

Grace and Truth in Life and Death

BY TED HAMILTON

“For the law was given through Moses; Grace and truth were realized through Christ Jesus.” John 1:17 (NASB)

She’s pregnant with her first child. This long-anticipated, much-wanted baby was conceived following years of disappointment for her and her husband. Diagnostic studies at five months gestation reveal anencephaly, a devastating neurological malformation in which the fetal brain fails to form. The truth is, that in the unlikely event her baby survives to term, it will be profoundly disabled and not expected to live more than a few minutes or hours outside the womb. This mother, these parents, now face perhaps the most tragic, emotionally wrenching decision they will ever encounter. Do we carry on, in full knowledge of the inevitability of a fatal outcome at an uncertain time in the near future, or do we consider the possibility of terminating this pregnancy?

That’s the unvarnished truth.

Where is grace to be found?

The current Seventh-day Adventist Church Guidelines on Abortion, as noted in this issue of *Spectrum*, do not condone abortion for birth control, gender selection, or convenience. In keeping with this position, hospitals affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America do not perform elective abortions.

The Church’s Guidelines go on to acknowledge exceptional circumstances of moral and medical complexity, including a threat to the health or life of a pregnant woman, severe fetal anomalies, and pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. Such circumstances impose painfully difficult decisions deemed properly to be the province of a mother in consultation with trusted professionals. The remarkable balance evident in these Guidelines, developed by a duly appointed committee under the auspices of the General Conference, and with due regard for Adventist theology, bioethics, medical science, and life experience, has served Adventist health care institutions well over the past quarter century.

AdventHealth, a system of almost fifty hospitals located in nine states, is an expression of the health ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, operating in harmony with the Church’s Guidelines on Abortion. Each year, AdventHealth hospitals care for well over thirty thousand live births. Meticulous records reveal a total of twenty-five (plus or minus three) clinical terminations of pregnancy occurring annually across the company, comprising less than one in 1,000 (or less than one-tenth of 1 percent) of live births. The majority of these heart-breaking decisions and procedures are due to severe fetal anomalies, with a relative few due to life-threatening maternal conditions. Each prospective termination is subjected to review by a well-defined biomedical ethics process. The number of pregnancy terminations, along with the documented reason for each termination, is reported annually to the AdventHealth Board of Directors, which is composed almost entirely of Adventist church leaders at union and conference levels of responsibility.

The truth is that we inhabit a failed, flawed world in which an enemy works tirelessly to destroy the image of the Creator in His beloved creation. But an opposite, and ultimately more powerful, redemptive truth is that we have the opportunity to demonstrate the mercy of our Creator to patients facing the most challenging of circumstances.

Where is grace then, if not in our hands, as we skillfully, compassionately, and prayerfully extend the healing grace of Jesus Christ through the care we provide to His children in need?



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