

# An Analysis of the ELCA Social Statement on Abortion (SSOA)

Our remarks are based on the ELCA Social Statement on Abortion (SSOA) adopted by the Church-wide assembly in Orlando Florida, August 28-Sept 4, 1991. Copyright © September 1991 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. See website <http://www.elca.org/dcs/abortion.html> for the complete statement.

## Introduction

We commend the tens and hundreds of thousands of members of the ELCA who have held steadfastly to the teaching of the Bible and the historic Christian commitments regarding the sanctity of human life. We know they are grieved by the strange doctrine and teaching, which advocates the killing of innocent, unborn children, into which many bishops, pastors, and other leaders have taken their church.

The ELCA's statement on abortion should be taken seriously. It is not just a speculative and abstract argument by a starry-eyed band of pastors or theologians. It is a matter of life and death. No one knows how many lives have been taken as a result of this unfortunate teaching. No one knows how many more will be taken. However, in a church of around 5 million members, it is certain that many have used the teaching of this document to justify the terrible, regrettable, and irreversible decision to take the life of a vulnerable and precious little child created and redeemed by God.

Early Christians lived in an environment where life was cheap. Abortion was widespread. Even the venerable Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle advocated abortion. For over 300 years the Romans watched and were entertained by hundreds of thousands of gladiators who were mangled or gored to death in their great sport coliseums. Child abandonment and infanticide were common.

This low view of human life was viewed as a shocking affront to early Christians who held an exalted view of human life. Like their Jewish ancestors, they saw human beings as the crown of God's creation. They believed that man was made in God's image. They knew that God honored human life. God Himself became incarnate in the womb of Mary in the person of Jesus Christ.

This early Christian insistence that life, from conception to natural death, was sacred and was to be protected and honored quietly influenced the culture around them and led to the gradual extinction of officially sanctioned murder. This high view of life that has brought so much blessing to us, and which we have taken for granted, is a fruit of their faithfulness to their Lord and His word. (We recommend the book **Under the Influence, How Christianity transformed Civilization** by Dr. Alvin Schmidt, Zondervan.)

The acceptance of abortion in America and even in the ELCA is evidence that this high view of life held and practiced by Christians and defended by the church fathers and teachers down through the centuries is being forsaken. We offer this analysis with the prayer and hope that it will cause those, especially in the Lutheran family, who support the abortion ethic to prayerfully reflect and reconsider their views. We pray that all Lutheran denominations will support the ethic of life. (All other Lutheran denominations except the ELCA officially support the ethic of life now.) We offer this as encouragement to the many faithful believers and congregations within the ELCA who support the ethic of life that they will continue to pray, love, and work for change.

Naturally the SSOA justifies their pro-abortion ethic as a means of helping women

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who might be overwhelmed with panic, anguish, and uncertainty when they find themselves with an unexpected pregnancy. In reality, however, the immediate relief offered by abortion comes at a very high price of a life time of guilt, shame, and self condemnation as the unfortunate mother lives with the inescapable reality that she made a choice that resulted in the death of her child.

We of **Lutherans For Life** affirm our obligation to love and help care for both mother and child. That means praying with that woman, now a mother, to help her appropriate the abundant grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It means walking beside her and honoring her with wise, gentle, and loving counsel consistent with long held Christian teaching. It means helping her in practical ways before and after the baby is born and stability is restored in her life. It means lovingly and patiently presenting the wonderful truth of the preciousness of the unborn child and his or her mother.

### **The Analysis**

Though there are many things that could be discussed in the SSOA we will highlight only a few. We will indicate the page from which the issue under discussion is taken. We do not intend to offend the reader by use of terms like killing or murder. However, in the interest of honesty and integrity, instead of terms such as abortion or termination of pregnancy, we will generally use the terms killing and/or murder because they accurately describe what actually happens to the child.

#### **Gift of diversity (Page 1)**

Lurking behind these statements is an attempt to suggest from the outset that both sides of this issue are correct. In other words, it is correct to argue in defense of the life of the baby and it is also correct to argue in defense of killing the baby. It dignifies the pro-abortion ethic, welcoming it at the table of discussion as being just another valid opinion that must be accepted as part of “our diversity.” We submit that arguing in favor of killing our babies is not a gift to the church. In fact, this idea hopes we will forget the historic teaching office of the leaders of the church of Jesus Christ. They are called to teach, persuade, and move people toward Biblical truth as has been understood by the church down through the centuries and not serve as a referee between a Biblical truth and another irreconcilable opinion.

#### **Convictions of our faith (Page 2)**

With a few small exceptions we support the affirmations made in this section with regard to the sanctity of human life. We agree that:

1. Humans were originally created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27-28).
2. Human beings are persons and have intrinsic value. (This means their value is

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given by God and is not dependent upon race, looks, intelligence, stage of development, etc.)

