



WHEN THE CHURCH IS SILENT

*10 Words for the
Church Concerning
Abortion*

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**WHEN THE CHURCH IS SILENT:
TEN WORDS FOR THE CHURCH CONCERNING ABORTION**

Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The suggestion implicit in the title of this work, that the Church is silent on the matter of abortion, is on one level plainly false. Far from being silent, the Christian Church addresses abortion in very practical, courageous ways, and without the Church, the tragedy of abortion would be far worse than it is. Advocacy for the unborn and their parents in crisis has been, with few exceptions, the work of Christians. We can therefore thank God for the Church's willingness to speak.

And yet there are ways in which the Church, and particularly her leadership, is far too silent on the matter of abortion. Reasons vary. Some pastors don't want to drive people away or are concerned that abortion is too political. Some will readily take a pro-life position but fail to call their people to respond actively to the biblical call to defend the fatherless and plead for the widow (Isa 1:17). Sometimes it is fear, for speaking plainly about abortion will surely incur opposition. More subtly, perhaps, we have determined that abortion is an "issue," and as such, we set it alongside other "issues," and then sideline it. After all, as the thinking goes, there are many issues that deserve our attention, and we can't attend to them all. Because such thinking contains an element of truth, it allows us to set certain matters aside. Yet abortion is no more of an "issue" than the Holocaust or the genocide in Rwanda or Sudan were. Concerning abortion, many are satisfied in taking the right position. Few weep. And the effect is devastating not just for the oppressed but also for the life of the Church herself. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."¹

In the end, silence concerning abortion is a betrayal of the Gospel, and the Church cannot be faithful to her calling apart from attending to abortion directly. To say it differently, the witness of the Anglican Church in the world depends, in part, upon our faithful attention to abortion. The following reflections, each based upon one of the Ten Words (Ten Commandments), explain why.

When the Church is silent, we have forgotten who we are.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exod 20:2).

The Lord constantly reminds His people of who He is. In the Old Testament, the Lord instituted the Passover as an annual reminder that He delivered Israel from slavery. In the New Testament, Jesus instituted the Eucharist "in remembrance of me," so that God's people would never forget that, in Christ, He delivered them from sin.

¹ This quote is attributed to Martin Luther King, although it is quite possibly a paraphrase.

These feasts also reminded God's people who they were. For Israel, the Passover would remind them that they were once slaves. Likewise, the Church in remembering Christ in the Eucharist is reminded of our own deliverance from the bondage of sin. In other words, when the Lord calls His people to remember who He is, at the same time He calls us to remember who we are.

Well, who are we? We can answer in word, acknowledging ourselves as sinners delivered by the blood of Christ. But it can also be answered in deed, by what we do or don't do, and particularly what we do for our neighbor. Perhaps it is best said in the Old Testament, in a law that takes its bearings from the first word quoted above: "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9).

The ground for the commandment is Israel's own experience of oppression and sojourning. Having known the pain of being an alien and oppressed people, they are called to be gracious to the sojourner and the oppressed. The implication is clear and carried throughout the Scriptures—recognizing who we are brings forth a response toward our neighbor. Have you been forgiven? Then you will forgive, and willingly, as one forgiven a great debt (Matt 18:21-35). Have you been comforted? Then you will comfort others, for God "comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor 1:4). Have you been loved? Then you will love, remembering Jesus words, "just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34).

Often abortion is considered someone else's sin by those not directly involved. Not only does such thinking shut down our witness, rendering us incapable of being a blessing to the hurting or the hardened, but it reveals that we don't know who we are or remember who we were. If I have not directly participated in abortion, there is much in which I *have* directly participated, and I know fear and selfishness and bondage to sin. In other words, I am really no different than my neighbor. My sin may have different outward expressions, but just like my neighbor, I need to be delivered.

If you are in Christ, then you have been vulnerable, enslaved in sin, and God has mercifully rescued and freed you (Rom 5:6-11; Eph 2:1-10). And therefore you will love the vulnerable, the fearful, and the sinful, because you know your own vulnerability and fear and sin. This will include the unborn child and the mother and father, even when they are in crises of their own making, and due to their own sin and/or their own poor choices. Because you love the vulnerable and those enslaved in sin, you will speak, and you will serve. For our neighbors are us.

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:10-12).

When the Church is silent, we forsake the worship of God.

You shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself a carved image... You shall not bow down to them or serve them... (Exodus 20:3-6).

