

THE CREED: Chapter III

Christian Practice

127. CHAPTER III – CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

127.1. The purpose of this section is to provide members of the Evangelical Congregational churches with positive guidance for Christian living and to warn them against actions and attitudes that detract from Christian character and service. Every effort has been made to support these admonitions by the teachings of Scripture. Of course, they are not intended to replace the biblical ethic, nor are they intended to provide an exhaustive statement of the will of God for His people. They are set forth to call attention to important spiritual and moral issues of the day, and it must not be presumed that any and all practices not specifically addressed here are necessarily sanctioned by the denomination.

128. INTRODUCTION

128.1. The theology of the Evangelical Congregational Church, as set forth in the Articles of Faith, is oriented to the practice of Christian faith. There is always an integral connection between the church's theology and its ethics. Beliefs shape lifestyle, either to produce good fruit or to bring forth evil fruit.

128.2. A major thrust of the Scriptural principles enumerated by the Articles of Faith is Christian living, a consequence of our salvation. As Paul suggests, faith is always active in love (Galatians 5:6). The believer trusts in Christ and is saved by acceptance of God's gift. Faith not only saves (brings forgiveness and regeneration) but faith works. It nurtures love toward God and neighbor. Loving God means doing all that the relation of love requires. This includes devotion to God, prayer, study of the Scriptures, witness to our faith, and abstention from practices that reflect love for the world more than love for God. Loving our neighbors involves sharing what we have to give, feeding the hungry, providing services for the aged, and working toward the elimination of the injustices in society.

129. SPIRITUAL STANDARDS

129.1. Personal Devotional Life

129.1.1. The Bible commands every believer to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Especially helpful in this process is faithfulness in prayer, in Bible study, in the Christian walk, in observance of the Lord's Day, in the stewardship of life and substance, and in anticipation of the return of Christ.

129.2. Prayer

129.2.1. Our blessed Lord taught His disciples that they "should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). He also gave them a brief and comprehensive model, embodying the elements of true prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). In like manner, the Apostle Paul admonishes Christians to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

129.2.2. Prayer is not to be regarded simply as a Christian duty, but always as the blessed privilege of every sincere believer (Matthew 7:7-11).

129.2.3. The Scriptures teach us that all matters and concerns of ours are proper subjects of prayer (Exodus 15:24; 1 Samuel 1:27; Matthew 6:13; Luke 1:13; Acts 4:29; 1 Timothy 2:2-3).

129.2.4. To be effectual, prayer must be offered in faith (Mark 11:24; Hebrews 11:6; James 1:6) and should include elements of adoration, confession, contrition, supplication, intercession, and thanksgiving.

129.2.5. Prayer should be offered in the name of Christ (John 14:13) and should be marked by complete surrender to the will of God so that with Christ we may say, "not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

129.2.6. Let every member of our church, therefore, respond faithfully to the duty

and privilege of prayer, remembering that the Holy Spirit ever stands ready to aid us in prayer (Romans 8:26).

129.3. Bible Study

- 129.3.1. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, infallible Word of God given to show us, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, our sinful condition before God. It likewise shows us the way of salvation and provides the instruction we need to develop spiritually and to walk acceptably before God in the new path of faith (2 Timothy 3:16). Therefore:
- 129.3.2. Read the Bible daily. The Bereans were wise as well as “noble” in that they “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).
- 129.3.3. Read the Bible prayerfully. “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Psalms 119:18).
- 129.3.4. Memorize Scripture. The Apostle Paul said, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). This is necessary for our own guidance (Psalms 119:11) as well as for our equipment for Christian service (2 Timothy 3:17).
- 129.3.5. Develop a systematic method of study, utilizing resources such as study guides, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries.
- 129.3.6. For mutual edification, study the Bible with other believers in Sunday school, midweek services, and home Bible study groups.

