

LIFE AND DEATH SEEN FROM A (DUTCH) REFORMED POSITION

A Calvinistic Approach to Bioethics

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1 Introduction

The book *Life and Death*¹ is an impressive attempt to make the Lutheran tradition fruitful for the ecumenical debate on bioethical issues. It provides both a theoretical account of some basic normative considerations in Lutheran thinking, and an attempt to apply these norms and values in the complicated field of biomedical research and practice. We are invited by the Nordic Theological Network for Bioethics to do the same from a (Dutch) Reformed or Calvinist position. We consider this invitation as an honour and a challenge. In our work as ethicists at the Center for Bioethics and Health Law at the University of Utrecht, we are frequently invited to give contributions to the reflection on practical ethical issues. Sometimes we are requested to do so in our quality of *ethicists*; on other occasions, a contribution from a *theological* angle is desired. In either case, the language and the concepts that we use should be communicable; likewise, the normative arguments should be understandable, if not acceptable, to a broader public—broad both in the sense of “multidisciplinary” and in the sense that this audience may have differing religious and ideological beliefs. Only very seldom, we are deliberately asked to give a *Reformed* or a *Calvinist* contribution. This means that the development of a systematic account of a Dutch Reformed perspective on biomedical issues is not our daily, not even our main concern. For these reasons, it is appropriate to make some preliminary remarks.

In the first place, a *captatio benevolentiae*: with an eye on the distinguished members of the working group who contributed to *Life and Death*, we have to be modest. As theologians and (bio-)ethicists, we are not specialized in the history of ideas nor, specifically, in John Calvin's theology.

Secondly, we are facing the same difficulty as the working group, namely that *the* (Dutch) Reformed or Calvinist position does not exist. It is therefore somewhat surprising that in Chapter two of *Life and Death*, six scholars from the five Nordic countries attempt to give an account of *the* Lutheran position. We will not be the first to ask whether this is possible. At most, it can be done insofar as a description is given of some of the *basic* tenets of Lutheran thinking, i.e., in a general way. Like in any ethics, however, when it comes to the *application* of general norms to the practice of biomedical research and treatment, opinions will diverge. It is therefore no surprise that the reader finds a variety of positions in *Life and Death* when it comes to concrete action guiding principles. Rather than proposing *the* Reformed approach, our contribution has the character of a thought experiment: a reconstructivist account of what we believe a Reformed position *could* be. This means that instead of repeating Calvin or the Calvinist tradition, we will try to develop a contemporary Calvinist perspective on the basis of this tradition.

A third remark is that, in doing so, we do not want to play off Protestantism and Roman Catholicism against each other, nor do we see reason to create far-fetched contrasts between Luther and Calvin. The primary concern of the Reformation was not an ethical, but a theological one. The theology of both reformers is rooted in the trilogy of *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. The ethics of Luther and Calvin are not at the beginning, but at the end of this road. They are an attempt

¹ Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *Life and Death. Moral Implications of Biotechnology*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995.

to relate the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to the practice of human action. There are, however, distinctions in emphasis and elaboration, as we will see.

Finally, although we will refer to elements in *Life and Death*, we will not give a full book review. Our contribution will have much of the same structure as the book. It means that we start by sketching some basic tenets and intentions of Reformed (Calvinist) theology, with some suggestions to make them fruitful for bioethics. Then, two issues in applied ethics will be dealt with, namely the *status of the human embryo* (Theo Boer) and the *euthanasia problem* (Egbert Schrotten). These applied issues may be paradigmatic for the relation of Calvinist theology in the strict sense, and Calvinist ethics.

2 A Theological Basis for Bioethics

2.1 General remarks: theology and ethics

In the Reformed tradition, theology in the strict sense (i.e., theoretical assumptions about God, and about God and mankind in their relatedness) has a priority over ethics. This does not always mean that moral guidelines are deduced from theological tenets, but it does mean that moral principles at least have to be congruent with them.

In his book *Can Ethics Be Christian?*, James M. Gustafson suggests four contributions that Christian theology can make to ethics. First, it gives reasons for being moral, such as gratitude for the Divine providence. Second, it qualifies the character of the moral actor, in the sense that it nurtures attitudes and dispositions towards doing the right and pursuing the good. Thirdly, a theological view may change our perception of the (factual) circumstances, and it makes us sensible to perceive certain aspects of reality. And, fourthly, it contributes by providing concrete action-guiding principles.² Throughout the following elaboration of the basis of Calvinist moral thinking, we will see all these four contributions recur in one way or the other.