The first commandment in the Decalogue concerns worship, forbidding the worship of anything apart from God alone. Its corollary? “Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (1 Chr 16:29; Ps 29:2; 96:9).

Anglicans have always been centrally concerned with worship. One might even make the case that worship informs Anglican theology, for traditionally Anglican doctrine is derived, not firstly from the 39 Articles, but from the Prayer Book and the creeds contained therein. The recognition of the centrality and indispensability of worship, and the care with which the Anglican Church has attended to the forms of worship, is one of the great blessings of Anglicanism.

And yet, with all the appropriate attention to the forms of worship, it is possible to forget that the Lord does not delight in those forms for their own sake. Rather, faithful worship depends upon attention to the vulnerable:

When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause (Isa 1:12-17).

In language strong and visceral, the Lord calls worship an abomination if offered without attention to justice, and particularly to the fatherless and the widow. The Lord’s disgust is likewise echoed in Amos: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24). Or in Jesus: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matt 23:23-24).

In these Scriptures above, it is noteworthy that the Lord does not reject the worship of His people based only upon what they have done but principally by what they have left undone. Sins of omission are particularly deceptive because they are often hidden from us. Like the rich man stepping over Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), too often we see what we want to see and fail to see what we ought.

Who then are the fatherless, and who are the widows? Is there a more fatherless population than unborn children at risk of abortion, at risk largely because the fathers are not being fathers? And who are widows, but those left without husbands and the fathers of their children, and the

support that those husbands and fathers provide? Might not mothers left alone to carry children without the support of fathers be among the widows for which God is concerned?

To obey is better than sacrifice. If the fatherless include the unborn and the widows include unsupported (and often unwed) mothers, then the implication is plain: if we neglect abortion, our worship, for all the depth and beauty of our forms, becomes an abomination.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

When the Church is silent, we lie about God's character.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (Exod 20:7).

“My walk is a public one. My business is in the world; and I must mix in the assemblies of men, or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.”² Such were the words of William Wilberforce, the English parliamentarian who, more than any other, was responsible for the abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of slaves in England. They are also the words of one who had deeply imbibed the spirit of the third commandment.

The Hebrew word translated above as “take” more literally means “to bear.” To bear the name of God in vain can mean one of two things. It can mean to bear the name of the Lord to no purpose, which is consistent with our understanding of vanity as that which is fleeting and meaningless. Or it can mean to bear the name of the Lord falsely, which suggests bearing the name of the Lord in a manner that is false to His character. This is precisely the hypocrisy for which Paul rebuked the Jews, charging that “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Rom 2:24). That the people of God bear His name is a given. The question is not *whether* we will bear His name but rather *how* we will bear His name.

So how is the life of William Wilberforce an example of faithfulness to the third commandment?

In what is surely among the most famous personal mission statements in history, Wilberforce wrote that “God Almighty has placed before me two great Objects, the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners.”³ For Wilberforce, his political advocacy on behalf of enslaved peoples was a direct response to the call of God upon his life. His prayers are clear: “If it please God to honor me so far, may I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness and cruelty as never before disgraced a Christian country.” It is worth noting that it was John Newton, Anglican minister and former slaver trader himself, who helped Wilberforce see that defending the slaves as a public servant was God's calling upon his life.

² Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 29

³ Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 85.

One of the ways the world seeks to silence the Church is to draw a boundary around our witness. In America, for example, we insist on a bright line between the sacred and the secular, and specifically between religion and politics, expressed in a particular understanding of “the separation of church and state” that suggests God has no place in public affairs. In the matter of abortion, this means we can publicly argue abortion is wrong because the DNA of a child is complete at conception but not because the child is created in the image of God. It means that foundational truths are ruled out as publicly inadmissible, such as that God created everything good, that sex is meant for marriage and appropriately leads to pregnancy, and that God does not turn a blind eye to the shedding of innocent blood. In the end, apart from God, public opposition to abortion amounts to “we don’t think you should do it.” And abortion persists.

Bearing the image of God faithfully in our day means at least two things. It means being clear that the Lord reigns over the affairs of men, that He loves the fatherless and the widow, that He will call to account those who tolerate the shedding of innocent blood, and that He is willing to forgive all manner of sin, including abortion, in Christ Jesus. It also means that our lives reflect the character of God toward the vulnerable—that we are known for our homes being open to the pregnant and homeless mother, for our finances being available to those who need help in a difficult time, for adopting children who would otherwise be aborted or abandoned, and for extending Christian love and community to mothers and fathers and children in crisis, holding out Christ, not only as the One who forgives sin, but also as One who is near to all who call upon Him. In this the Church faithfully bears the name of Christ. On the other hand, a silent and complacent Church not only fails to carry out the calling of God but also bears false witness, implicitly declaring that the Lord is not, in the end, overly concerned with the widow and the fatherless, thereby making Him appear different than He really is. Therefore the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. In the words of Bonhoeffer, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless...”