129.4. Christian Walk

- 129.4.1. Steadfastness in prayer and Bible study should lead to loving God with all the mind and heart and patterning our lives after Christ. This will manifest itself in a life of purity and well-doing, which is approved of God and beneficial to humanity. Evidences of the devoted life include:
- 129.4.2. Seeking to show compassionate concern for the unsaved, pressing upon them the claims of the gospel, inviting them to the services of God’s house, and acquainting them with His people.
- 129.4.3. Cultivating a spirit of sympathy, helpfulness, and mercy toward the neglected and suffering by feeding the hungry, clothing the destitute, giving shelter to the homeless, and visiting the sick, the lonely and the imprisoned, according to the opportunity and ability that God gives (Luke 4:18; Matthew 25:35-40; Isaiah 61:1).
- 129.4.4. Helping those who are of the household of faith, loving, forbearing, and forgiving them as brethren (Galatians 6:10; Colossians 3:13).
- 129.4.5. Seeking to promote peace, goodwill, and justice among all people (Proverbs 29:7, Matthew 5:6, Romans 12:18).
- 129.4.6. Speaking the truth in love and nothing but the truth (Ephesians 4:15).
- 129.4.7. Exercising the Christian profession with a life of faith, virtue, knowledge, patience, self-control, godliness, modesty, honesty, and love (Galatians 5:22-23) in all circumstances and conditions of life so that the gospel is not hindered.

129.5. Observing the Lord’s Day

- 129.5.1. “After God finished His work of creation, He rested on the seventh day” (Genesis 2:2). Reflecting this pattern of creation, one day of the week was divinely ordained for man’s benefit as a day of rest. (Exodus 20:8-10; 31:15; 34:21; Mark 2:27).
- 129.5.2. This day, blessed of God, was to be kept holy. In Old Testament times this Sabbath Day (the seventh day of the week) was strictly observed by the faithful.
- 129.5.3. Since the Resurrection of Christ took place on the first day of the week, we regard Sunday as the day to be observed as the Christian’s day of rest and worship, in joyful celebration of Christ’s Resurrection. In this we follow the early

disciples' observance of the first day of the week (John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10).

129.5.4. Sunday is therefore to be observed appropriately insofar as possible by our members, through rest from the normal pursuits of labor and cultivation of corporate worship, private devotion, fellowship with one's family and brothers and sisters in Christ, and engaging in deeds that bring praise to the name of our Lord. In those situations in which employment obligations require work on Sunday, Christians are strongly encouraged to set aside another day to observe in a similar manner inasmuch as possible.

129.6. Stewardship of Life and Substance

129.6.1. God, the maker and owner of all things has given to us all that we have and are in life (Genesis 1:1; 1:26; Psalms 24:1; 50:10; Haggai 2:8). Therefore, the Bible repeatedly calls us to responsible stewardship (Matthew 25:14-15; Luke 19:13; 1 Corinthians 4:2; Romans 14:12; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 1 Timothy 1:11). We are required to be good stewards of everything our bodies, our time, our talents, our money, our possessions, the gospel message, and the very earth on which we live. All things are to be held in sacred trust for God and are to be used in a manner that will bring glory to Him.

129.6.2. Accordingly, the sacredness of life is to be upheld; time, talents, and possessions are to be used wisely in the service of God and mankind; the gospel message is to be constantly proclaimed; and natural resources are to be utilized carefully. Money should be used to advance that which is good rather than squandered on selfish delights and activities that do not glorify God.

129.6.3. One helpful expression of our stewardship response to God, along with the giving of ourselves first to Him (2 Corinthians 8:5), lies in the practice of tithing: voluntarily, cheerfully, and systematically giving at least one-tenth of our income to our Lord through His church (1 Corinthians 16:2). Such funds are then to be used in support of the institutions of the church, the spread of the gospel, and the alleviation of the distressed.

129.6.4. The gift of human life is an embodied life; as believers, Christians are those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells (Genesis 2:7; 1 Corinthians 6:12-19). Therefore, we are required to care for our bodies in order to be used more effectively in the work of the kingdom of God (Romans 6:11-14). This means that physical exercise, restraint in eating, regular wellness checks, and due attention to injury and illness should be considered important aspects of our Christian stewardship.