2.2 God's sovereignty

The best way into Calvinist theology is from a theocentric perspective, to use an expression coined by James M. Gustafson. The proper use of the expression “theocentric perspective” in a Reformed context is not primarily *epistemological*, as if we could view the world from God's perspective; rather, it is an *axiological* and an *ontological* approach. The axiological aspect indicates that God is to be viewed as the *summum bonum*, the One who deserves to be valued more than anything else. One of the important elements that James M. Gustafson retrieves from the Reformed tradition, is that “God” is not to be seen as an instrument to bring about human well-being, but rather as a centre of value in his own right.³ Moreover, Reformed theology is theocentric in an ontological way. Calvin stresses more than anyone else that God is sovereign, the Originator and Ruler of heaven and earth, history and human life. The purpose of creation as a whole, including mankind, is to be there to the glory of God. This God-centered way of thinking marks Calvin's theology as a whole, and not only his thoughts on providence and predestination.

The concept of sovereignty has been mistaken more than once. The famous tenth Sunday text of the Heidelberg Catechism contends that

“health and illness, wealth and poverty, all things not [happen] by accident, but come to us from his fatherly hand.”

This has led to extreme positions in more than one direction. On the one hand we see forms of religious quietism, even to the degree that certain religious groups in the Netherlands reject vaccination as a form of human pride against the ruling hand of God; on the other hand, this position has led to a remarkable revulsion against anything close to “Calvinism.”

² James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

³ See James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, part One: Theology and Ethics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.

Calvin's stress on God's sovereignty is impressive, indeed, and it is special in its all-pervading character. For Calvin, "God is in the details," to repeat a saying frequently quoted by Gustafson. As in much of Lutheran theology, this has led to the conviction in Calvinism that no part of life, however small-scaled and trivial, is exempt from God's involvement. This involvement may be active (God is deliberately causing certain things to happen), or passive (God allows certain things to happen), all because of our guilt, to test us, or to purify us. So in his omnipotence, God is not the remote, absolute Ruler, but He cares about all of his creatures. This aspect of God's love and commitment is revealed in Jesus Christ. He is at the origin of being and wellbeing, of creation and salvation. In short, He is sovereign in his goodness as well. For Calvin, this assumption of the Divine goodness is so crucial that without it his theology would crumble.⁴

The all-pervading theocentric perspective has at least four important consequences for ethics. The first one is *epistemological*. As ethics is literally "Theo-logy," God (God's revelation, or God's will) is the most fundamental normative source for christian ethics. Therefore, Karl Barth is in line with Calvin's *Anliegen* when he takes ethics as part of the doctrine of God.⁵ As a consequence, the Bible, as an account of the Divine purposes, plays an important role in ethics. Although Calvin speaks uninhibitedly of nature as the "theatre" of God's glory,⁶ the Bible in which we are informed of God's special revelation in history, particularly in Jesus Christ, is indispensable to find our way to God and to his holy will. This dependence upon Divine illumination is all the more radical as a consequence of Calvin's view on the corruptness of humankind's epistemological faculties, as we will see.

Secondly, *normative* ethics may be qualified by the awareness of God's all-pervading presence. For Barth, the indicative of the Divine grace and providence takes priority over the imperative: "*Du kannst, denn Du sollst.*" Not our human and natural possibilities and limitations are the primary framework for ethics, but the Word of God which calls us to question our possibilities and to challenge our presumed limitations. In a concrete situation, belief in the Divine providence which is "in the details" may mean that no situation of moral ambiguity or tragedy is without conditions of hope.

Thirdly, in Reformed thinking, there is no realm of life in which God is *not* involved. There are no aspects of reality that are theologically neutral. This implies that, however great our concern may be for the common good, we are called to be responsible for the well-being of the parts, however small. As *Lars Östnor* points out,⁷ it is problematic when the good of the whole, or the good of future generations, overrules the interests and the integrity of a single human being. The greater good, in other words, may not be played off against the good of its parts.

A fourth consequence of Calvin's view on God's sovereignty may be found in our interpretation of the concept of human autonomy. In discussions on medical decisions at the end of life, frequent reference is made to the human right to self-determination. The four principles of biomedical ethics as stipulated by *Beauchamp* and *Childress* serve as important tools in establishing

⁴ In the history of theology (and not only Calvinist theology), many attempts have been made to resolve the apparent tension between God's love and God's sovereign power. Some have tried to resolve the tension by virtually equating love and power, as the Dutch theologian *Piet Suurmond* does in his book *God is mighty, but how?* He contends that love is the only power God has; God is sovereign only in his love. Others, like the popular Rabbi *Harald Kushner*, try to resolve the tension by abandoning the concept of sovereignty altogether, leaving us with a God who sits by our side and grieves with us in our sorrow. *James Gustafson* takes another direction, contending that we have to qualify our conception of Divine *love* rather than that of Divine *power*. In the Dutch Reformed debate, the liberal theologian and ethicist *Harry Kuitert* tries to retain both the concept of love and sovereignty. In the public debate, he presents the human intuition and desire for an overall justice as an argument for his position that, somehow, there will be a final judgement that leads to a final restoration. Now the longing for a happy ending does not make it all the more true; but we do observe that, in the Reformed tradition as in any other mainstream Christian denomination, God's sovereignty *and* his love can be retained only when there is somehow the belief that present suffering and injustice will be restored in a life hereafter.

