Gracious and Multi-Faceted
When Theology Drives Involvement in the Life Arena

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After a Seminary Life Team meeting last year, a seminarian came up and said, "I need to talk to you about something."[1] Given the vagaries of life and the wide spectrum of student concerns, I was ready to hear almost anything from him. What I heard from him was this: "I can't get any of my seminary friends to come and check out the Life Team. They think we're just a bunch of angry Republicans, and I try to tell them that's not what we are about. But they won't believe me."

I was not surprised by his comment. I've heard this before, and given how students so quickly enter, study, learn, and leave the seminary community, it presents itself as an on-going need for teaching and correction. The basic problem is this. Perfectly normal LCMS people—even very pious LCMS people preparing for ordained ministry—too often assume that it is one's *political* commitments that lead people to engage with issues about valuing and protecting human life. And perhaps for some people—even many people—that is their answer to the question of "Why do I esteem and seek to preserve human life?" Our American students have been taught this by the culture, and they *assume* that politics is the reason why one might work to defend and preserve human life.

But that's not my reason.[2] For my part, I am a member of no political party, and I often find myself without a political home as I consider the issues of our day. Be that as it may, my point is that I have not found my way to participation in life issues

and in the life arena because of anything other than *theological* commitments (and the inspiring example of my wife). Moreover, I would argue that no thinking Christian should have mere political reasons or commitments as the foundation for their involvement in the life arena. Our allegiance in all of life is to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his words, and it is to his truth that we should look for the reasons why we care about human life at all stages and ages. What some of our student body did not know, then, was the answer to this question: How does our theology and the truth as it is in Christ Jesus necessarily bring us to caring actively about human life?

Partly in response to the seminary student's words, during the 2018–2019 academic year the Life Team sponsored a basic sort of event. We called it, "Mercy, Not Politics: Affirming All of (Human) Life." The goal was to proffer to students and to others a foundational, theological perspective on human life, and why *as Christians* we are to value life and seek to protect and preserve it. This simple essay is a written form of my remarks on that gathering.

This reflection has four parts. Part 1 ponders the truth that the Eternal Son of God became flesh as our brother, and how that teaches us to recognize and know human life when we see it. Part 2 suggests that the biblical teaching concerning the image of God in humanity should not bear the weight that many seem to be putting on it. Part 3 dwells briefly on the universality of the gospel work of Jesus Christ, and how that provides the major reason why all human life has value and should be esteemed and protected. The essay's part 4 offers a few comments on how our theology might shape and flavor all that we as Christians do in matters pertaining to the life arena. This final section is reflected in the title I've given to the essay, "Gracious and Multi-Faceted."

The Incarnation of God's Son Defines and Demonstrates What Counts as Human Life

Jesus himself reveals what it means to be human. It's a simple statement, but I think it is of central importance, more important than any arguments based on science or moral reasoning. The simple statement follows from the truth that Jesus is both substitute and representative for the entire human race. As substitute, he takes our place—he is like us in every way, except without sin. As representative, the Lord sums up humanity in his identity as the second Adam, as Israel reduced to one, and so forth. This means that we learn what it means to be human by looking at Jesus. To repeat the point in a slightly different way, the *theological definition of "human life" is christologically derived.*

This is true both in the sense of his own life and its course, as well as in the sense of what it means to *act* as one who is fully human. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus is our brother, and he remains so forever. On the one hand, there was a time when the eternal Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, was not also a man. Since his

conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, however, he has been and always will remain fully human—the perfect human, in fact. Humble no longer, now our risen and ascended brother has reached his goal, and (in the words of the book of Hebrews) "been perfected." To consider, then, how human life is defined by Jesus the Lord, we can begin at the end, and work backwards in brief but (perhaps) suggestive fashion.