129.7. Anticipating the Return of Christ

129.7.1. One of the greatest incentives for holy living and faithful Christian service is belief in the personal and certain return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory (John 14:3; 1 John 3:2-3). As individual believers and as a church we affirm our faith in the promise given when Jesus ascended to the Father that He would return in the same way as the disciples had seen Him go (Acts 1:11). This truth should be proclaimed by our pastors and teachers.

129.8. Family Devotional Life

129.8.1. The family is a divine institution (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:31) wherein husbands and wives are to grow in their loving relationship to one another and to God (Ephesians 5:25-33), and where children are to be reared in the Word of God and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1-4). Parents, especially fathers, have God-given roles as leaders in the matter of the family devotional life (Genesis 18:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 1:2-28; Ephesians 6:4; 2 Timothy 1:5).

129.8.2. The children, a sacred trust from God, are to learn of God and Christ from their parents through their godly example and through the biblical truth that they teach and practice in the home. Such instruction will encourage personal commitment to Christ and the fashioning of Christian lifestyle for all members of the family.

129.8.3. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 is a classic biblical example of how a home should function according to God's pattern. God said, "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

129.8.4. A proper devotional atmosphere in the home brought about by the daily participation of each member in private and corporate prayer, Scripture reading, and worship will produce an abiding influence upon each family member (Proverbs 22:6). The reading of Christian books and periodicals will likewise aid in the enrichment of the family devotional life. In such a spiritual climate all things will be done for the glory of God, and the awareness of His presence will beautify the home.

129.9. Corporate Devotional Life

129.9.1. Every believer in Christ should involve himself or herself in the life and service of the local church. Every believer is a member of the body of Christ and all members are needed for the proper functioning of that body. Each one of us has been given at least one gift or talent wherewith to edify another (Ephesians 4:11-16; Romans 12:4, 6; 1 Corinthians 12).

129.9.2. As a believer, you are called to invest your life in service for Christ and His church, express your love for Christ by being faithful in attendance at the services of the church (Hebrews 10:25), by receiving the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, by using God-given gifts to the fullest extent for His glory, and by combining your talents and abilities with those of other believers as you assume a responsible share in the work of spreading the gospel message both at home and abroad.

129.10. Thought Life

129.10.1. Scripture alerts us to "pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" and exhorts us to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Hence, we must not only pattern our actions after Christ; we must guard our thoughts and beliefs as well.

129.10.2. We call all our members to guard against humanism and the many varieties of "spiritual" teachings that are not "after Christ." Remembering that Satan seeks to deceive even the most faithful of believers (1 Peter 5:8-9; 1 Timothy 4:1), it is important to develop a biblically informed discernment to detect non-biblical influences wherever they appear.

129.10.3. For evangelical Christians, the Bible, God's infallible Word, is the sole authority for our faith and practice. Jesus Christ is the only Savior (Acts 4:12) and faith in Him is the only Way to Heaven. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The Apostle exhorts us that "no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Those who receive Christ by faith are children of God (John 1:12); they have been "rescued...from the dominion of darkness and brought...into the kingdom of the Son" (Colossians 1:13); they have been called "out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

129.10.4. Holding these biblical teachings, we caution our members against involvement with practices, organizations or movements that advocate or suggest

otherwise.

129.10.5. We encourage our members, as they have opportunity, “to do good to all people” (Galatians 6:10) and to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:12-16). This may involve activity in civic affairs; local, state, and national politics; and organizations concerned with drug abuse, environmental pollution, poverty, prisons, world hunger, world peace, and other humanitarian causes (see sec. 131 Social Standards). But in carrying out these biblical mandates, we must be careful to be in the world but “not of the world” (John 17:15-16). Today, perhaps more than ever, we must be alert to subtle teachings and influences not in harmony with the “truth as it is in Christ,” which appears in many places under various guises.