When the Church is silent, we leave people in despair.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (Exod 20:8).

Have you ever wondered why Jesus healed so regularly on the Sabbath? Considering the danger He faced for so doing, why did Jesus seem to choose the Sabbath for healing? To understand, let’s briefly look at the Sabbath.

The first Sabbath was a celebration. God had created everything “very good” in six days, and all that was left was to complete the work he had done by ceasing and enjoying it. In fact, the question the Lord asks Job “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7) sounds like a reference to the first Sabbath service, all creation rejoicing in the “very good” of God’s work. Yet, as we know all too painfully, we no longer live in the original “very good.” Rather, the world is weary and heavy laden. Particularly for those who have undergone an abortion.

Consider: worldwide there are roughly 40 million children killed each year by abortion. While not every situation is the same and not every country is the same (for instance, the dynamics of elective abortion in the US are not the same as forced abortion in China), that means that there

are 40 million children slain, 80 million women and men wounded. For women, alongside the guilt that many feel, abortion leads to an increased risk of several maladies, among them certain cancers, infertility, depression, eating disorders, alcohol abuse, insomnia, and suicide. Abortion is a heavy weight indeed, and borne on a massive scope.

Herein lies a great opportunity for the Church. To think in terms of a missionary, if we consider those involved in abortion—mothers and fathers, abortionists and other clinic workers, friends or others who have encouraged an abortion, public servants who have supported it, and the like—there is a people group of hundreds of millions, likely approaching a billion, who bear the guilt of abortion, perhaps many of whom have turned away from God because they believe they have forfeited their place with Him. In other words, the Church's call in responding to abortion is not only to defend the unborn and support their parents but to bear witness to the world that “there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). When the Church is silent about abortion, we imply either that abortion is not that big a deal, and therefore participate in the injustice that leaves children slain and women and men broken and/or hardened, or we imply that abortion is an unspeakable sin and of such magnitude that there is no hope for forgiveness or restoration. In either case, the Gospel is withheld from the weary and heavy laden who desperately need rest.

One day the Lord will restore all things to His original intention. One day, in Christ Jesus, God will wipe away every tear from every eye, righting every injustice, even to the point of raising the dead to life. At that point, the work of God will be complete, and once again all creation will worship God, forgiven and whole. Once again all creation will celebrate the Sabbath, rejoicing in the “very good” of God’s work. The Sabbath is therefore a pledge and a vision that all need to hear, including those burdened due to abortion. Thanks be to God, we have good news indeed.

Perhaps Jesus healed on the Sabbath because it was the most appropriate day to do so.

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

When the Church is silent, we forsake other children.

Honor your father and your mother (Exod 20:12).

The fifth word above rests upon an important presumption: Fathers and mothers must be worthy of honor. Yet we live in a world that suggests that honor lies principally apart from one’s children. Or, to say it a bit more pointedly, that honor lies in forsaking one’s children. How so?

Abortion is the ultimate forsaking of children. Yet, abortion does not stand alone, but is inextricably tied to a host of other matters that encourage it, all of which tear at the family. The push for abortion fosters, or perhaps reflects, a vision that moves life away from the home, replacing family with career as the center of life, encouraging sexual license inevitably at the expense of stable marriages and therefore family, and, in the end, fostering a selfishness that puts one’s own desires and dreams first, to be pursued at the expense of others.

Let me give one example. In America, it is often asked of a wife, “Does she work?” What is meant is “does she have a job outside the home?” But the phrasing of the question is telling, for it implies that real work lies elsewhere. Mothers that stay at home, and particularly those who pour themselves into their children’s upbringing and education, know they work, and at a task far more exhausting, and rewarding, than many jobs outside the home. In the inimitable words of Chesterton:

To be Queen Elizabeth within a definite area, deciding sales, banquets, labors, and holidays; to be Whitely within a certain area, providing toys, boots, sheets, cakes, and books, to be Aristotle within a certain area, teaching morals, manners, theology, and hygiene; I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people’s children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one’s own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to someone? ... A woman’s function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute.⁴