⁵ *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/2, § 36.

⁶ *Inst.*I,vi,2

⁷ *Life and Death*, Chapter Five.

the range and limits of human autonomy.⁸ According to this framework, human autonomy is limited by the autonomy of others, as well as by the moral principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. In recent years, the overall stress on the principle of autonomy is more and more relativized in the light of these other moral considerations. From a theological perspective, *Kuitert* adds that human autonomy has another limitation: the Divine autonomy (or theonomy).⁹ *Kuitert* stresses that this qualification is limited to the relation between God and humans, so that issues *between* humans cannot be settled by referring to theonomy. We will return to the issue of human autonomy below.

2.3 Creation as “*Theatrum Gloriae Dei*”

A second morally relevant characteristic of Reformed thinking is its view on creation. Here, we see an absolute distinction between God, the Creator, and creation (*creatura*). Creation is the result of God's creative activity (*creatio*), and neither the whole, nor parts or aspects (such as life and death), can be equated with God. Creation is finite reality before God (*coram Deo*), and it can therefore never become an object of worship. In line with the argument made above, creation is meant to be “theatre” of God's sovereignty and glory. As such, it can be seen as an expression of God's will and being, however not unambiguously; the human fault makes revelation necessary in order to gain a proper sight on the purposes behind creation. In Reformed thinking, this leads to a heavy stress on Scripture as a source for clarification.

Creation is thus subject and the theatre, not object, of worship. Worship takes place in two forms: direct religious worship within the context of a religious community, and indirect worship in the form of a way of living. The destination of living creatures, human beings in particular, is to glorify God by answering to their vocation. It is a human vocation to serve God as responsible stewards of the rest of creation. In this manner the *locus classicus* of biblical anthropology, in which it is said that mankind is created “in the image of God,” is to be explained. Calvinist ethics is an ethics of service, obedience, and responsibility to God.

In his recent book *A Sense of the Divine*—a playful allusion to Calvin's “*Sensus Divinitatis*”—, James Gustafson distinguishes four possible attitudes towards nature: (1) Dominion, (2) Stewardship, (3) Reverence, and (4) Participation.¹⁰ Of these, dominion is rejected because, in our words, humans are not called to “play God”; reverence is rejected because nature is not God. Partly on the basis of modern scientific theories, Gustafson rejects the option of stewardship and chooses instead for the term participation. Depending upon one's view on human beings, a Reformed as well as a Lutheran approach might justify both. On the basis of our vocation to stewardship or participation, we can say that humankind, according to Reformed thinking, is called to develop scientific activity.

The link between science and nature in Calvin's thought is clarified further by *Alistair McGrath*. In his recent book on Calvin, he points out that for the reformer, the fact that both nature and the universe in a wider sense can be seen as “theatre” of God's glory, justifies the human quest for more and more knowledge of it.¹¹ In other words, knowledge about the universe (including scientific knowledge) could lead to a greater awareness of God's glory. A critical question about the scientific activity would be whether and how the results of science and technology could be assessed in the light of responsible stewardship, which implies an attitude of care, protection of the weak and

⁸ Tom. L. Beauchamp and J.F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press, 1994⁴.

⁹ H.M. Kuitert, *Een gewenste dood. Euthanasie en zelfbeschikking als moreel en godsdienstig probleem*. Baarn: Ten Have, 1981.

¹⁰ James M. Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine. The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994.

¹¹ Alistair E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin. A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991. pp. 253ff.; Cf. Calvin in *Inst.* I,v,1f. This “critical enhancement” of the sciences may explain why in the Netherlands one of our greatest Reformed theologians, Abraham Kuyper, apart from being a prime minister for many years, was a founder of one of its most famous universities, the Free University in Amsterdam. The freedom of this university was found in its independency from current ideologies. Kuyper actively advocated scholarship and research, albeit with some clear qualifications retrieved from his Reformed view.

the vulnerable, and prudence.