130. MORAL STANDARDS

130.1. Personal and Family

130.1.1. Temperance

130.1.2. Moderation

130.1.2.1. The Bible sees self-control and other Christian qualities that please God, not as human attainments but as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). As one aspect of the Spirit’s fruit, self-control needs to be supplemented by other more positive Christian qualities such as faith and love. It requires divine wisdom (2 Peter 1:6) and soundness of mind (Titus 2:2) to refuse to yield to the baser desires of the flesh and mind and to guard against excessive indulgence in things not evil themselves, such as food, clothing, recreation, and personal possessions. The Scriptures speak out against such excess, especially when practiced at the expense of the poor (Amos 4:1; 6:4-7).

130.1.2.2. It is especially fitting to emphasize self-control in an age that extols pleasure as the goal of life and urges instant gratification of desire as the guiding principle of daily living. Even Christians need to be on guard lest the greed of self-centeredness of our world subtly invade our thoughts and deter us from love for God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37), which involves self-control in all things (1 Corinthians 9:25).

130.1.3. Abstinence

130.1.3.1. At times self-control may require abstinence from or renunciation of certain activities or things even though they are not evil in themselves.

130.1.3.2. In practicing or advocating abstinence, however, we must be aware of biblical warnings against false asceticism arising from the unscriptural idea that physical things are evil in themselves and therefore need to be avoided by godly persons. We must remember that God created the physical world for mankind to enjoy and that the Bible condemns those who would forbid marrying, eating of meat, or the touching, tasting, and handling of material things (Colossians 2:20-25; 1 Timothy 4:1-3).

130.1.3.3. It may, however, be advisable for an individual Christian to abstain from an activity or thing that particularly tempts him to overindulgence – even though it may be good in itself and may be enjoyed by other Christians with no ill effect. Christians may also be called upon to refrain from legitimate activities or things if these tempt a weaker brother to do something his conscience considers wrong (1 Corinthians 8:13).

130.1.3.4. Every Christian is, of course, always commanded to abstain from practices clearly contrary to the will of God. Among these are fleshly lusts (1 Peter 2:11), immorality and covetousness (Colossians 3:5), idols (Acts 15:2, 29), drunkenness (Galatians 5:21), and every other kind of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). As a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), the

Christian is obligated to glorify God in his body (1 Corinthians 6:20) and to present his body a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1).

130.1.4. Drug abuse

130.1.4.1. In the light of the above biblical principles, Christians ought to refrain from indulging in practices that harm the body or the use of which provides a poor example for others to follow. These include the use of mind-altering drugs, overdependence on prescription and over-the-counter drugs, smoking, and other personal use of tobacco.

130.1.5. Alcohol

130.1.5.1. The use of beverage alcohol is a serious drug problem facing our society.

130.1.5.2. In the light of this and the Bible's uniform condemnation of drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1; 23:30, 29-31; Isaiah 5:11; Habakkuk 2:15; 1 Corinthians 6:10) and the uncompromising call for the wise stewardship of life, we must seek by personal example, and appropriate legal means, to counteract the unrelenting industry, media, and peer pressures that seek to entice people to make beverage alcohol a part of daily life. Therefore, we encourage abstinence from the use of and traffic in beverage alcohol.

130.1.6. Food

130.1.6.1. Moderation is also required in the amounts and types of food one consumes. Bodily health is compromised in innumerable ways when self-control is not exercised, causing loss of time and productivity in one's labor, excessive drain of personal and family resources, and possible compromise of Christian witness (Proverbs 23:19-21).

130.1.7. Human Sexuality

130.1.7.1. God created humanity male and female (Genesis 1:27). A man and a woman, biological gender determined at birth, who seal the bond of mutual love through Christian marriage are to live for each other as set forth in Holy Scripture (Ephesians 5:21-23). Within this marriage relationship, and only within it, is human sexuality to be expressed in sexual union.

130.1.8. Marriage

130.1.8.1. The Biblical Ideal

130.1.8.1.1. The Bible conceives of marriage as a lifelong, monogamous commitment between a man and a woman. The two, man and woman, become one in the marriage bond (Genesis 2:24). The institution of marriage, ordained of God (Genesis 2:24), has been reaffirmed by Jesus (Matthew 19:5) and Paul (Ephesians 5:31). Our Lord Jesus further declared this union to be indissoluble when he said, "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6). This marriage covenant is morally binding so long as both shall live (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39) and may not be dissolved at will.

