

Statement Concerning the Status of Human Life with Special Reference to its Origins, Development and Termination

Report of the Standing Committee on Synod Resolution 31/85

This report was received by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1986.

Synod Resolution 31/85

1. This statement has been presented in response to resolution 31/85, passed by the Synod of the Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney in October 1985. The full text of the resolution follows.

"Synod noting the issues raised by the Social Responsibilities Commission of General Synod's book 'Making Babies: The Test Tube and Christian Ethics', and the General Synod's unqualified opposition to any form of live human embryo research not undertaken for the benefit of the child concerned, expresses its unqualified opposition to any form of live embryo experimentation not undertaken for the benefit of the embryo concerned and requests the Standing Committee to have a theological statement prepared on the status of human life, with particular reference to its origins, development and termination."

The Specialness of Humanity, Humans, and Their Relationships

2. All things God does are "After the counsel of His will" (NASB) or "According to his plan and decision" (GNB) Eph. 1:11.

3. He created that everything may tell of his glory (Ps. 19:1), but the most special of his creative works was the creation of human life. Man was created as a result of a divine reflection within the triune Godhead, "Let us make man ..." (Gen. 1:26). This creature alone was created in the image of God.

4. The image of God, marred though that may be as a result of the fall, is what distinguishes human life from animal life. It also entails the potential for a special fellowship with God personally and individually and corporately as a "body" or "bride". See Rom. 8:28-30, Eph. 1:3-14, Rev. 19:7 etc.

5. Humans also have a special relationship and responsibility to their environment. This relationship is both one of dominion and stewardship. See Gen. 1:26-30, 2:15-23.

6. Not only is the specialness and function of humans defined in terms of their relationships with God (Exod. 20:1-7) and the environment, but their relationships with each other. These are more special than relationships to inanimate objects, plants or animals. Jesus presented, as the crux of all the law and the prophets, the linked commands to love God and to love our neighbour (Matt. 22:39-40). This love is to be extended to all people (Luke 6:27, 10:25-37).

7. Man is set apart from other creatures, not only in the creative acts of God, but also in terms of his redemption and destiny. The redemption of mankind was in the mind and purpose of God from the very beginning. This showed the greatness of God's love for us, in spite of our unworthiness, and involved his becoming one of us in the person of his Son who redeemed us through his death on the cross (John 3:16), as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Man's destiny in redemption is to receive eternal life and to share eternity with God.

When in Human Life Does this "Specialness" Begin?

8. Genesis 25:22 refers to children struggling in the womb and Luke (Luke 1:41, 44) refers to foetal movement at six months as being John's leap for joy in response to the presence and greeting of the pregnant Mary.

9. The foetus in the middle and latter stages of pregnancy is spoken of in the Bible and appears to be regarded as a human being. But what of the fertilised ovum and the earliest stages of pregnancy?

10. Exodus 21:22-25 is the most frequently referred to passage regarding the biblical view of the status of the foetus or embryo, as it is the only one in which a termination of pregnancy is induced. The Hebrew is difficult, however, and opinions as to its meanings are quite varied. Thus caution must be exercised in using this passage as a key one in any discussion.

11. Some verses such as Jeremiah 1:5 refer generally to the fact that there is no limit to God's knowledge, as we are reminded in passages such as Romans 8:28-30. There is nowhere that man can flee from God's presence, for even the psalmist's growth in his mother's womb is the work of the great Weaver, as described in Psalm 139:13-16. This same creative activity of God within the womb is appealed to in Job 31:15 and more vividly in Job 10:8-12.

12. Hence the Bible affirms the specialness of human life, without elaborating in detail about its earliest development. Human observation, however, whether it be from morphological, functional, or relational

criteria, indicates that the development of an individual human can be traced back as a continuous process to the point of conception. From that moment there is a live and a distinct individual, the same individual that from fertilisation to old age, grows, develops, matures and eventually dies. Those who suggest that human life commences at various other times have difficulties in terms of the arbitrariness of their choice, and in defining the nature of the embryo at earlier stages.

13. A clear distinction also needs to be made concerning the ovum and the sperm. Each is a living cell. Neither can develop alone, even with optimum nutrition and care in an appropriate environment. Given such optimum conditions, however, the fertilised ovum develops into an adult human person.

14. Thus, in summary, while the Bible does not deal in detail with the status of human life at the earliest stages, it affirms the specialness of human life, every person having eternal existence, whether that be in fellowship with or banishment from God. But as there is a clear change that does occur at conception, and no other event offers a satisfactory alternative, it appears most appropriate to regard conception as the point at which a new human being begins his or her existence and development.

What Are Our Obligations to Human Beings?

15. As has already been noted, we are to love our neighbours and this love is to extend to all people. Those who are God's are commanded to love because he first loved us (1 John 3:23; 4:19). God's selection of Israel (Deut. 7:7-8) and his choosing of us out of the world (John 15:19) to love, is not conditional upon our worthiness, capabilities or actions (Eph. 2:8-9).

16. Likewise we are to love all people as Christ loved us, regardless of their age, their health, or their degree of dependence. We have all been made in the image of God.

17. Furthermore, throughout the scriptures there has always been a special concern for those who are most vulnerable and needy; widows, orphans, aliens and the poor being frequently mentioned. See Exodus 22:21-22, Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 82:3-4 and Luke 4:12-14 etc. The child in the womb is also particularly vulnerable and therefore deserves special protection.

What Implications Has this for the Termination of Human Life?

18. Special care and protection should be given to the child in the womb from conception. The deliberate destruction of the embryo or foetus is not consistent with the Christian obligation to sustain human life (Gen. 9:6), and to provide that special care. However, in rare circumstances, our obligation to maintain and care for life may lead to a justifiable termination of pregnancy. Care, help and protection should also be provided for mothers who are pregnant in less than ideal circumstances.

19. Experiments on live human embryos that are of no potential benefit to the embryos on which the experiments are undertaken are not to be condoned.

20. When the quality of a human life is less than ideal because of deformity, illness or age, everything should be done to make that life as meaningful and dignified as possible. That does not mean the prolongation of that life by extraordinary means under any circumstance; but it does mean that basic care should not be withheld, and that the life should not be actively terminated in such situations.

21. We are not to take our own lives because of feelings of unworthiness or guilt, or because life seems to be intolerable, for God accepts us just as we are (Matt. 11:28, 9:13b), and forgives without limit (Matt. 18:21-35). We may, though, be called upon to give our lives for others (John 15:13).

22. Thus we can conclude with the certain knowledge that Christian faith as revealed in the Bible gives us hope for an eternal future for all who will receive it, it constrains us to love all humankind with the love of Christ (Cor. 13), even the unlovely (Matt. 25:31-46) and our enemies (Matt. 5:44), as well as those the world counts unworthy of care.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

DR A. M. BRYSON
DR R. C. CLAXTON
THE REV DR P. F. JENSEN
MRS P. J. JUDGE
DR L. MILLER

13 June 1986