There is another point to be taken from McGrath's Calvin biography.¹² He makes clear that Calvin removes an important obstacle for scientific development in his contention that the Bible is not to be seen as an infallible science textbook but as a book about God's revelation and salvation, concentrated in Jesus Christ. Its aim is not to inform us about the structure of the natural world but to bring us to belief in Jesus Christ. It means that scientific knowledge has its own value and relevance and that it is a category mistake to play them off against each other. At the end of the 20th century with its scientific and technological revolutions, this may be of great help in looking for ethical answers in new situations. In this respect, Calvinist thinking would result in a "critical enhancement" of biomedical research. Insofar as scientific data form the factual framework for normative ethics, new discoveries and explanations from the sciences may even lead to the alteration of traditional moral convictions.

2.4 The "Weight of Sin"

However, in sharp contrast to the glory of God and to human vocation, Calvinism is deeply convinced of the impact of sin on (human) nature. Called to "play God" in order to obey and to glorify God as responsible stewards in creation, human beings are "playing God" for themselves, trespassing the bounds of God's commandments and human predicament. No part of human nature is excepted from this distortion, not even our rationality and epistemological capacities. Reason is "darkened" so it is not able any more to see, by itself, nature as *theatrum gloriae Dei*. That is why Calvinism, in the end, has very little confidence in (human) nature as a basis and guideline for ethics.

This distrust has been radicalized by Karl Barth. His famous phrase "*Religion ist Unglaube*" can be extended to natural law. In this view, it is sinful to think that we could know God ('s will) outside the revelation in Jesus Christ as it is exclusively found in the Gospel. Although it is possible, in principle, to speak of *lex naturae*, it is wrong to think that we are able to know it all by ourselves.¹³ Therefore, "*sola Scriptura*," in ethics too! Although Calvin did not defend this radical position, he certainly looks upon Scripture as a necessary condition for the proper reading of the "book of nature." If we want to know the will of God, Scripture is a more reliable source than natural law.

In comparison with the natural law tradition, there is an interesting side-effect of this position, in view of secularization. Our impression is that, in countries with a natural law tradition, there seems to be more of a moral consensus between believers and non-believers. When (christian) ethics is based on the Bible (only), secularization may have a more devastating effect in creating a moral vacuum than in the case of a natural law tradition, where the loss of faith does not necessarily imply the loss of the corresponding moral convictions. To stress the *sola Scriptura* too heavily may therefore lead to an unsound polarization between believers and non-believers in matters of morals, and to an unwarranted movement towards individualism in this area. A natural law tradition may therefore have a "saving" effect on public morality.

Now whether this impression is right or wrong, and whether or not we advocate a natural law element in ethics, we definitely need a theology of nature in (applied, *casu quo* biomedical) ethics. In order to be able to take moral decisions we need a description and an analysis of the problem. This includes the need for factual information. Sooner or later, we will therefore be confronted with the question of the importance of "natural" knowledge for ethics from a theological point of view. We will come back to this question below.

2.5 Redemption, Recreation

Notwithstanding the weight of sin and evil, God, in his sovereign goodness, remains faithful to creation. "Incarnation," the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ, means that mankind and creation are seen in the perspective of hope. The damage of sin and evil will be repaired, and creation will be recreated to fit its original purpose as the *locus* of God's kingdom. Calvin's theology is based on Luther's doctrine of justification (although with a stronger emphasis on cosmological and eschatological implications), in which the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are pivotal. The gospel of resur-

¹² O.c., pp.255ff.

¹³ Cf., for instance, *Ethik I*, Zürich 1973, p. 356

rection can be seen as a “vindication of creation” (Oliver O’Donovan¹⁴) and human vocation can be confirmed from an eschatological point of view. Jesus Christ is called “image of God” and every human being is invited to “follow” him and to “walk in the (his) Spirit.” So the acceptance of God’s sovereignty and the corruptness of human nature do not lead to an anthropology and ethics of resignation. Human beings are created in the image of God and, although they are sinners, in and through the work of Jesus Christ their original vocation remains the same: to be in the service of God wherever they happen to live and to work.

It may be appropriate here to emphasize that a Calvinist theocentric perspective does not imply a denial of human dignity, which is such an important concept in bioethics. In other words, God’s sovereignty and human dignity should not be seen as contrary to each other. In the light of what has been said above, human dignity may be phrased in terms of (the restoration of) “the image of God.” Calvin points out that this “ornament,” which we do not owe to ourselves but to God, has important ethical consequences for our treatment of fellow human beings.¹⁵ Put the other way around: in the context of bioethics, what Calvin writes there about *imago Dei* could very well be translated in “secular” terms of human dignity.

2.6 Sanctification

Mankind is saved by grace alone; that is what Reformation is all about. Calvin combines a stress on *sola gratia* with the quest for a holy life. In “sanctification” we give shape to our gratitude for God’s grace. The christian life is a life of gratitude (Heidelberg Catechism) and, therefore, a commitment to God’s sake: in the world, in and through our lives, God’s name should be sanctified, his kingdom come, his will be done. To live according to the will of God, in concrete everyday life, that is what christian (bio-)ethics is about.