130.1.8.1.2. Since the strength of any society is based upon a firm family foundation, and a strong family is based upon total commitment of husband and wife, we strongly urge that:

130.1.8.1.2.1. Appropriate instruction by precept and example in the sacredness of marriage be given to our children from the earliest ages, both at home and in the church;

130.1.8.1.2.2. Our pastors seek, by every means possible, to convey to their congregations the sacredness of Christian marriage;

130.1.8.1.2.3. Our pastors insist on adequate premarital counseling prior to solemnizing any marriage;

130.1.8.1.2.4. Every effort be made to ensure that persons entering into

marriage harbor no reservations with regard to lifelong commitment;

130.1.8.1.2.5. This step be taken only when it can be done in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39) and thus avoid being “yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14) in life’s most intimate relationship.

130.1.9. Family Planning

130.1.9.1. Procreation

130.1.9.1.1. In the beginning God breathed life into the man He created (Genesis 2:7). Since that day, all human life owes its existence to the breath of God. But God has given to humanity, His creation, the privilege of being a partner in the life-giving process. Hence, He told our progenitors to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28).

130.1.9.2. Responsible Parenthood

130.1.9.2.1. Children are a blessing from the Lord (Psalms 127:3-5), and every new life has a right to be loved and wanted. Therefore, we encourage responsible parenting. Every child has a full right to life, acceptance, and love.

130.1.10. Adoption

130.1.10.1. Adoption is a means by which children can live in homes of love and share in the joys of family life. Therefore, we support all proper means for the adoption of children and recognize this, rather than abortion, as a suitable solution to difficulties arising from unwanted pregnancies.

130.1.11. Divorce

130.1.11.1. Divorce is an admission of failure in human relationships that negates the biblical ideal of marriage. Jesus indicated that Moses permitted divorce only because of hardness of heart and that it was not intended in the beginning (Matthew 19:8).

130.1.11.2. When serious difficulties occur in a marriage, the couple involved should seek the counsel and guidance of the pastor or other respected persons within the Christian fellowship. If the distressed couple fails to seek help, loving, discreet biblical counsel and exhortation should nevertheless be offered in a spirit of helpfulness and humility (Galatians 6:1) in an effort to restore harmony. Counsel that would make dissolution of the marriage bond an easy solution, even to difficult problems, should be rejected. If actual separation takes place, every possible effort should be continued to resolve difficulties and effect lasting reconciliation.

130.1.11.3. When failures do occur in this less-than-perfect world, we encourage compassion and concern for all persons involved. God’s love extends to all, even to those who have failed to live up to His standards. Therefore, every separated or divorced person has a right to be loved in Christ Jesus. Like any other penitent sinner, he or she should be granted the privilege of church membership and full participation in the life of the church.

130.1.11.4. Extreme caution must be exercised by our pastors in solemnizing a marriage in which either party has been divorced. Clear evidence of biblical grounds should be present (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:39), and adequate counseling should be given to guard against the recurrence of a broken relationship. As long as reconciliation with the previous spouse is a viable option, marriage to another person should not be considered.

130.1.12. Adultery

130.1.12.1. Marriage is a lifelong commitment to a mate of the opposite sex “so long

as...both shall live.” The two have become one flesh (Genesis 2:24), and therefore intimate sharing of the body is reserved exclusively for the marriage partner (1 Corinthians 7:3-4).

130.1.13. Premarital Sex

130.1.13.1. We oppose all forms of sexual activity outside of the biblical understanding of lifelong monogamous marriage. The premarital performance of the sex act at any time is to engage in fornication and can be looked at only as sin (Galatians 5:19).

130.1.14. Homosexuality

130.1.14.1. Homosexuality was the sin of Sodom for which that city was destroyed (Genesis 19) and is uniformly seen as a perversion of sex in the New Testament (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9, Colossians 3:5). Therefore, a homosexual relationship is not acceptable as an alternative lifestyle, and any homosexual act, even between consenting adults, is a violation of the biblical ethic.

