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Pastors' Breakfast
CareNet Pregnancy Resource Center
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It's a privilege to be asked to be with you all and to speak about the sanctity of life and our role as pastors to preach and teach God's Word, and to care for the vulnerable and the broken who have been affected by abortion.

Hear these words from Luke's Gospel, Chapter 1, beginning at verse 39.

[39] In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, [40] and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. [41] And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."

That was John the Baptist, of course, who leaped in his mother's womb. And it's vitally important to note that the unborn John is being called in Scripture, a "baby." In the original Greek of Luke's Gospel, it is *brephos*. And that same word is used in the very next chapter to describe the baby Jesus after his birth. Chapter 2, verse 16: "And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, *brephos*, lying in a manger."

And years later, during Jesus' ministry, that same word, *brephos*, is used for the children Jesus blessed. Luke Chapter 18, verse 15: "Now they were bringing even infants, *brephos*, to him that he might touch them."

God's Word makes clear that it was a baby in Elizabeth's womb and in Mary's. Luke was a physician and he understood the details about pregnancy and he often used medical terms in his Gospel. One scholar has counted over 300 technical medical terms in Luke's Gospel. Luke knew what a baby was, born or not yet born.

John the Baptist, six months along in the womb, recognized Jesus as the incarnate Lord. Elizabeth said to Mary, "When the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." Even in his mother's womb, John the Baptist begins his prophetic ministry, preparing the way for Jesus.

Our son Michael sent my wife, Meg, and me a 3-D sonogram picture of our youngest grandson, who was then nearly six months along, just approaching his final trimester in the womb of his mother, Tracy. Seeing that amazing picture, with his facial features, his fingers so very clear, makes so real to me the beauty and the significance of the unborn John the Baptist, at that same early age, moved by the Holy Spirit, leaping in worshipful recognition of Jesus his Savior.

Throughout Scripture, God shows us how precious is the gift of life. How precious are babies in the womb, and babies as they are born.

You'll recall in Exodus Chapter 1 that there arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph. And he said to his people, "the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply..." And so they enslaved God's people. "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied."

And so we read in Exodus Chapter 1, beginning at verse 15:

[15] Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, [16] "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." [17] But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. [18] So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" [19] The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." [20] So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. [21] And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. [22]

Shiphrah and Puah feared God—the passage says that twice. They feared God more than they feared Pharaoh and so they risked their very lives to save the newborns. They are true heroes of the faith. And that's emphasized by the fact that the names of these two women are recorded, but the Book of Exodus doesn't even give us the name of Pharaoh himself. These women were valuing life, and honoring God and trusting him even before Moses, before Moses was born and before God called Moses and spoke through him to call the people of Israel to faith.

Those midwives are powerful examples for us, because to look at our society is to see persecution increasingly coming on those who stand for life.

As pastors, we need to help our people be ready to hold firm to the truth of God's Word and the priority of life.

There is tremendous pressure on our people to capitulate to the growing culture of death: on medical personnel: doctors, nurses, people who work in pharmacies to participate in abortion and, in more and more states, in euthanasia.

There is pressure on teachers and social workers and employees of major corporations to endorse and promote abortion and ungodly values about human sexuality.

We see in the news and on social media the condemnation and silencing of those who voice a biblical worldview. And that harsh treatment is intimidating to others who uphold the value of life.

As church leaders, we need to ask ourselves:

What kind of disciple will it take to be faithful and fruitful under the pressure that is coming upon Christians?

What kind of church will it take to make that sort of disciple?

And what kind of leader, what kind of pastor will it take to raise up that sort of church?

In Luke Chapter 10, Jesus warns the 72—and us—that we are sent out like lambs in the midst of wolves. We should count the cost; we should be eyes-wide-open about what we're facing and

what may be required of us, but our attitude should never be that of fear. Jesus warned us that we will be persecuted and hated and perhaps even killed. But again and again, he tells us, “Do not be afraid of them.”