Jesus is risen from the dead, the firstfruits of God's new humanity. His complete conquest of death presages our own experience as believers. In bringing life and immortality to light in all of its blinding fullness, Jesus reveals God's plan for his human creatures. God's salvation entails eternal, embodied life, filled with all holiness and beauty and glory. In his resurrection, Jesus reveals what it means to be completely and fully human. All of Jesus's disciples are destined for immortality and glory. This alone has implications for how we regard one another *and all other persons*; I think of C. S. Lewis's sermon, "The Weight of Glory":

> It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people.[3]

By implication, the course of Jesus's ministry also reveals what a grievous thing it is for human beings to die. Jesus did not, of course, deserve to die, but he died because of his calling from the Father to save us. We all *deserve* to die—every listing on the obituary page reveals a sinner. Caring for our fellow dying human creatures, however, means that we will regard their death as inevitable, but not as good. To be human as God originally intended—and as God finally purposes—entails bodily *life*.

Jesus our brother reveals what it means to be and live as a human creature, a human person. During his earthly ministry Jesus defined true human existence in his perfect obedience to God, his Father, and in his perfect love for his neighbor. From one perspective, in fact, it was Jesus's full and perfect humanity that caused him to be hated, rejected, and crucified. Thus we see the present fallenness of our race; humanity's own perfect exemplar was one who evoked hatred and opposition. And yet it was even for those who hated and opposed him that Jesus did what he did (more on that below). This reveals that we, too, are at our most profoundly and deeply human when we live to honor and obey our Creator, when we live for the

To live in community, in family, with each taking his or her turn at being now strong and able, now weak and dependent—this, too, is being human.

good of our neighbor. This means that preserving and esteeming the lives of others, including our enemies, is profoundly human behavior—because the perfect Man did it perfectly.

Before the onset of his baptism and his ministry in Israel, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. He lived, moreover, in a family, being subject to the authority of Joseph and Mary. In my view, the most natural reading of the relevant NT texts reveals that Jesus grew up as the eldest child in a family that included at least six other children born to Joseph and Mary—four brothers and at least two sisters (Mt 13:55).[4] Here, too, the Son of God shows what it means to be human according to God's design. Human beings should be and need to be in families, with parents guiding and nurturing them. When human brokenness shatters the family, God still desires a family for his creatures: "though a mother forsake her child, He will not abandon you." In Jesus, God provides a family that does not depend on biological descent or relation. Water shows itself thicker than blood, and we name our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, with One who is our heavenly Father. To live in community, in family, with each taking his or her turn at being now strong and able, now weak and dependent—this, too, is being human. As Gilbert Meilaender wrote some years ago, "I want to burden my loved ones."[5]

Jesus's human life included his birth from his mother, Mary of Nazareth, while she was still a virgin. Our brother emerged from the womb, and despite pious speculation over the centuries, the birth of Jesus seems to have happened in the ordinary fashion. Matthew 1:25–2:11 and Luke 2:6–7 indicate nothing to the contrary. The creedal articulation is appropriately simple: "(He was) born of the Virgin Mary." To be human is to be born (with the apparent exception of Adam and Eve).

The eternal Logos did not, however, become incarnate on the first Christmas, despite the choice of John 1 for the Christmas Gospel reading ("and the Word became flesh"). Christmas is the festival of the *nativity*, the birth of Jesus—not his *incarnation*. His human life had already begun in the womb of Mary, the Virgin. The virginal *conception* of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit does not eliminate or denigrate Jesus's humanity—it celebrates it. As remarkable and unique a plan as the virginal conception was, it does not bypass God's own institution. Yes, Jesus was

A statue of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke1:39-56) at the historic Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem, Jerusalem (Credit: Wikimedia Commons / Deror avi).

conceived without the agency of a human father. But yes, Jesus *was conceived*. God uses *conception in the womb* to show us what it means to be human, and to inaugurate his plan to save us. As with Jesus's birth, the scriptural texts regarding his conception employ the expected verbs. The angel said to Mary, "You will conceive (συλλήμψῃ) in your womb" (Lk 1:31; see also Lk 1:24, 36; 2:21). The angel said to Joseph, "For that [child] which is begotten (τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθέν) in her is from the Holy Spirit."[6] In a perfectly natural use of language, Elizabeth, likely during her own third trimester, in the Spirit greets Mary and names her, "The mother of my Lord" (Lk 1:43). Elizabeth's Lord lives in the womb of Mary. Jesus, our brother, began his life as one *unborn*. We have every reason to think that the Lord of all was an embryo, and then a fetus, and when the time came, he was born. In Mary's womb, he was Jesus. He is now Jesus. He will always be Jesus.