Chesterton’s remarks are poignant because they get to the heart of what family is and does. It is the family that teaches us to lay down our lives for one another, beginning with the physical burden that is pregnancy, to the myriad of costs—financial, emotional, time and energy, and the like—that come along the way. When my daughter calls for me in the middle of the night while feeling sick, getting up with her not only comforts her, but it teaches me to love and makes me more like Christ. It is the family where the Gospel is taught, parents being commanded to “teach [the ways of God] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rest” (Deut 6:7). It is the family where the Gospel shines most brightly, not only in the unusual fragrance that emanates from a home where parents love their children and children honor their parents, but also in the hospitality that Godly families extend, particularly to the poor, the lonely, and the hurting. Is it any wonder that the Lord *requires* those who would aspire to be bishops, presbyters, and deacons to be hospitable, and manage their households with dignity, having the respect of their children? (1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9).

Increasingly, the expectation in much of the world is that both parents work apart from home, an expectation that often seeps into the Church. The costs, however, are steep. In order for both parents to work away from home, children must begin life in daycare of some sort, followed by school, where their education and therefore view of the world, is shaped by teachers parents often don’t know, teaching subjects they have not chosen in community with children they don’t know. Although the Scriptures call for children to be educated primarily within their families (Deut 6:4-9, Ps 78:5-7), it is normal for children to spend the most of the day apart from their families and often in institutions that explicitly deny the place of God in education. And we wonder why so many children of Christian families fall away from the faith when they leave home, often assuming the answer lies in better youth programs.⁵

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2007), 99-100.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this matter, see W. Ross Blackburn, “Keep Them from Idols,” *Touchstone*, 30/2, March/April 2017: 31-37. The article can be accessed at <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=30-02-031-f>.

Of course, we live in a world where it is not possible always to live into the Scripture's vision of work and family. A single mother, for example, may have little or no choice concerning work and the education of her children and often does the best she can for them given her circumstances. And for that she deserves honor (and, where appropriate, the help of her church). But it is one thing to turn one's children over to others due to necessity and quite another due to choice. The willingness to let others teach our children and form their characters so that we can occupy ourselves with other things, even careers, that take us away from our children is connected to the abortion mentality that puts other things before one's own children. The command to honor father and mother presumes fathers and mothers are loving their children by carrying out their God-given privileges and responsibilities. A world at peace with abortion inevitably becomes hardened toward children.

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments (Ps 78:5-8).

When the Church is silent, we incur guilt before God.

You shall not murder (Exod 20:13).

Let's take for granted the obvious—abortion kills a human baby—and explore what may not be entirely clear—the responsibility that the Church bears in a world of abortion on demand.

There is an obscure ritual commanded in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 21, concerning the case of an unsolved murder. When someone is found murdered in the open country, the elders of the nearest city are to break the neck of a heifer, wash their hands, and testify to their innocence with these words: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed. Accept atonement, O LORD, for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for" (21:7-8). The comment just afterward indicates the importance of the ritual: "So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst" (21:9).

Two observations. First, the Lord requires His people to distance themselves from the shedding of innocent blood, openly declaring not only that they are not responsible, *but that they were unaware of it happening*. In this way, the Lord reminds them that they are indeed their brother's keeper. Secondly, if this ritual with its declaration of innocence is not carried forth, then the people of the city will have innocent blood on their hands, *even if no one in the town was directly responsible for the murder*. In other words, apart from the ritual, the Lord would regard that town as if it had broken the sixth commandment.

We live in a world where many countries have made peace with shedding the blood of the unborn, even to the extent of promoting it legally. How do we then live? Deuteronomy 21 would suggest that a silent Church, one that fails to make openly and unmistakably clear that she will have no part in the shedding of innocent blood, is a Church with blood on her hands.

55 There are always reasons—rationalizations—to be silent in the face of the evil that is abortion, particularly for those who have not participated directly in abortion. Yet we know better. Righteousness is not passive, and it is possible to think we abstain from evil while passively participating in it. To slightly alter words attributed to Edmund Burke, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for the Church do nothing.

If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small. Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say “Behold, we did not know this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work? (Prov 24:10-12).

When the Church is silent, we support sexual immorality.

You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14).

Adultery is a gospel matter. How so? Because God made man in His image—male and female (Gen 1:26). Because the union of a husband and a wife is a picture of Christ and the Church (Song of Songs; Eph 5:32-33). Because this is so, our sexual lives bear witness, either truthfully or falsely, about the character of God and His relationship to His Church. Faithful marriage says one thing. Adultery says another.