We are to engage the culture, not flee from it. We are to carry the Gospel of hope and love and transformation into the culture. Much of the New Testament was written from prison in a culture which rejected even the most basic of biblical values. We have much to learn from the early church and from Christians who have remained faithful and full of love even under totalitarian regimes, where the open practice of their faith brought retribution.

What kind of disciple will it take to be faithful and fruitful under the pressure that is coming upon Christians in our society? Disciples who are not like seeds planted on rocky soil that fall away when hardship comes. Disciples who are not like seeds sown among thorns that are caught up in the temptations of this world.

God is giving us the opportunity to be salt and light in a society that has lost its way. We have to face reality. We can't candy-coat the difficulties, even the harshness, facing disciples of Christ in the years to come. But we must not be fearful. We must not withdraw. And yet we must not compromise the Gospel. We speak the truth in love to a world that needs Jesus so very much.

I am so deeply grieved over the changes in Virginia law already enacted in the past month. Bills have been passed that strip away so many important protection of women and their children. These new laws effectively remove Virginia's requirement that only a doctor may perform an abortion, lift the 24-hour wait period before an abortion, and repeal the law that the mother be provided important information prior to the abortion:

- There is no longer a requirement that a mother be given a full and comprehensive medical explanation of the procedure and potential risks, as well as alternatives to the procedure;
- There is no longer a requirement that a mother be given a reminder that she may change her mind or withdraw her consent at any moment prior to the abortion procedure;
- There is no longer a requirement that a mother be offered a chance to speak with the physician in case she has any questions about the procedure;
- There is no longer a requirement that a mother be shown an ultrasound image to help determine the gestational age of the baby.

And there is a very real prospect of further losses. After all, Governor Northam said last year about infanticide:

“The infant would be delivered, the infant would be kept comfortable. It would be resuscitated, if that's what the mother and the family desired, and then a discussion would ensue between the physician and the mother.”

Roe v. Wade came as a stunning blow that most pro-life folks did not see coming. But there's no way we can say that we didn't see the horror that is coming with infanticide and the rapid slide into euthanasia of those deemed unworthy to live.

Friends, there is so much at stake.

I want to encourage you in your ministries in your churches by suggesting some specific things that you and your congregation can do, things that make a difference for life:

1. Speak out. Teach, preach on behalf of life, doing it out of love, not condemnation. One quarter to one third of your congregation has probably had direct involvement in an abortion.

Share the message of life and the message of forgiveness.

I heard recently from a Christian woman who for many years was convinced she could not be forgiven for her abortion because her pastor never mentioned abortion as something that God forgives. He gave lots of examples in sermons about sins that people commit and are forgiven for, but he never mentioned abortion. And so she sincerely believed that she could never be forgiven for taking the life of her baby.

Teach, preach about life and about God's grace.

2. Join in public witness for life. Virginia March for Life tomorrow in Richmond. The experience last year in Richmond and at the National March for Life.

Our people are so encouraged when they see us openly witness for life.

3. Promote abortion healing and recovery.

- Abortion recovery Bible studies at CareNet. [Suzy is facilitator]. Other ministries offer weekend retreats, like Rachel's Vineyard.
- Many churches offer a worship service focused on healing for those who have experienced pregnancy loss, through miscarriage or stillbirth or abortion.

4. Promote marriage and promote married couples having children. It sounds odd to say that that is necessary, but it's a reality that rising generations are bombarded with false messages about marriage. They are told that marriage is, in effect, a consumer choice rather than a covenant. And they are told relentlessly that they and the planet would be better off if they didn't have children. How tragic. We need to uphold the biblical message about the joys that come through the commitments and the sacrifices of marriage and children.

5. Promote a culture of adoption and fostering. If we want mothers to consider adoption, we need to be at the forefront of providing homes for those babies, and for older children, as well.

Russell Moore is the President of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He wrote a book some years back about the experience he and his wife had of adopting two boys from Russia. It's called *Adopted for Life* and it includes some wonderful theological reflections on adoption and the Gospel.