In general, Calvin’s ethics is taken to be a severe ethics which is exempt of joy. *Prima facie*, this may seem to be true; there are some rather harsh passages in Calvin’s writings. Seen in the wider context of Calvin’s theology, however, ethics is more than this, for it is rooted in the joy of grace and hope. Therefore, Calvin is one of the few theologians in the christian tradition who uses the word *frui* (enjoying, alongside *uti*, using,) to characterize the christian way of life, albeit *frui* should take place “with moderation.”¹⁶ Life is a pilgrimage to the joy of a future heavenly kingdom; during that pilgrimage there is much suffering and temptation, but in the light of this bright future and because we may *frui* the goodness of God’s creation, sanctification has a positive undertone.

Meanwhile, even here God’s sovereign goodness becomes apparent: it is by inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we are motivated and enabled to sanctification. This pneumatological aspect is an integral part of Calvinist theology and ethics. It implies a realistic view on humans. Because of sin and evil, the Christian remains *simul iustus ac peccator*. Even after justification, trying to live according to the will of God is far from easy. In this context, Calvin uses terms like “self-denial” (not meant in an ascetic sense but to underline the theocentricity of christian life), “cross-bearing” (as a consequence of following Christ), and “suffering” to characterize the christian life.¹⁷ The way we cope with suffering and affliction may even be seen as a way of expressing our belief in God: whatever happens, we are in God’s hands and He will not let us down. Coping with suffering may therefore be a form of sanctification. Needless to say, then, that if God would not be with us in his Word and Spirit, sanctification would not be very likely.

2.7 Law and Spirit

It is against the background of what has been said about sanctification that the function of the law, specifically the so called *tertius usus legis*, can be clarified. Divine law, in particular the Decalogue, being a form of the Word of God, has three functions:

(1) The *usus politicus* or *civilis* may be seen as a form of the natural law tradition: the law

¹⁴ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order. An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*. Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986.

¹⁵ *Inst.* III,vii,6.

¹⁶ *Inst.* III,x,1f

¹⁷ *Inst.* III,viif.

gives guidance to society as a whole, believers and non-believers. The government has to obey God's commandments as well, in particular the first four commandments of the Decalogue: it should fight for true (christian) belief, for the church and for justice in society.

(2) The *usus elencticus*: Divine law functions as a mirror in which "natural man" can be convinced of his sinfulness, and therefore becomes receptive to the Gospel.

(3) The *tertius usus legis, the usus didacticus (in renatis)*. Divine law is intended to help the believers in sanctification. Conscience, the natural understanding of good and evil, is so distorted by sin that it is no longer a reliable guide. Divine law is the revelation of God's will and, as such, it marks the moral boundaries of the "playing ground" of the followers of Christ. As we said above, in the Heidelberg Catechism this function of the law is called "rule of gratitude": compliance to the Divine law is the way in which our gratitude for God's grace takes form.

In this perspective, human vocation and, therefore, christian ethics may be interpreted rightly as obedience to God's will. It is, however, not a slavish obedience. Here again the Holy Spirit comes in: we are called to live "*kata pneuma*," in the Spirit of Christ who liberated us from the slavery of sin and inspires us to follow him. One of Calvin's metaphors to characterize the work of the Holy Spirit is his use of the term "internal teacher".¹⁸

It would lead us way beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on Calvin's pneumatology. What we want to say about it in our reconstructivist account can very well be summarized by a formulation of Klaus Bockmühl: Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is "*die überbietende Parallele*" of Sinai,¹⁹ and Law and Holy Spirit are "*das Doppelprinzip der christlichen Ethik*".²⁰ Christian ethics is an ethics of respons-ibility *kata pneuma*, certainly when new questions arise, for instance in bio-medical technology.

2.8 Theology of nature

We finally return to the question of a theology of nature. In the Calvinist tradition, there is an ambivalent attitude towards nature: on the one hand there is an attitude of distrust, because of evil and the darkening of reason by sin, which has led to radically negative positions like that of Karl Barth. On the other hand, however, there is the idea of creation as *theatrum gloriae Dei*, which is present in the natural law tradition and in the distinction between general and special revelation.

We want to combine the two and keep them in tension, like Calvin did. While keeping in mind his warnings about the non-reliability of (human) nature, we do want to stress what we said above: that knowledge of nature is indispensable for ethics. By "knowledge of nature" we do not mean an interpretation of particular "natural" events in someone's life, e.g., when we explain a specific illness as God's will. Much could be said about Calvin's doctrine of Divine providence and about his way of dealing with the question of *theodicee*. But that is not at stake, here. What we have in mind is a theological evaluation of the results of the sciences, in particular the biomedical sciences.