130.1.14.2. Consistent with our understanding of human sexuality and marriage as articulated in Sections 130.1.7 ff. of the *Discipline*, persons holding ministerial credentials in the Evangelical Congregational Church are prohibited from performing any rite or ceremony, as well as from signing any documents pursuant to the sanctioning or solemnizing of same-sex unions or same-sex marriages or any union or marriage other than that between one man and one woman, nor may they recognize these unions as solemnized by other jurisdictions.

130.1.14.3. Whereas the Bible clearly teaches homosexuality to be sin, the Evangelical Congregational Church will not ordain nor accept into its ministry ranks those who identify themselves as homosexuals, whether practicing or non-practicing.

130.1.15. Temptation

130.1.15.1. Temptation is the common lot of mankind (1 Corinthians 10:13), and even our Lord was tempted (Matthew 4:1-10). Therefore, temptation to sin does not itself involve transgression of the law of God. However, realizing the power of the tempter (1 Peter 5:8) and recalling Jesus’ warnings against murder and adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:22, 28), we should seek to avoid situations that entice us to inner feelings of lust or outward acts of homosexuality, fornication, or adultery. While such attitudes and acts are sinful, we recognize our obligation to extend the love of Christ to persons caught in such circumstances and affirm our duty to minister to them as redeemable human beings.

130.1.16. Abortion

130.1.16.1. The moral issue of abortion is more than a question of the freedom of a woman to control the reproductive functions of her own body. It is a question of those circumstances under which a human being may be permitted to take the life of another.

130.1.16.2. Since life is a gift of God, neither the life of an unborn child nor the life of the mother may be lightly taken. The value of life prior to birth is seen throughout the Scriptures (Psalms 139:13-16; 51:5; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:41-44). Divine blessing is conferred upon an unborn infant (Luke 1:42, “Blessed is the child you will bear!”). The strife-filled lives of Jacob and Esau are shown already in process prior to birth (Genesis 25:22-23).

130.1.16.3. It is neither right nor proper to terminate a pregnancy solely on the basis of personal convenience or sociological considerations. Abortion on

demand for social adjustment or to solve economic problems is morally wrong. On those rare occasions when abortion may seem morally justified, the decision should be made only after there has been thorough and sensitive religious, medical, and psychological consultation and counseling.

130.1.17. The Single Life

130.1.17.1. We affirm the dignity and acceptability of the single life. While the married state is good, and family life necessary for the continuation of human life, not all persons may be led into this shared relationship. Our Lord Himself did not enter the married relationship, and Paul wrote, "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am" (1 Corinthians 7:8). Paul also suggests that for those who are able, the unmarried state might allow one to serve God better (1 Corinthians 7:32-38).

130.1.18. Death and Dying

130.1.18.1. God, and God alone, has the right to determine the moment of death (Job 1:21). Therefore, we oppose any effort to terminate innocent life outside of the natural processes, whether it be with malice aforethought (murder, suicide) or from misdirected "kindness" (euthanasia). We also caution against the overuse of modern technological methods that unnecessarily prolong life and thereby deny the person the right to die with dignity.

131. SOCIAL STANDARDS

131.1. Introduction

131.1.1. The proper social involvement of Christians must be considered carefully. On the one hand we must not attempt to coerce, by force of law, unbelievers to confess Christ (1 Corinthians 12:3), to engage in pious activity, or to refrain from all personal sins condemned by Scripture.

131.1.2. This does not mean, however, that it is impossible or unwise to legislate or otherwise influence public or social morality. We must not be deterred from such efforts by those who accuse Christians of imposing their own moral standards upon other people. It must be remembered that all who seek to establish social codes of behavior, of necessity, do the same thing, since all laws reflect the ethical position of the person(s) seeking to enact or maintain them. In a free society, especially, Christians have the right as well as the obligation to influence the moral level of society.

131.1.3. On a personal level, this may be done through moral precept and example. On the social level, it may be done through legislation and political activity as well.