Jesus, our brother, defines what it means to be human. In becoming human Jesus has, in one sense, honored and sanctified our humanity by taking it on himself. To be sure, we and all other humans have majored in dragging whatever dignity might accrue to our humanity through the filth. But in Jesus, God has defined what it means to be human—perfectly human. This christological or incarnational approach to the question of human life does not depend on the categories of science, or law, or any other framework, however valid those might be in a discussion. My suggestion is that *as Christians*, the incarnation of the eternal logos provides a rationale by which we can know human life, and also (at least by implication) begin to esteem it at every stage, from conception to family, in love and into death and then out of death and on into immortality.

Although it moves in the right direction, it is only by implication (or indirectly) that the incarnation itself provides the foundation for *esteeming and valuing* all human life. The incarnation directly teaches us what it means to be human. For a strong foundation for why we should regard human life as *precious*, however, we need only turn our attention to the gospel of God's free grace in Christ for all humanity and for every person. Before considering the life-affirming message of the gospel per se, however, I would like to invite my readers to rethink the extent to which the notion of the *imago Dei* provides support for a full-bodied, life-affirming posture. I have three misgivings about how Christians seem routinely to depend on the *imago Dei*.

The Image of God in Man Is an Inadequate Basis for Esteeming Human Life

When Christians speak about ethics, about life issues, and about *why* human life should be esteemed and preserved, it's common for the truth that human beings are "made in the image of God" to receive a prominent place. I have, interestingly, even heard non-Christian-but-religious people also speak in these terms, even if vaguely. It almost seems to be a self-evident truth. People are significant; human life

should be (more or less) esteemed and protected because "we're all made in God's image." My further impression is that this theologoumenon has become increasingly popular among Lutheran writers and thinkers. I offer only a few simple observations here about this concept, and I realize to some extent how much theologizing has gone into discussion of the *imago Dei*. I would suggest, however, for three reasons why the imago Dei should not be a main, or at least not *the* main theological undergirding for our position on life issues.

No one knows to what the image of God in man refers—especially the image of God in fallen humanity.

The first reason consists of a simple exegetical observation. The theme of fallen humanity bearing the image of God is a minor theme, not a main one, *in the Scriptures themselves*—despite the extent to which great efforts have gone into explicating and developing the idea. To be sure, the creation account in Genesis explicitly teaches that in some undefined but unique sense, humanity alone, Adam and Eve, were created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27). Moreover, even after the fall the image of God in man still pertains in some sense, as two passages seem to indicate. Murder is forbidden as a crime worthy of capital punishment in Genesis 9:6, and cursing a Christian brother or sister is forbidden in James 3:9—and for the same reason, namely, God created humanity in his own image/likeness. In all of the post-fall history of humanity and of the Scriptures' speaking, however, these are the only two verses that use the *imago Dei* as the *general* basis for how we should regard and treat one another (cf. 1 Cor 11:7, which conveys a much more narrow application). The "image of God in man," is not exactly a major theme in the Christian Scriptures. This is my first reason for cautioning against making it too important in specifically *Christian* ways of thinking and speaking.[7]

My second reason for not leaning too heavily on this theme is this: *no one knows to what the image of God in man refers—especially the image of God in fallen humanity.* To be more precise, the history of interpretation has seen many attempts to define the image of God in man, but no attempt has won the day or become a consensus view. The reason this is the case is an important one, namely, the Bible itself does not offer sufficient clarity to settle the matter. In the Lutheran tradition, "truth, holiness, and righteousness" form the essence of God's image in Adam and Eve before the fall. That is, the image of God in Genesis 1 chiefly concerns the vertical relationship of man to God. The conclusion then follows by definition that the image of God was completely *lost* to humanity in the fall and is only restored in Christ, who himself is the image of God (Col 1:18).[8] As true and important an observation as this is, Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 at the least can be read as employing the language of the

divine image in humanity in some broader sense. Especially in the case of James 3:9, there seems to be some sense in which even fallen humanity has or is seen in terms of the image of God.