We have to be careful, here, as the naturalistic fallacy may be just around the corner. The fact that we cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," does not warrant the other extreme, namely, that the two have no relation whatsoever. Our analysis of "is" is vital for the answer to the question what ought to be done. If we do not combine the "ought" with the "is," the "ought" will lose its relevance and will become unrealistic. To make a shortcut to christian ethics: *Sola Scriptura* will not do!

From a Calvinist point of view there are three reasons to take the results of the sciences seriously in ethics. (1) The idea of creation as *theatrum gloriae Dei*, however darkened it may be. The Bible is not a scientific textbook, but an account of how we may be saved from sin and death by believing in God's grace in Jesus Christ. (2) The so called accomodation-theory in Calvinist thought. In line with what has been said in (1), biblical knowledge about nature was the knowledge of those days. God's revelation comes to human beings in the garment of history and culture. In other words, although *sola fide* will be true in view of salvation, knowledge of nature may develop in the course of history. (3) If one of the metaphors used for the Holy Spirit is "internal teacher," it is possible that He

¹⁸ *Inst.* III.i.4.

¹⁹ Klaus Bockmühl, *Gezetz und Geist. Eine kritische Würdigung des Erbes protestantischer Ethik*. I: Die Ethik der reformatorischen Bekenntnisschriften. Giessen/ Basel: Brunnen Verlag, 1987, p. 117.

²⁰ *O.c.*, p. 513.

teaches us new things. Pneumatology implies the possibility of new insights in moral problems. The famous expression *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* should be translated into ethics.²¹

We would end this section by saying that the Calvinist distrust in (human) nature may be operationalized by an adaptation of Paul Tillich's "protestant principle": the protest against any absolute (moral) claim made for a relative reality, even if this claim is made by the (Protestant) church.²² Christian ethics is a human undertaking, situated in the context of the human predicament. Consequently, it can only prosper in a context of a critical dialogue within the christian community as well as in the community of scholars.

3 Some Issues in Applied Ethics

3.1 *Introductory remarks*

In the light of what has been said in the former section, we will now elaborate on two issues in applied ethics, namely the question of the status of the human embryo and the euthanasia problem. Our starting point is the discussions in two reformed churches in the Netherlands, the Netherlands Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

3.2 *The Status of the Human Embryo* (Theo A. Boer)

It is not easy to retrieve a clear position on the moral status of the human embryo from the Calvinist tradition, or from that tradition alone. To begin with, the question is not whether Calvin would enhance scientific research. Rather, it is to what extent he would have allowed scientific results, such as data about the conception of the human embryo, about the natural "waste" of pre-embryo's in the first few days, about the predicability of genetic disorders, and about the different stages of development, to have an impact on his ethical position. Our impression is that the heavy reliance of Reformed ethics on Divine revelation in the past, warrants the conclusion that no quick inferences can be made from scientific "is" to moral "ought."

Moreover, as we pointed out above, the Reformation did not take place for the sake of ethics, but for the sake of theology. At its origin, Reformed ethics did not question the predominant Roman Catholic view on the status of the human embryo. Originally, Calvinism would therefore imply a rejection of abortion, and the contention that we need to accept human beings even when they have serious diseases.

Some years ago, a joint committee of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands made an attempt to address issues around the status of the human embryo in the document *Man in the Making*.²³ The committee members agree that human embryonic life from the first moments after the conception represents a high value. Furthermore, they agree that we, in a general way, can speak of an increasing value of the human embryo. However, on the question whether this would permit the performing of embryo experiments, the members disagree. Their conclusions reveal the fact that, within a Calvinist theological framework, there is no clear answer about the question whether the embryo is *inviolable* from the beginning. Especially when it comes to the status of the embryo, there are no direct "instructions" on the basis of a specific Calvinist theory. We see in this respect a striking parallel with Lars Östnor and Ann Marie Thunberg's letter to the medical researcher.²⁴

²¹ That science may have impact on ethics can be demonstrated by the following examples: 1. The moral judgment concerning certain forms of human behavior may be changed (should be changed) in the light of scientific theories concerning psychiatric illnesses; 2. Knowledge about processes around and directly after human conception may have an impact on the discussion about the moral status of the (pre-)embryo. 3. The impact of medical technology and cultural changes as to the quality of human life may be of great influence in the euthanasia debate. The latter two of these examples will be elaborated below.

²² *The Protestant Era*. Chicago: 1948, p. xii.

²³ *Mensen in wording. Theologische, ethische en pastorale overwegingen bij nieuwe voortplantingsmethoden en prenataal onderzoek. Een verkenning*. Leidschendam/ Leusden: 1992.

