

APRIL 2010

Item 16-03: Touching lives on the way to GA

Along its journey from sessions through presbyteries and on to the 219th General Assembly, this overture is making a positive impact. If approved it will add John Calvin's words, "God pronounces that he adopts our infants as his children, before they are born" to the Directory for Worship (W-2.3008b).

It happened to be reading an email from a couple who had just lost a child to a disease in which the child, if born alive, lives for only a limited time." The speaker was Mark Riethmuller, Elder from Elfinwild Presbyterian Church, as he introduced 16-03 to the Pittsburgh Presbytery. He spoke of one of two experiences that helped convince him that, not only were John Calvin's words founded in Scripture, but they were also a meaningful addition to the Book of Order. "These parents knew this would happen," he added. "Their son, Colin, lived only a few hours." The parents wrote that they found comfort in the fact that "Colin has joined our other children as one of God's sweet angels." Riethmuller wondered at their use of the phrase, "other children" until his wife explained that they had had miscarriages. "These parents had several children. It just so happened that 2 were born and died as infants. The others never made it through birth. There is no question in the minds or hearts of these parents—as it says in the overture—*God had adopted their children as His children, before they were born.*" The second experience shaping Riethmuller's thinking as he considered this overture, came at a funeral.

[T]he priest, relying on Scripture, noted that the family could take comfort in the fact that God is with us all 'from concep-

tion to eternity.' Riethmuller concluded, "If we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, if we believe that God is with us in eternity, it is not much of a leap to conclude that God was with us—adopted all of us—before we were born."

Sadly, the overture was defeated in the Pittsburgh and

West Jersey Presbyteries. Where some found a renewed appreciation for God's presence throughout our lives, others could not see the potential for ministry in Calvin's words. Some feared that adding Calvin's words to the section on baptism would deny a woman's right to choose abortion. Others worried that it

would result in parent requests to baptize babies after death.

Other Presbyteries—Missouri Union and Western Colorado—embraced the addition of Calvin's words. Below and on the back The Rev.P.J. Southam & Elder, Tom Cheney, share their thoughts inspired by Item 16-03 (<http://pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=3013>).

How old will you be in heaven?

by P.J. Southam

Do you ever wonder what heaven will be like? Years ago I was teaching confirmation class, and there was a young lady named Meili in that class. Meili's father died about age 30, when Meili was still a little girl. She asked me this question: If she lived to be an old woman with gray hair and wrinkles, would she be older in heaven than her father was?

Isn't that an interesting question? It is the question of "What will heaven be like?" We know that when Jesus returns and brings the New Jerusalem down to earth and restores all creation, that we will be given new resurrection bodies. These bodies will not be subject to illness or disease or any kind of infirmity. They will live forever. What will we look like? Will we look like we did at the moment of our deaths with gray hair and wrinkles? I am not

sure that our bodies will be like they are at the moments of our deaths. Will we look like we did at 20 or 30? I am not sure, but I am sure that we will be able to recognize each other, and that Meili's dad will recognize Meili.

Here is where this question also comes into play. One night, as a chaplain, at Regions Hospital in Saint Paul, Minnesota, I was called to be with a family whose infant only lived for a few hours. Later that same night, I was called to be with a family whose full-term baby was still born. If you are a doctor, nurse, or pastor, perhaps you have had to be with a family at that moment. You know, as I do, how excruciatingly sorrowful that is for a mother and father and grandparents. You know, that there will be no watercolor portraits from that child to hang on the refrigerator. There will be no dandelion bouquets offered

up by chubby little hands.

There will be no baptism for the still-born child. There will be no opportunity for that child to hear parents and grandparents and Sunday School teachers tell them how much Jesus loves them. There will be no day when they stand in front of a congregation to declare their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They will have no opportunity to grow and become followers of Jesus Christ.

Yet, we believe that salvation is extended to these children. Presbyterians believe that children of believers are included in the covenant of grace, even before they are able to become followers of Jesus. That is one reason that we baptize infants. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people

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before they are able to respond in faith. Our friend John Calvin wrote that children of believers have a special place in the heart of God.

As I was sitting just inches from those grieving families, as they held their dead child in their arms, I could tell them with all belief that as they were holding that child, Jesus was also holding that child in his arms. I gave that same assurance to another mother several years later. Her child had been still-born a few years prior, and she was still working through that sorrow. God's grace was also for that child. Someday, those mothers will see their children again. Will those children be in-

fant in the New Jerusalem? Will they be toddlers or someone age 20 or 30? I am not sure, but I am sure that mother will be able to recognize child, and child recognize mother. There will be a place in God's Kingdom for those children, not because those children were ever followers of Jesus, but because the grace of God included them.