3. Human life in all phases of its development is God given and therefore has intrinsic value, worth, and dignity.
4. God's law orders and preserves life. (We would include "protects life" in this sentence.)
5. Humans should be given equal respect and treated with high value.

These statements rightfully affirm the classical Christian understanding of the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. They correctly assert that human life in all phases of development is God-given and has value, worth, and dignity. Again, this statement understands that both mother **and child** are human beings who, although marred by sin, were created in the image of God and thereby are deserving of honor and protection that comes from this reality.

Having affirmed these classical pro-life statements as "convictions of faith," we would have assumed that SSOA would go on to argue in defense of unborn babies. Instead, as we will demonstrate, the statement dismisses the convictions of faith and goes on to argue in defense of a so-called "morally responsible" killing of babies who are unfortunate enough not to be wanted for a variety of arbitrary reasons. Having affirmed the convictions of faith, the SSOA's descent into a sub-Christian ethic of abortion cannot be blamed on ignorance. It is a callous, studied, and intentional betrayal of received truth. However, issues of life and death such as this do not lend themselves well to such blatant compromise. An attempt to be on both sides of this issue inevitably leads to inconsistency, dishonesty, and disrespect. It leads to a shattering of credibility. If those who authored and endorsed this document can believe that an unborn baby is created in the image of God and has intrinsic value, how can they stretch this truth enough to approve killing of babies that do not meet subjective and arbitrary criterion. We submit the following examples.

**"a developing life in the womb does not have an absolute right to be born. Nor does a pregnant woman have an absolute right to terminate a pregnancy."  
(Page 1)**

This is perhaps the most unconscionable, callous, and careless statement in the entire SSOA. Who among us can judge that a "child does not have an absolute right to be born"? If he or she has no right to be born, that means that someone else has a superior right to have him or her killed based on whether the baby is wanted or not. "Wantedness," however, does not describe the child but how others feel about the child. A woman does not have an absolute right to "terminate a pregnancy." Joining these two statements is intended to convey the idea that a right to "terminate a pregnancy" is

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somehow not analogous to killing a baby.

### **“We mourn the loss of life God has created.” (Page 2)**

These unborn children are not casualties of war, storms, accidents, or illness. If SSOA truly mourns or is saddened by the “loss of life” they should not approve or endorse the killing of those for whom they mourn.

### **“The strong Christian presumption is to preserve and protect life.” (Page 2)**

Translated into the language consistent with the statements above, this means “please keep, protect, and preserve your child if you can, but kill him or her if you must.” That is totally unacceptable for a Christian. “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) is far better.

### **“this church challenges the following life degrading attitudes . . . the desire for perfect children and treating those who are not as if they were disposable . . . attitudes that are inhospitable to children and to the women who bear them . . . .” (Page 3)**

What can be more **degrading** to a child than to arbitrarily decide that the circumstances are such that he or she is not worth keeping and should be killed? Allowing for the option of abortion for any reason is by default viewing the baby as disposable. Please understand that the remains of children killed by abortion are often put down the garbage disposal, incinerated, or thrown into a dumpster. That is degrading!

### **“Fetal abnormality which will result in severe suffering and very early death of an infant.” (Page 3)**

Can the SSOA really mean that the way to correct suffering is to kill the sufferer or that if the patient may die the solution is to kill him or her? How much suffering is necessary before the child would be killed? What is a fetal abnormality? Is it a missing finger? Is it Down syndrome? How normal must a child be to escape the abortionist’s knife?

### **Ending a pregnancy. “This church recognizes that there can be sound reasons for ending a pregnancy through induced abortion . . . what is determined to be morally responsible in one situation may not be in another.” (Page 4)**

In the first place, to say “this church” is inaccurate. This decision was made at an official assembly of the church. However, in view of the large number of people (perhaps a majority) who do not accept this or are appalled by it, it would be more honest to say “some people in this church.” “Induced abortion” is a very “clinical” sounding procedure. However, by the SSOA’s own definition we are dealing with both a mother **and a child** created in God’s image. Therefore, to translate “an induced abortion” means killing an

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unborn baby. This is clear on page 4 in the paragraph on adoption. Notice it is correctly understood that the mother **will bond** with her child during a pregnancy. Here it is recognized that it is a child, not a pregnancy or a piece of tissue or a strange “abnormality.” Yes, a mother will grieve when she makes an adoption plan for her baby. What about the grieving process when the mother has had her own child murdered by an abortionist?