Although rarely admitted openly, legal abortion exists to support sexual license. Yet, surprisingly, the U.S. Supreme Court freely admitted this in a comment on *Roe v Wade*, the 1973 case that made abortion legal in the United States:

The *Roe* rule’s limitation on state power could not be repudiated without serious inequity to people who, for two decades of economic and social developments, have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail. The ability of women to participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation has been facilitated by their ability to control their reproductive lives. The Constitution serves human values, and while the effect of reliance on *Roe* cannot be exactly measured, neither can the certain costs of overruling *Roe* for people who have ordered their thinking and living around that case be dismissed.⁶

In simpler language, the Court argued that sexual license depends upon the availability of abortion. To say it differently, if abortion were illegal, sexual license would need to be forsaken. And that, apparently, is too high a price to pay. The implication is plain—if sexual license must come at the expense of young lives, so be it. The Supreme Court, by its own admission, has ruled to protect sexual immorality by force of law.

The evil of abortion is therefore not limited to the slaying of unborn children. Legal abortion encourages sexual immorality which, even when it does not lead to pregnancy, always brings heartache and destruction. We don’t need the Bible to tell us of the destructiveness of

⁶ *Planned Parenthood v Casey* (1992).

extramarital sex—an honest sociologist knows that premarital or extramarital sex has destructive consequences, particularly within a marriage. In other words, sexual immorality doesn't work. And therefore God, in His love for mankind, draws a bright line of sexual exclusivity around marriage, so that man and woman can live in faithful and joyful union, to the end they would be blessed and fruitful in marriage, and that the world would thereby behold something of the nature of Christ's love for the Church.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (Eph 5:31-32).

When the Church is silent, we revisit the sin of slavery.

You shall not steal (Exod 20:15).

The natural bent of the human heart is to possess that which is not ours. James said it well: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (Jas 4:2). One could say that the root of our sin is seeking to possess that which is not ours, rather than being thankful for what is ultimately God's. Eve desired the forbidden fruit, and, along with her husband, took it (Gen 3). King Ahab desired the land of Naboth, and, with the aid of Jezebel, took it (1 Kgs 21). King David desired Bathsheba and took her (2 Sam 11). All took what was not theirs to possess. In a word, stealing.

Stealing was effectively the sin of slavery. In the US and the UK, slavery was rooted in stealing—the idea that the powerful could just take whatever or *whomever* they wanted. The Bible, of course, condemns this: “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death” (Exod 21:16). The U.S. Supreme Court effectively codified ownership of human beings when it ruled in *Dred Scott v Sanford* (1858) that slaves were property of their masters.

So it is with abortion. While the language of abortion rights doesn't use the term “property,” the idea is the same—a woman has a right over her own body, a right which trumps any rights that the unborn body within her might have. The mother is legally entitled to dispose of her unborn child as she wishes, much as she would her property.

The parallels between slavery and abortion are vast. Many today look back on the brutal experience of slavery and are appalled at the silence of the Church. Will ensuing generations wonder the same thing, in a future day when they try to make sense of how abortion persisted so long in lands where the Church abided? In words attributed to Martin Luther King, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”⁷

In the end, all things belong to God, including people. Yes, there are ways that we belong to one another—a husband belongs to a wife, a child belongs to a father. But such belonging entails

⁷ Although attributed by many to King, it is unclear from whence the quote came.

the God-given responsibility for the well-being of the other, not a right to do to another as one pleases. For, in the end, we all belong to God, even before we may belong to one another.

The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers (Ps 24:1-2).

When the Church is silent, we support the killing of the vulnerable.

You shall not bear false witness (Exod 20:16).

“Verbicide must precede homicide.” The sentence is from Paul Greenberg, an American journalist. What he means is that, in order to do the unthinkable, we must convince ourselves that the unthinkable is acceptable. We do this with language. Rather than speaking of an unborn child, we speak of a fetus. Killing a child is one thing. Removing the “contents of the uterus” or the “product of conception”—well, that’s another matter altogether. These terms, abounding in the language of abortion rhetoric, make an abortion sound like cleaning out one’s garage. Even the word “abortion” is a euphemism, focusing one’s attention on a procedure, rather than a slain child or a wounded mother.