It is vitally important that we believe it is the grace of God that saves those infants. We can look at any little child and say, "How cute. How innocent. How pure." Those still-born infants didn't commit any horrible sins. But we believe in the teaching of original sin. We believe that we have all inherited the

sin of Adam and that we cannot save ourselves. We need a savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. Those children who were still-born also need a savior, and we believe our Savior's grace avails for them. If they are saved it is because of God's grace and not their own innocence, for there is none righteous, no not one.

That is how it is for all of us. We are called before we are followers of Jesus. We are saved before we respond to that salvation—before we are able to respond. We were saved when Jesus died on the cross. We were chosen by God even before the foundations of the world, before there was a planet earth or stars in the sky. God has elected us

to be part of his family and his kingdom. God made the decision for us because we were totally dead in our sin and cannot save ourselves. It is God who saves us. That is nothing for us to be proud about and nothing for us to take for granted. We cannot brag in ourselves. We can only brag in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Item 16-03, will reinforce our understanding of God's claim upon our lives and the lives of pre-born children, and will offer reassurance to families at times of grief and loss over children. I believe this overture deserves careful consideration.

The Rev. P.J. Southam is the Pastor of Big Creek Presbyterian Church Hannibal, MO.

Emily's Story

by Tom Cheney

.....Emily was being protected even before she was born.....

Emily is our 5th daughter. Her birth certificate reads that she was born to Tom and Beth Cheney in Denver, Colorado, on Aug. 22, 1986. However, neither Tom nor Beth were in Denver on that date. In fact we didn't even know Emily at that time. (However, she had already been adopted by our God, as we were later to know and appreciate!) We were not acquainted with her until about 2 years and three months later when the local Department of Social Services called and requested that we provide a 2 year old child with a temporary home for a couple of weeks.

Emily's mother became pregnant at her 16th birthday party. She remembered being with several of her friends for this event. The party was unsupervised and alcohol was being consumed. She woke up the next day pregnant with Emily. Emily's birth father was and remained only a "sperm-donor".

Emily's mother looked into having an abortion early in her pregnancy before telling her

own mother of her condition. When told that the abortion would cost \$200.00 which she did not have, she abandoned the idea of an abortion. I thank God to this day for His saving grace! Emily was being protected even before she was born. Later in her pregnancy, Emily's birth mother moved to the Denver area, where she carried Emily to term and gave birth to her in a Denver hospital.

When Emily was about one and a half, her mother fell asleep at the wheel somewhere in Utah and a terrible accident ensued. The car was a total wreck, but when the police arrived and were able to reach Emily, they were amazed that she did not have a scratch on her! Our Lord had intervened again to protect His little one!

Our Lord saw to it that Emily was placed in a Christian home when her birth mother could not protect her from ongoing abuse. This is another act of grace on His part.

After about 3 years of continual attempts to return Em-

ily to her birth-mother, Social Services decided to commence legal proceedings to terminate the parental rights of Emily's birth parents. Beth and I had become very attached to Emily and we notified the Court of our intent to adopt her. The termination proceeding became hotly contested and a hearing before the District Court Judge was conducted during which Emily's birth mother unexpectedly declared that she was tired of acting in her own interest and wanted to do something which was best for Emily. She declared her intent in open court to designate Beth and I as Emily's adoptive parents, and thereby voluntarily relinquished her parental rights. Our Lord had again intervened by changing the heart of Emily's birth mother!

Emily finally became our child by adoption when she was 6 years old.

Emily wished to be baptized by the associate pastor of our church shortly after our adoption. When the mode of baptism was discussed with her,

she remarked, "I'd rather be dribbled than dunked." She was now an official "child of the Church." Emily attended the communicant's class and became a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Montrose at age 13. She made a public declaration of her personal faith in Jesus Christ at this time!

Emily is an adult now; she has graduated from College; her chosen life's work is to work with children in early education. When I read the proposed Overture, "On baptism and the adoption of our children," I immediately "connected the dots" as it became clear to me: this is exactly what our Lord did for Emily before she was born. This Overture speaks TRUTH and should become a part of our Book of Order. I enthusiastically recommended it to our Session; they unanimously approved it. The Presbytery of Western Colorado approved it by a clear majority. I pray that the General Assembly will approve it this coming July.

Tom Cheney is an Elder from First Presbyterian in Montrose, CO.