²⁴ *Life and Death*, Chapter 5.

In the process of deciding, a Calvinist approach needs more than only factual circumstances and convictions from the tradition. Especially in individual decisions, it would involve the elements of careful Scriptural reading, pastoral discourse, and sensitive prayer, all in the context of a christian community.

Even though we cannot say for sure what the ontological or axiological status of the human embryo is, we can, from a Calvinist position, make some remarks about the limits and the purpose of our actions. First, there is the element of the sovereignty of God. God is in the details, and overall purposes with promising results are not necessarily sufficient to justify the infringement on the life and the dignity of human life in its first stadia. As Östnor and Thunberg indicate, human life in its first beginning is more than potentiality; we have to account for the already existing, active evolution of life taking place.²⁵ In the case of a human pre-embryo, as with all human life, we are not primarily dealing with the product of human decisions, but with the result of God's will and power to create. The question whether, and when we ascribe full human dignity to a foetus, might not be as crucial in Calvinist thought as it is in Roman Catholicism. But still, just like in Jewish thinking, we have to do with a human being in the making. This implies that, whether the fetus is a human person or not, human beings have the obligation to respect and protect this form of "human life."

All this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that, on the basis of explicitly Reformed convictions, embryo-experimentation or abortion are wrong. For such a position, premises might be needed that are not specifically "Reformed." The least we can say, is that as a consequence of the view of the sovereignty of God, there is a *real* moral conflict between God's creative work on the one hand, and human intervention which leads to irreversable damage to human embryo's on the other one. And when there might be the slightest indication that there is a conflict between the realisation of human objectives and respect for the Divine creativity, a Reformed view would tend to say: "In dubio abstine."

Secondly, in a Calvinist view, more than in other views, we may be called to accept certain limits, such as scarcity, discomfort or even suffering. Not only are humans, as a matter of factuality, limited in their possibilities and capacities, but they are also called to accept these boundaries and to make the best out of it. As said above: coping with suffering may be a form of sanctification. But all this is no warrant for theological quietism or resignation. All other things being equal, whenever a person can prevent harm, illnesses or injuries, she is justified or even called to do so. The real question is: "Does the purpose justify the means?"

As a thought experiment, let us take the example of the couple that has already one child with cystic fibrosis, and which is now considering another pregnancy: would they request prenatal diagnosis, and would they have an abortion if the same disorder was found? In their contribution to *Life and Death*, Kees van Kooten Niekerk and Per Sundström indicate the dilemma: ". . . a child may under certain conditions become a serious threat to the life and community of a family," and "the whole family could be put into jeopardy."²⁶ It is interesting to observe that the sheer option of a selective abortion after discovering a serious handicap already implies the vision that the foetus does not have the full status of a human being. Only by virtue of this relatively "low" status of the embryo, the question whether an abortion might be justifiable for the sake of the well-being of others, can be a meaningful one. But from a Calvinist perspective, the real issue in this case is not: "Abortion, or not?" but: "Pregnancy, or not?" From a Calvinist perspective, with its stress on providence, responsibility and (in this case) stewardship in the form of a high respect for the human fetus, a reconstructivist reply might somehow run along the following line:

"You are considering another pregnancy, but you are afraid that the child may have a serious disorder? Then you have to choose. Either you think you cannot bear the burden of another such child, which is an understandable position. God does not impose this burden. Therefore, if you are convinced that another handicap would be unbearable, then do not take the risk. But if you decide to take the risk, be aware of your moral responsibility, and do not violate the life of this child once it is concei-

²⁵ *Life and Death*, p. 54

²⁶ *Life and Death*, p. 39.

ved. Listen, we're talking about a person in the making here! Would you take the good things out of God's hand, but not the tragic? Would there not be conditions of hope when the child would have the same disease? Would there be no church, and no social institutions, which would have the obligation to lift your burden, and would there not be reason for prayer to be able to carry this heavy burden?"

In Reformed thinking, the real evil is moral evil. Moral evil may be the result of the use of improper measures in order to remove non-moral evil. It is not necessarily right to remove suffering and its causes. Human autonomy to pursue human happiness is limited by the Divine governance. But insofar as humans stay within the proper bounds of their moral freedom, they are called to do all they can to remove suffering and to enlarge the scope of their knowledge.²⁷

3.3 *Euthanasia* (Egbert Schrotten)

As has been said above, I shall take my starting point in the euthanasia discussion in the Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. In 1986, a task force of these two churches argued for a "no, unless" position in christian ethics concerning euthanasia. This standpoint was laid down in a report named *Euthanasia and the Pastorate*.²⁸ It is not my intention to give a summary of this carefully written report. I would, rather, concentrate on the argumentation of its moral position, which can be summarized as follows: from a christian moral point of view, there may be situations (mainly of unbearable suffering at the end of life) where euthanasia could be optional, or even justified.