On the other side of life, we have “death with dignity.” My dictionary defines dignity as “the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect.” But that is not what supporters of euthanasia mean by dignity. Dignity in the so-called “right to die” movement means being able to bathe or feed oneself and not having to use a bedpan. The idea that somehow dignity is wrapped up in whether or not a person needs help is a perversion of the idea of dignity. But dignity is a powerful word, and a powerful word is needed if we are going to justify the practice of getting rid of those whose existence impinges upon the rest of us in uncomfortable ways.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Abortion and euthanasia thrive on false witness. If fact, they require it. After all, who is against choice? The name of the pro-choice movement is shrewd, to be sure, particularly in its reluctance (sometimes even refusal) to mention the choice it promotes. After all, “reproductive choice” sounds not nearly as troubling as homicide or murder, just as the language of “disarticulating the calvarium” of an unborn child is more soothing than “beheading.” And who is against dignity? Perhaps if we understood dignity as that which we recognize in another, rather than as something that we grant to others if they fulfill certain requirements, we might begin to see the image of God in one another, regardless of age or ability.

The call to the Church? We must speak. Our silence allows the world to define the terms and therefore shape how we think about the things of life. Left to itself, the world will convince us that we are not the image of God but rather the complex cellular end of an unguided process of evolution. If that is what we are, then it becomes difficult—in the end impossible—to argue why we ultimately matter, and particularly why the unborn, the elderly, the handicapped, and the otherwise vulnerable matter. Furthermore, we must learn to speak clearly and plainly, with boldness and without euphemism. In other words, we must learn to speak truthfully. Speaking of the efforts of the *International Justice Mission* to stem human trafficking and slavery, Gary Haugen writes,

I am convinced that any serious contest with evil requires a painful confrontation with the truth. The greatest and most shameful regrets of history are always about the truth we failed to tell, the evil we failed to name. The greatest enemy in our struggle to stop oppression and injustice is always the insidious etiquette of silence.⁸

The etiquette of silence is a great temptation, for plain speech in the area of abortion is, at the least, socially and relationally awkward, and at the most, dangerous. Yet, speaking in a manner that obscures truth is nothing other than bearing false witness. And, just like it was in the Old Testament, false witness can get people killed.

A truthful witness saves lives... (Prov 14:25).

When the Church is silent, we display our true loves.

You shall not covet (Exod 20:17).

Defending the vulnerable—the fatherless and the widow—is costly. It is costly because people who profit by oppression will not stand by idly and allow their darkness to be exposed, but will fight back when their interests are threatened. It is also costly because the vulnerable are people in need, requiring resources of time and money and homes and patience and prayer.

Covetousness is essentially desiring what is not appropriate for us to have. It is good to desire a wife but not your neighbor's wife. The Scriptures also call covetousness idolatry (Col 3:5). It is not difficult to see why. A thankful heart trusts God, glad in God and the good gifts that He has given, but is also content when certain gifts are withheld. Which in the end means that covetousness is a failure of worship, for one who loves and trusts God above all else is content to lose all, knowing that all belongs to God anyway, and that he can never lose God or be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

People who refused to serve God for fear of loss are many. The rich young ruler, despite being promised treasure in heaven if he would follow Jesus, loved his possessions more than the Lord (Mark 10:17-31). Demas deserted Paul because he loved the world (2 Timothy 4:10). The authorities who believed in Jesus refused to openly follow Christ, “for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:43). Throughout the Scriptures, the call is plain:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

⁸ Gary A. Haugen, *Terrify No More* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2005), ix. To learn more about IJM, visit <https://www.ijm.org>.

Or, in the words of missionary Jim Elliot, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”⁹

Abortion is a testing ground. It is not the only one, to be sure, but it is one nonetheless. Our world is weary and guilty with the shedding of innocent blood, much of that the blood of unborn children. And there are powerful and persistent forces intent on ensuring it continues. On one level, the Church has been a bright witness to the Gospel and the blessing of life. For instance, crisis pregnancy centers will not take payment, while abortion clinics require it. Yet on another level, we have been far too timid. The world will know if we are more interested in God—and in the image of God that is in every unborn child and pregnant mother and father in crisis—or in our comfort. In other words, the world will know who we worship—whether we believe that Jesus is more beautiful and worthy than anything we could grasp in this world that is passing away, and whether we love the Lord our God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves. Our time, our talents, our treasure, and our tears will testify to our loves before a watching world.

Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! (Jeremiah 9:1).

⁹ Elisabeth Elliott, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Wheaton, IL, Tyndale House, 1981), 172.

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