Whether Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 teach that in some sense fallen humanity retains the image of God, in contemporary discussions of life issues and the esteeming and preserving of human life, even Lutherans do not always hew to the traditional Lutheran understanding as briefly described above. That understanding, strictly speaking, would deny the image of God to non-Christians (or at least make non-Christians only potential candidates for bearing the image of God), since the image is only renewed *in Christ*. I have not heard Lutherans speak this way, however. It seems that Lutherans are increasingly defaulting to a general understanding, at least on the popular level: "We're all made in God's image."[9]

My second point in sum is this: It is apparently not possible to describe what it means for humanity to have been originally created in God's image. Further, it is not clear in what way (if at all) humanity in general still is to be regarded as bearing the image of God. It's a little perilous, then, to make this the main (or a major) reason why every human life should be valued and protected. It's true—but it won't bear the weight that people seem to want to put upon it. This brings me to the third reason why I could wish for less of an emphasis on the *imago Dei* in Christian thinking that pertains to the value and protection of human life.

To transition to my third point, recall how "the image of God in humanity" is often understood, namely, *as some quality that is inherent to all human beings*. This makes me theologically nervous; it puts an emphasis upon some quality that is intrinsic to human beings themselves. Something that we possess or what we are by nature or by right becomes the "why"; something native to me provides the basis for others to regard my life as worth esteeming and preserving. I don't want to sound like more of a curmudgeon (or misanthrope) than I actually am here. At this point, however, my criticism is widening beyond the specific use of the *imago Dei*. The question is this: to what intrinsic quality in all human life could we *as Christians* point without hesitation, and confidently say, "This makes us valuable; this quality in us means that all human life should be preserved and esteemed"? Again, I acknowledge that other frameworks and points of reference might conclude that there is something about us that makes our lives valuable, worth protecting. One thinks of the claim in the Declaration of Independence that our Creator has endowed all people with unalienable rights. Now we have these rights; they are our possession. This gives us value.

This is, however, not a *Christian* way of speaking or thinking. The move to find human value in something that inheres in us cuts against the grain of Christian truth on the deepest level; it runs the risk of asserting worth independently of the Creator God who made us and redeemed us. Nothing within us has called forth God's care

for us as Creator or Redeemer. Rather, in the Scriptures it is primarily God's own character and grace that are the source and cause for his concern. And it is God's own attitudes and actions that are to motivate Christians in their relationships with others, especially others whose lives are in peril or in special need.

I would encourage my readers to consider "demoting" or at least carefully nuancing how the *imago Dei* functions in their thinking. It's biblical, it's there, and it can be useful. But it's a minor biblical emphasis, we aren't even sure what it means, and its overuse can potentially crowd out more fruitful Christian ways of speaking and thinking about life issues.

I have already suggested that the incarnation of the Son of God teaches us much. Jesus is our brother, and therefore the course of his life from conception in Mary's womb to eschatological glory defines and describes what it means to be human. Through the incarnation, then, we know what human life is—and by implication the incarnation affords a worth to all human lives. A second truth, however, can provide a more explicit foundation for valuing all of human life. That truth is the gospel message itself, and especially the fact that the gospel message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is *for all people, and thus imparts an "alien" value to all human life.*

The Gospel of God's Son Imparts Value to All of Human Life

Not all Christians will agree with all of the following statements. I anticipate that Lutherans (and perhaps many others) would, however, accept them as fully biblical. So I shall just lay them out in quick fashion—they form the basis for my claim that the gospel of God's Son imparts value to all of human life, and to every human life.

