conference. God have mercy.

● **“Planned Parenthood abortionist Colleen McNicholas is among three finalists selected from around the world for the European Union’s top human rights prize, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.** As an abortionist, she proudly claims to have killed 31 babies in abortions in one day! This is the first time in the history of the prize that an abortionist or an abortion advocate has been nominated. When did we start calling someone who kills babies for a living a human rights advocate? What changed?” (Canon Georgette Forney, “A Season of Change,” Carpe Diem—Anglicans for Life’s Quarterly Newsletter, October 2023, p. 1)

Excellent questions.

● **Whatever you think of Donald Trump, he spoke the truth about abortion on a political stage.** In a 2016 presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, he said: “...what Hillary is saying in the ninth month you can take the baby and rip the baby out of the womb of the mother, just prior to the birth of the baby. Now you can say that that’s okay. And Hillary can say that that’s okay. But it’s not okay with me. Because based on what she is saying and based on where she is going and has been, you can take the baby and rip the baby out of the womb in the ninth month, on the final day. And that’s not acceptable.”

Candidate Clinton then responded: “Well, that is not what happens in these cases. Using that kind of scare rhetoric is just terribly unfortunate...” (YouTube, NBC News, Clinton-Trump Debate on Abortion)

By energizing usually non-voting citizens to vote, that exchange might have played a part in determining the 2016 presidential election. Perhaps in spite of himself, Mr. Trump spoke an unvarnished truth that many Americans had yearned for decades to hear from a presidential candidate.

● **“The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks our most vulnerable and voiceless brothers and sisters and destroys more than a million lives per year in our country alone.”** In November, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops met and approved that sentence as part of an “Introductory Note” to its voting guide, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” in advance of the 2024 elections.

Catholic bishops, thank you for this good and truthful word.

● **Look at all the pro-choice politicians and state-constitutional amendments that are now winning.** Politically speaking, perhaps it would have been better if the United States Supreme Court had not handed down *Dobbs*. Wrong!, replies Thomas Clark, an attorney with decades of public-policy experience. Clark explains: “*Dobbs* can’t lose anything, because it is right. If the proper articulation of how it is the people in our constitutional system that decide fundamental questions like abortion is a loser, then what is lost is not an election, but the system itself, for the people will have lost the effective practice of self-government.

“...[the *Dobbs*] victory will always remain important, practically and symbolically, for erasing the perverse idea that the American Constitution, the scheme of ordered liberty that has maintained republican government and political freedom for centuries, somehow requires that a woman be able to kill her unborn child. I wish to think that even the two generations of time during which the issue has wrongly been withheld from the people [because of *Roe v. Wade*]—and during which they have been conditioned to think of this evil as bearing the cherished label of a constitutional right—has not atrophied the moral discernment of the people, and that they will see the murder of defenseless human life for the evil it is. The small catch with *Dobbs* having restored the decision to the people is that they will now be judged by

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how they respond.” (“The Myth of *Dobbs* Losing the Midterms [Part II],” The Human Life Review, Summer 2023, p.35)

● **The Human Life Review website contains much Gospel of Life content.** On October 19, 2023, “Britney Spears Revealed She Was Pressured into Having an Abortion” by Madeline Fry Schultz was posted on the site. On October 23, 2023, my article “Breaking Free from the Pro-Choice Captivity of the Church,” which quotes extensively from United Methodist Bishop Tim Whitaker’s first Lifewatch Sermon, was posted. On November 20, this email came from one who monitors the website: “Clicks on

Rev. Stallsworth’s piece [which is based on Bp. Whitaker’s sermon] are just shy of the Britney Spears story! Not only do we typically see low activity for Pastoral Reflections stories (that’s unfortunate)...but it’s quite an accomplishment to compete head to head with a dramatic story about the Princess of Pop.” Bp. Whitaker and I are still coming down from an inflated sense of self-importance....

Now seriously, offer a prayer for Britney and her little one.

● **“Our Salvation Began with an Unplanned Pregnancy”** That sign was spotted at the 2024 March for Life in Washington, DC. (Mary Elise Cosgray and Noah Slayter, “Top 42 Signs at the 51st March for Life,” [dailysignal.com](http://dailysignal.com), January 19, 2024)

● *Vulnerari praesidio.* “Protect the most vulnerable.”

● *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

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