

Perspectives



Choose Life!

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW, FILM CRITICS GENE SISKEL AND ROGER EBERT REHEARSED their long-standing fight about the merits (or lack thereof) of the movie *Thelma and Louise*. Let me cast the deciding vote: it was a bad film. Forget the arguments about whether it is a women's movie or whether its characters get judged more harshly for their adolescent irresponsibility and violence than male characters would be in a similar road flick. It is a bad film because it celebrates death. Unlike the Greek comedies that drive people into the most dreadful crises only to save them by the cheap appearance of a *deus ex machina*, *Thelma and Louise* drives its characters into a seemingly unsolvable dilemma and then "saves" them by the cheap trick of driving them off the edge of the Grand Canyon. We were spared the final scenes, of course, of the pain of the landing, of the twisted wreckage and mangled bodies at the bottom, of the perhaps lingering death of the characters and the certainly lingering nightmares of the rescue workers, of the blood dripping off the rocks, of the weeping of families and friends, and, yes, of the tears of God. None of that would have fit the moral, namely, that death is the solution to life. It's an awful movie with an awful moral.

But there's a lot of that moral going around, whether in quick and easy Kevorkianism, the drug culture, the epidemic of teenagers' "romantic" flirtations with suicide, the American gun cult, the resort to terrorism, the glorification of war, or some of the ideological rhetoric about a "right" to abortion. Death is the solution to life.

Except that it's not. All death does is kill. True, there may be extreme times in which death is a blessed release for suffering ones prepared, with Christ at their side, to enter the embrace of the Almighty; also true, life calls forth tragic and terrible life-and-death choices—but that's hardly what our contemporary death culture is about. For it, death is neither the giving up of self in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection nor the final battle with the Evil One nor the tragic preference for the more life-giving of two bad choices; it is just the end, just escape, just a way out, just nothing at all. Ours is a culture that can celebrate meaningless death, but cannot bear to look at its consequences—neither the distorted bodies produced by the violence of death nor the distorted society produced by the discounting of life.

The Old Testament saw something profound when it cried out to God that "Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness" (Isa 38:18). Death separated even from God. Death was forever. Death, after Genesis 3, was the antithesis of creation, of that

which God had pronounced “good.” To be sure, biblical theology finally proclaims a God who overcomes death, but getting there was no easy matter. It required God’s own entrance into the world of death, and ultimately the death of God’s own Son. It required God’s being willing to say, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (Isa 43:2). Thelma and Louise wanted no one with them—not the forgiveness of their families, not the love of their friends, not the supporting systems of the created order that might have offered them aid, not even God. Who needs entanglements? Thelma and Louise wanted to be free. So they killed one another and they killed life itself. Some freedom.

The movie’s great appeal tells us something about the profoundly anarchic and nihilistic spirit of our day. It reminds us of both the extreme need and extreme difficulty of preaching a gospel of life in a way that this culture can hear as good news. But this is our task: to be able to speak to the Thelmas and Louises of a life that is more exciting than death, of finding self by loving the other, of accepting forgiveness when there is no way out, of the ability to imagine something other than either the pain or the pleasure of the moment, of hope for tomorrow and for another tomorrow after that, of faith in a God who promises a future. The articles in this issue describe a world of incredible threats and choices, choices about life and death that we are ill prepared to make. But one thing is clear: if we imbibe too fully or embrace too easily the present culture of death and despair, we will be useless in our pastoral care of people facing such bewildering choice. It is a time that calls for bold and robust faith in the God of the Bible, the God of creation, the God who comes to us in his Son Jesus Christ and gives us genuine freedom—not the freedom to die meaninglessly but the freedom to live courageously. Without the humane concern for the other that comes with biblical faith, without the discernment that comes from the wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord, without the forgiveness given through the grace of Christ, life in the face of bewildering choice and gathering threat may seem as unimaginable for us (and for others) as it did for Thelma and Louise. But biblical faith is available, wisdom comes, the grace of God is real, Christ is truly present. Deuteronomy’s imperative becomes possible: Choose life! (Deut 30:19). Our job is to proclaim that word.

Martin Luther reminds us of the same thing in his 1534 sermon on the Baptism of Jesus. The water of baptism is “the bath water of Christ...a precious ointment and medication...the genuine Aquavit...because it has divine power, the power to break sin and death.” Such a notion is altogether fitting for the theme of this issue, “The Edges of Life.” We offer this sermon, the first of a series of four by Luther that have not previously been published in English, as a way to observe the “Luther year” of 1996, the 450th anniversary of the death of the German reformer.

The 1995-96 *Word & World* lecturer, *Ted F. Peters*, presents us with some of the ethical issues raised by the dizzying array of new choices available to those contemplating making babies in our culture. His careful middle-ground position, neither embracing the new technologies without question nor dismissing them out of hand, will be helpfully instructive to those counseling people facing such choices.

Three articles speak of pastoral care in times of life and death. *H. Frederick Reisz, Jr.*, addresses pastors with both theological insights and practical advice on ministry at the time of death. There are no “right” things to do, he argues, other than modelling and proclaiming the presence of Christ.

Adele Stiles Resmer looks squarely at the reality of assisted suicide and the desperation and pain that suggest it. But she also looks squarely at the cross as the source of a theology strong enough to encounter such pain.

Kathleen Lull Seaton writes of the reality of early pregnancy loss with the credibility of one who has been there. Her clear and candid reflection on the event will enable readers to share her experience and thus minister more effectively to others who share her loss.

Two essayists provide a different perspective on our theme. In a striking first-person account, physician *Susan M. Vitalis* reminds us that the life-and-death issues of American culture, troubling as they are, need to be seen in the context of a world where, for billions, survival is an everyday concern. Her stories may break our veneer and open our eyes to a new way of seeing.

In his insightful exposition of the ecumenical significance of the papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, *Paul J. Wojda* invites readers to the best kind of ecumenical dialogue: one that is informed, civil, and profoundly concerned with the church’s evangelical witness.

Finally, within the theme, *Robert Holyer’s* critical analysis of the 1991 ELCA statement on capital punishment raises theological and methodological considerations for thinking about this issue that make his essay a valuable resource for Christians of any tradition who are concerned to speak responsibly on this matter of life and death.

The Resources section begins with *Charles Bruning* and *Timothy C. Geoffrion* speaking Face to Face on the Promise Keepers phenomenon.

Outside the theme, *James K. Bruckner* compares proposals for doing biblical theology by Ernst Käsemann and Peter Stuhlmacher. Bruckner recognizes that such hermeneutical proposals are anything but merely theoretical, that they have direct consequence for the proclamation of the gospel and the nature of Christian faith itself.

The last feature article returns to the interest in Martin Luther with which this issue begins. *William R. Russell* argues that *The Schmalkald Articles*, though often neglected in Luther studies, can provide a useful key to the reformer’s thought.

To close the issue, *Gracia Grindal* presents a Texts in Context study of the Series A Gospel lessons for Lent. In the process, she introduces us to one of her own hymns based on the raising of Lazarus (John 11).

F.J.G.