- The work of God in Christ was, in God's heart and mind, intended for the benefit of all humanity. God's saving deeds in Christ are necessary for the entire human race, and they are sufficient to save everyone and anyone without exception.
- God's redeeming a people for himself will also be the means by which the entire creation is renewed and restored. When the glory of God's children is revealed, then the longing of creation will be over (Rom 8:18–21).
- No human being is excluded from the universally valid and sufficient work of Christ on the cross and through the empty tomb. Christ died and rose for *all*, without exception, including his enemies—including my enemies.
- Of course, faith (itself God's unearned and undeserved gift) is required for the benefits of Christ's work to be applied to any given individual. Without faith, God's universally offered gifts are not received.
- Nevertheless, the promise of reconciliation and life in Jesus Christ is universally applicable. That is, I can say to any human being that I encounter, "Jesus died on the cross *for you*. Jesus rose from the dead *for you*." To repeat, I can say this *to anyone*, and *to everyone*, and it will be true.

This universally valid gospel proclamation flows out of God's free grace in Christ. It is evoked by nothing positive in me, in you, in us as human creatures. If one wanted to identify, in a sort of paradoxical way perhaps, something within us that called forth God's work in Christ, it would be this: our neediness and helplessness. Our negative is met by the overwhelming positive of God's unmerited kindness. This is only another way, however, of saying that the gospel is good news for the powerless and needy, for the unable and the ungodly, for the child and the outcast, and the least and the powerless. That is to say, the gospel is for us all—even for those who never receive the gifts.

In terms of the doctrine of justification, Lutherans and others declare with joy that Christ has become our righteousness, and that in fact we sinners who trust in Christ have thus received an *alien righteousness*. This status come from outside of us. It is not *native* to who we were or are, but it is nevertheless God's gift. We are in the right with God now; God himself has justly settled his righteous contention against us for Christ's sake and through Christ alone. This right standing comes from outside of us because it comes from Christ—in that sense, it is *alien*.

I would suggest that it is also valid to speak of Christ's universal gospel work as investing or imparting to all people an *alien value*. God regards us as precious for Christ's sake, and—here is the payoff for life issues in our day—we can regard one another and every human life as precious, as possessing an alien value. This does not have anything to do with us, except in the sense that all people are in need and all people from conception onward are the objects of God's concern. Everyone and anyone can receive through faith the benefits of Christ's work because he did what he did for all. This communicates, offers, invests an alien value into every human life.

Our negative is met by the overwhelming positive of God's unmerited kindness.

These two great truths—the gospel itself along with the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God—provide a broad and unshakable position from which to approach the task of preserving and esteeming all of human life and every human life. We know human life from its beginning in the womb to physical death because our Brother lived such a life—and more. We love one another, our neighbor and even our enemies, because God in Christ has loved us all. For God thus loved *the world*, after all, and the invitation to come to Jesus and find rest has a universal scope. And the life that the risen Son has in his Easter and ascension victory is a life that is offered to every person.

Conclusion: Gracious and Multi-faceted Christian Ministering in the Life Arena

From these two broad bases—the incarnation and the gospel itself—Christians can

engage the life arena. How should we do that, and what should we do? Here I will offer only a couple of observations; I intend that they will flow directly, as result follows cause, from the dual theological bases of the incarnation and the gospel.

The face that those around us must see is the face of compassion, not anger or outrage.

In the first place—the very first place—the doctrine of the incarnation and of the gospel's universal applicability can and must and will become a well and a font of blessing and peace for Christians before they even do one thing in the life arena. Christ incarnate reveals that I am one of God's human creatures and implies that this is a very good thing indeed. That Christ's work was and is for all means also that Christ is for *me*. God wants me to rejoice and rest and revel in the alien value that I have received, and in the alien righteousness by which I stand as fully pleasing and restored before God. Theologically driven involvement in the life arena changes *me*, and turns me once again to rejoice in God's undeserved favor in Jesus. In that truth and strength, God desires that his people recognize and esteem and protect all of human life—as his own dear children, themselves cherished beyond comprehension.