**There are three categories of reasons listed that justify the “morally responsible” decision to kill the baby. They are: (Page 4)**

1. When “continuation of a pregnancy presents a clear threat to the physical life of the woman.” As mentioned above, most Christians would agree that when every attempt has been made to save both mother and child it may be tragically necessary to perform a medical procedure which results in the death of the baby. An example of this would be an ectopic pregnancy where the embryo implants in the fallopian tube instead of the uterus. If left untreated, this would result in the death of both mother and child. Treatment involves surgical removal of the fallopian tube. This will result in the death of the child, but it is not the death of the child that saves the mother’s life. In other cases where there may be a threat to the life of the mother, some mothers choose to put their own life at risk rather than kill the baby. Even in those cases, however, some mothers would choose to put their own life at risk rather than kill their baby.
2. “A woman should not be morally obligated to carry a pregnancy to term if the pregnancy occurs when both parties do not participate willingly in sexual intercourse.” What does this mean? How much willingness is necessary to protect the life of the baby? Even in cases of rape and incest we are dealing with a living human being. Though killing the baby may provide immediate relief, it is attempting to correct an evil act by a wrong that will damage the soul of the mother as much or more than the violence done to her.
3. “There are circumstances of extreme fetal abnormality, which will result in severe suffering and very early death of an infant. In such cases, after competent medical consultations, the parent(s) may responsibly choose to terminate the pregnancy.” It is not possible to fully understand the anxiety such a situation would cause for the parents of this child. Nevertheless, the idea of killing another human being because they might suffer or may die anyway has never been part of Christian compassion. If a born infant would become severely disabled due to an accident, a Christian would not be able to justify killing that child. God can and does work through every life to accomplish His purpose. He works in the lives of people regardless of the length or “quality” of their lives. Another important point to consider here is that when a child is allowed to be born, the opportunity for baptism exists.

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## **Terminology**

In a document that will mean life or death to many children, there should be a serious attempt to use language in an honest and precise way. Please notice that in the section on *Convictions of our Faith*, the SSOA uses terms like human beings, human life, personal human life, created life, etc. In the section on *Ending a Pregnancy*, it usually uses “ending a pregnancy or terminating a pregnancy,” terms that are impersonal and intend to disguise the reality of what they are doing to a living human being. A woman is not pregnant with a pregnancy; she is pregnant with a child. To terminate a pregnancy is to either give birth or kill the child.

## **Absent from SSOA**

Though there is brief reference to the need to counsel women who grieve because of their “morally responsible” decision, there is nothing about establishing crisis pregnancy centers or ministries to systematically help women. How many women would be helped if the ELCA would use the vast resources of many congregations to help mothers with a crisis pregnancy? There is almost nothing on counseling those bereaved by the loss of their baby and burdened by the awful truth that they had their own baby killed. There is nothing about sharing with them the sacred message of forgiveness by Jesus Christ who died to save sinners and whose blood cleanses from all sin (I John 1:7). This should not be a surprise. A meaningful explanation of the need to deal with grief and shame that comes when a mother makes the choice to have her baby killed would be an admission that the act was indeed wrong. This is the inherent and spiritual danger in condoning abortion as a moral option. The saving and healing Gospel cannot be directed toward that sin.

## **Application of SSOA**

Ideas have consequences. When the teaching in this document is applied to real life situations we see the results. In August 1993 the ELCA Board of Pensions inquired as to whether they would have to ask a woman to provide information regarding the reasons for her abortion. If it were elective would it be considered morally responsible? How would they ask a woman if the elective abortion was sought because the mother was dominated or suppressed during the time of sexual relations? How would they find out if she had little access to contraception? If major medical insurance is going to pay for their abortion, do we have to ask these questions?

An official of the ELCA church and society submitted an opinion that the three situations mentioned in SSOA which would qualify as “morally responsible” were intended to be only examples of approved abortions. Actually any abortion for any reason would qualify. The church ought not try to determine what is “morally responsible” but leave it up to the conscience of the individual. This opinion was subsequently ratified by a study committee and was supported by the vote of the Church Wide Assembly in 1997.

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A member of the ELCA inquired of the Board of Pensions as to whether they would pay for an abortion for the purpose of sex selection. That board stated that they would pay for an abortion for that purpose. The secretary of the ELCA confirmed this conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis confirms that the SSOA does not stand the test of either Biblical truth or love. To love and honor human life means that the intentional taking of human life through abortion is never a moral option for a Christian. To respect and honor a woman is to counsel her with the Biblical truth that has stood the test of centuries. It is to tell her that God's grace is sufficient not only to save her by grace but also to help her in time of need. It is to offer to help her in her difficult time. Love is to help and counsel her so that she will trust in the Lord of Life and will not need to turn to the death of her baby as the solution to a problem. Love is to protect her from the terrible consequences of judgment, guilt, and shame that will follow her the rest of her life if she has her baby killed. As much as she tries to suppress her conscience, apart from repentance, confession and acceptance of the assurance of forgiveness by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, that guilt is inescapable. Love is to defend and welcome that child as our Savior did.

We urge members of the ELCA to pray and work to restore integrity to their church that is besieged by the onerous and shameful burden of this pro-abortion ethic. We urge them to develop ministries to help women with crises pregnancies in their time of vulnerability and need. We urge them to teach, witness, and proclaim so that the message of the sanctity of human life that includes both mother and child will become the teaching of our churches.

April 2003

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