In particular, he speaks about the attitude that others have toward adopted children. In a delightful passage, he writes this:

“So, are they brothers?” the woman asked. My wife, Maria, and I, jet-lagged from just returning from Russia, looked at each other wearily. This was the twelfth time since we

returned that we'd been asked this question. When I looked back at the woman's face, she had her eyebrows raised. "Are they?" she repeated. "Are they brothers?"

This lady was looking at some pictures, printed off a computer, of two one-year-old boys in a Russian orphanage, boys who had only days earlier had been pronounced by a Russian court to be our children...

"They are now," I replied. "Yes," the woman said. "I know. But are they *really* brothers?" Clenching my jaw, and repeating Beatitudes to myself silently in my mind, I coolly responded, "Yes, now they are both our children, so they are now *really* brothers." The woman sighed, rolled her eyes, and said, "Well, you know what I mean."

Of course, we did know what she meant. What she wondered was whether these two boys, born three weeks apart, share a common biological ancestry, a common bloodline, some common DNA. It struck me that this question betrayed what most of us tend to view as *really* important when it comes to sonship: traceable genetic material.

This is the reason people would also ask us, "Now do you have any children of your own?"...

During the weeks that Maria and I waited anxiously for the call to return to Russia to receive our children, I pondered this series of questions. As I read through the books of Ephesians and Galatians and Romans, it occurred to me that this is precisely the question that was faced by the apostle Paul and the first-century Christian churches.

As pig-flesh-eating Gentile believers—formerly goddess worshipers and Caesar magnifiers and all the rest—began confessing Jesus as the Messiah, some Jewish Christians demanded to know, "Are they circumcised?" This mean, of course, "Are they really part of us? Are they our brothers?" The Gentile believers would respond, "Yes, with the circumcision made without hands, the circumcision of Christ." From the heated letters of the New Testament, it's evident that the response to that was along the lines of, "Yes, but are you *really* circumcised...and you know what I mean."

What we think about adoption says a great deal about what we think about our relationship with God. If we believe that adopted children aren't a couples' "real" children, then underneath all our Christian talk, we don't believe we are really God's children either.

Promote adoption and fostering!

6. Teach your people, especially your young people, the value of life.
Every life is precious. Every life is of great worth.

Leo Alexander was the American psychiatric representative to the Nuremberg trials, which brought to justice the mass murderers of the Nazi death camps. Alexander explained the origin of

the Nazi Holocaust by saying that it all began with the concept that there was such a thing as human life not worthy to be lived.

You may have heard the news reports some time back that, in Iceland, Down Syndrome has been almost entirely eliminated, not because they've cured it, but because, through the mandatory availability of testing, parents are opting to kill through abortion nearly all the children who have it.

Frank Stephens, an actor and spokesman for people with Down Syndrome, testified before Congress. He said, "I don't feel I should have to justify my existence. Is there really no place for us in the world?...Whatever you learn today," he said, "please remember this, I am a man with Down syndrome and my life is worth living."

When my wife and I were first buying a house, I was concerned about how much to offer. How much was this house actually worth? So I asked our realtor: "How much is this house worth?" And he said, "John, you need to understand that it's worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it."

Our people—particularly our young people—need to hear that they are of infinite worth because Jesus paid for them with his life on the Cross. The Bible says, "You are not your own, you were bought with a price." That price was the blood of Jesus. He paid the penalty for our sin—you and I belong to him and he loves us. Our people need to hear that their life is not theirs to take, ever; nor is the life of a baby. No matter what they experience, no matter how much pain they may feel, they need to hear the truth that Jesus holds them and their church family cares about them and they will carry them through.

7. And last: Support CareNet.

- Personally
- Through your church's budget
- By encouraging individuals to support it through donations and baby bottles and diapers.
- By encouraging people to volunteer.
- By attending the annual banquet and inviting a few key individuals to attend with you.

As pastors, we declare our commitment to our Lord and to his precious gift of life.

Friends, our witness matters. Our prayer matters. Our leadership matters.

May our gracious God strengthen and encourage us as we witness and pray and lead our people for the sanctity of life. Amen.