In the second place, the power of these truths about the incarnation and about the universal gospel message should be sufficient to impel Christians—especially through the ministry of the local congregation, the partnership of pastor and people—to be involved in the life arena. Human lives are precious, and in need of protection, support, and ministry. Not to care is not an option. I am not speaking at all at this point about *political* involvement, but about the Christian service of mercy and compassion for the least and the neediest, in our congregations and around them. In every community, human lives are in peril. Prayerful, wise discernment will lead grace-filled believers into ways of esteeming and preserving all of human life. You won't be able to make the world a better place. But we can labor on behalf of others in the name of the Lord, and that labor will not be in vain.

As we Christians engage others in the life arena, it is most fitting that we do so in a gracious way that befits the gospel that motivates us. The face that those around us must see is the face of compassion, not anger or outrage. We love because he first loved us. This is not to say that those who oppose the truth about human life will like us if we show a patient and gracious face to them; they may very well hate us all the more, and bitterly malign and unfairly trouble us. In this we may find ourselves truly following in our Master's footsteps, as I Peter describes it: suffering wrongfully for doing good.

In the third place, In light of this theology, we can and should esteem and preserve human life—all of human life. This will prevent us from focusing only on

the beginning of life, or only on the end of it. Our congregations will teach, and mentor, and serve in our communities in many different ways that bespeak our love for life. And what are some of the issues and needs with which we can engage?

The largest single life issue remains that of elective abortion. Under any estimate, elective abortion is the leading cause of death in the United States; an annual figure of 862,000 (number as of this writing) will not be too large, and may be much too small.[10] We can teach that it is wrong to kill an unborn child, and we can help others to love and protect life in the womb, that is, *in the condition in which the Son of God (and every one of us) also found himself.* We can support ministries that help parents in crisis pregnancies. We can reckon with the staggering estimates of women and men in the United States who are post-abortive; they are everywhere, and they are in our congregations. As we speak and preach and live, we can give the message that Christ came into the flesh for us even after we have made terrible choices; his good news is for every sinner who longs to be forgiven and clean.

Human life is not only to be esteemed and preserved in the womb, of course. The doctrines of the incarnation and of the gospel's universal offer to forgiveness and life teach us to be gracious and *multifaceted.* It would take many words to devote even a brief mention to all of the life arena issues in which Christians can be involved with grace and truth. One thinks about the support and guidance needed as decisions about the end of life are made, and as individuals and families face those realities. There are silent, almost invisible griefs that require care and attention when couples experience the agony of infertility or loss through miscarriage. Caring for people who suffer with depression or are in danger of committing suicide comes to mind. All around us are people oppressed by poverty, and immigrants learning how to make their way in our midst.[11] Our congregations and families can seek to become safe places in the midst of cities and towns where violence threatens life every day. The list of "life arena issues" can go on and on.

Why should we as Christians care about these matters? Because God does. Why should we affirm and value and seek to preserve human life? Because God's gracious, undeserved favor means that in Christ he has imparted value to all of human life.

My reader will have noticed, I suppose, that I have not spoken of direct political activism in the life arena. I have reserved that for the end because it is of penultimate importance. Should Christians be active in the political realm? Yes, of course. What will we seek to do in the realm of politics? The short and overly simple answer is: Show love and concern for our neighbors, especially the weakest and most vulnerable. All the while, however, we must keep in mind that politics and political power can do real good (or real evil)—but it is not the church's primary mode of operation.