The report was accepted by a vast majority of the synod members as a "contribution to the reflection in the congregations," in combination with a request for critical commentary. Interestingly enough, it does not follow the Dutch trend to limit the definition of "euthanasia" to voluntary euthanasia on explicit request, but prefers the following definition: ". . . the treatments which deliberately are set forth to end or to shorten a patient's life at his/ her (explicit) request, or in his/ her interest, whether active or passive." The arguments used to support the no-unless-thesis are not one by one decisive, but are meant to be a cumulative way of reasoning: taken together, they form the basis of the position of the task force concerning the "unless." Let us have a closer look at them:

(1) It goes without saying that attention is paid to the question of autonomy. In christian faith, it is claimed, there is no place for absolute human autonomy. However, this does not mean that the opposite is true. In line with biblical thinking, human freedom and responsibility have their place, not only in normal life but especially in issues of life and death. Autonomy should be interpreted as responsibility before God and the neighbor and, as such, it does not stop when we are facing death.

(2) A second line of reasoning bears upon the function of the ten commandments in christian ethics, especially the commandment "thou shalt not kill." Being the expression of God's will, "to make and to keep human life human" (Paul Lehmann), it goes without saying that the commands have to be taken seriously by christians. But that is precisely why it would be strange to use this Divine commandment, in a situation of severe suffering, to uphold an inhuman situation. Then it is, so to say, turned upside down and becomes counterproductive. Jesus' way of dealing with the sabbath commandment²⁹ is used as a paradigm, as a hermeneutical key case. When He was attacked by the pharisees, because his disciples, hungry as they were, broke the sabbath commandment by picking corn ears, He replied that the law has been made for man and not the other way around. Thus, there can be situations in which it can be justifiable to break the law.

(3) Thirdly, attention is paid to the meaning of life and death in the light of christian faith.

²⁷ Some other relevant theological aspects in the context of the status of the human embryo have been left out of consideration here, such as:

* the link between procreation and covenant: human reproduction should reflect the covenant between God and mankind. Therefore, fertilization techniques and embryo research apart from parental love and responsibility are problematic.

* Careful thinking about the element of "naturalness" as a possible moral guideline.

²⁸ *Euthanasie en pastoraat*. Baarn: Boekencentrum, 1986.

²⁹ Cf. Mark 2,23ff. par.

There is no place for an idolization of life. The Bible is not concerned with “sanctity of life” as such, but rather with the protection of the lives of human beings. These human beings may find themselves in a situation of sheer torment and unbearable suffering, and that is certainly not what human beings are created for. Granted that God can ask us to “bear our cross” and to accept suffering, that does not mean that life should be seen as a lemon which has to be squeezed to the last drip. Human life is not to be reduced to mere biological or physiological aspects nor to the aspect of life-length, however important these aspects may well be. Death, in its turn, is put into the perspective of resurrection, which implies that it loses its “sting”.³⁰ In human life, meaningfulness and quality of life play an important role and are to be taken into account. To die in peace with God and man can be a way to glorify God: we show our belief in his trustworthiness.

(4) Last but not least, the place of nature in christian ethics. The task group emphasizes that natural processes, such as the natural course of a disease, cannot be put on a par with the will of God or with Divine providence. It is impossible to derive, unambiguously, from the course of events, what ought to be done. From a christian point of view, human beings are not supposed to be playthings of fate. They may, in the Spirit of Christ, make decisions as to how they want to cope with what happens in their lives.

Thus far the way of reasoning of *Euthanasia and the Pastorate*. It may serve as an example to show that, from a Calvinistic position, a “no unless” position can be defended, which means that the euthanasia is not to be replied by an absolute “no.” In a situation of unbearable suffering it can be a justifiable option.

Against the background of our reconstructivist account of Calvinist tradition, I would make the following concluding comments: in *Euthanasia and the Pastorate*, the theocentric perspective is not predominantly present, but more or less presupposed in what has been said about autonomy and Divine law. It may be read as a serious appeal to the personal responsibility of the members of the christian community: they should eventually decide, *coram Deo et proximis* and in the light of the Gospel, what ought to be done. Biblical thinking plays an important role, but there is no deductive reasoning from a deontological position. Divine law, in a sense, is interpreted teleologically, according to its fundamental aim “to make and to keep human life human.” In other words, in situations of unbearable suffering, “thou shalt not kill” is not kept at the expense of human dignity (although the problems in this context are certainly not denied!). Personally, I would agree to this line of moral reasoning.

³⁰

I Corinthians 15,55.