And the good that politics can accomplish is a limited one, as a moment's reflection on the issue of elective abortion in the United States will reveal. I can remember 1973, when the ability to choose to end human life in the womb was

legally located under the constitutionally protected right to privacy. It was a terrible moment in the history of the United States and of the world. In our day, however, I fear that some Christians have made the reversal of Roe v. Wade into a sort of Holy Grail—as if the power of political fiat can make the world a better place. I am not particularly knowledgeable in legal matters. My understanding, however, is that if Roe v. Wade were to be reversed, then the regulation of elective abortion would return to the state legislatures. We have seen, in recent years, that there would be some states in which abortion would be virtually outlawed, while other states would legalize and protect the ability to end an unborn child's life. So, would fewer children die if Roe v. Wade were reversed? Yes, and that would be a great good. Would reversing Roe v. Wade end elective abortion in the United States? No, it would not. Would the American people rise up and insist that their state legislatures protect the life of the unborn from the moment of conception? I do not think that would happen. Would many Americans be willing to allow abortions during the first trimester only? I don't know the answer, but I would not be surprised. (That is, by the way, when about 90 percent of all elective abortions happen now—during the first trimester.[12]) In the end, Christians should be involved in politics, seeking to influence our leaders and our laws in ways that show love to our neighbors: to the unborn, to the aged, to the poor and disabled, to immigrants, to all who are treated unjustly and whose lives are being demeaned or trampled or done away with.

Do Christians and Christian congregations have work to do, regardless of the legal conditions under which we as citizens live? Yes, we do, and it is empowered by our theology of the incarnation, and of the gospel itself. Whatever the law of the land may be, still we acknowledge one Lord, Jesus Christ. His incarnation shines the light on human life at all stages and all ages, and his gospel fills us with peace and hope, and sends us into our congregations and then into our communities to esteem and protect all of human life. This is why we do what we do in the life arena.

Endnotes

1 The Life Team is the student group that equips and educates for Christian involvement in the life arena. My wife, Renee, and I are the faculty sponsors.

2 In fact, my own political opinions are of secondary or tertiary significance, if they have significance at all. I don't mean to disparage involvement in civic affairs, per se. Like most of you who are reading this, however, my political opinions tend to be fairly uninformed and probably held more strongly than they deserve to be.

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 14–15.

4 See the discussion in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew* 11:2–20:34 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 732–736.

5 https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/i-want-to-burden-my-loved-ones.

6 Students at times ask why the substantized participle in Matthew 1:20, τὸ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθέν, is grammatically neuter, "that which is begotten." The most natural answer is that a normal Greek noun to be supplied is itself grammatically neuter, τὸ βρέφος.

7 In the NT, Paul utilizes the notion of "image" more frequently than any other writer. His use, however, is almost exclusively christological. That is, Christ is by nature the image of God, and *believers* (not humanity in general) are being remade/recreated into the image of Christ.

8 Formula of Concord, SD, 1:10 (Kolb-Wengert, 533). Also see the helpful discussion in Nafzger, Johnson, Lumpp and Tepker, *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology*, 1:272–281.

9 Luther fully explicates the view that for all intents and purposes, the image of God was eradicated by the fall. See, e.g., *Luther's Works*, 1:61–68; 2:141–142. For a nicely nuanced popular essay, see the 2005 article by the Rev. James Lamb, "The Image of God and the Value of Human Life," https://www.lutheransforlife.org/article/the-image-of-god-and-the-value-of-human-life.

10 Statistics are readily available on the internet but sometimes hard to interpret; one remembers Mark Twain's dictum. For one summary, see: https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/09/18/number-of-abortions-us-drops-guttmacher-institute-study/2362316001/ The second leading cause of death (listed as "first," of course) is heart disease, taking a total of about 650,000 lives: https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/282929.php.

11 I ask my reader not to assume that I am taking a political stance here that pertains to the United States and its laws regarding immigration. I am not doing that. I am saying that with not a few congregations, there will be needy immigrant populations close at hand who can receive gracious care and support. For a very balanced discussion of issues surrounding immigration, see the study produced by the LCMS' Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Immigrants Among Us* (https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=DSlPJgMzRUlHw95YpjUdtDbKPQGR9y6h.) One local St. Louis ministry that exemplifies this sort of service is Christian Friends of New Americans (http://www.cfna-stl.org/).

12 https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states.