131.2. Government

131.2.1. Along with the family (Genesis 5:24-25) and the church (1 Timothy 3:15), God instituted human government. Grounded in the necessities of human nature, government is appointed to restrain evil, preserve order, and encourage just dealings among men (Romans 13:1-4). It is the duty, therefore, of all persons to be subject to the authority of the nation in which they reside (Romans 3:5) and to respect and honor the civil magistrates (1 Peter 2:17).

131.2.2. As a creation of God, however, the state's power is never absolute. It must not appropriate to itself those privileges and duties that belong to the individual, the family, or the church. When government neglects or abuses its divinely appointed responsibilities, the Christian, as a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:12), must speak out against or, if necessary, refuse to follow public policies that directly threaten the people of God, the family, or the basic rights of persons (Exodus 1:17; Acts 5:29) and be

willing to suffer the legal consequences thereof.

131.2.3. Godly men and women may, and ought to, hold political office and participate in civil government. Further, the church must be careful not to identify, consciously or unconsciously, any earthly nation – however just its precepts – with the Kingdom of God. Under the New Covenant the nation whose God is the Lord (Psalms 33:12) is the Church of Jesus Christ (Matthew 21:43; 1 Peter 2:9) with its member-citizens scattered throughout the nations of the world.

131.3. War and Peace

131.3.1. It is certain that Christians oppose war and desire to promote peace on earth (Matthew 5:9). Hence the church renounces the use of destructive weapons in defending herself, in extending her influence in the world, and in waging the spiritual battle against sin and Satan. It is true that God's Old Covenant people, living under divinely appointed civil rulers, were commanded upon occasion to take up the sword in defense of their borders and as agents of divine judgment upon sinful nations. But under the New Covenant the people of God are scattered among all nations, and final divine retribution has been reserved for the Last Day. The New Testament does, however, sanction the just use of force by the state in order to restrain evildoers within and aggressors from without. It would be inconsistent, then, to bar Christians from participating in these divinely appointed police and peacekeeping actions of the state.

131.3.2. This in no way implies support of repressive police measures or blanket approval of all military intervention. The threat of totally destructive nuclear war, the escalating arms race, and the increasing complexities of international affairs introduce profound ambiguities into the question of justifiable warfare. In the light of such considerations, some Christians may feel conscience-bound to refuse involvement in military service, which ordinarily implies a pledge to carry out unquestioningly all orders issued by the state or its representatives. Therefore, we acknowledge the right of the individual believer to apply for conscientious objector status. Whatever decision is made in this area, it must be remembered that God's commands always supersede those of all earthly authority and that no one can ultimately escape moral responsibility for his own actions.

131.4. Human Rights

131.4.1. It is only as bearers of the divine image (Genesis 1:26-27; James 3:9) that men and women possess "natural" or, preferably, God-given rights that animals and things do not have in the same sense or to the same degree (Matthew 10:31; Matthew 6:25). We believe all humans are created equal and that all should have equal rights. In addition to the direct statements of Scripture regarding the dignity of mankind, duties enjoined upon people, such as worship of God (Exodus 20:3-4), concern for the poor (Deuteronomy 15:11), and the prohibition of murder, lying, and stealing (Exodus 20:13-14, 16) imply corresponding rights to freedom of worship, life, truth, and property.

131.4.2. Since these rights derive directly from God, no state may deny them legitimately to its upright citizens. Government is rather under obligation, as a divine institution, to protect these rights. All rights, natural and civil, must apply equally to all law-abiding citizens residing within a nation and must not apply selectively.

131.4.3. In the light of the Bible's uniform teaching of the equality of all humans (Genesis 1:26-27, Luke 6:31, Acts 17:26, Galatians 3:28, Philemon, 1 John 4:21) and the uncompromising call for human flourishing (John 10:10), we must seek by personal example, and appropriate legal means, to counteract all forms of racism, ethnic bias and supremacy of any people group wherever we encounter it in our

churches, communities, and government. We commit ourselves to a compelling Christian faith and Christian action until equality of opportunity and responsibility are realized by all without regard to disability, ethnicity, or national origin.

131.5. Poverty and World Hunger

131.5.1. Although our primary concern is for the poor within the household of faith (Galatians 6:10), we must display charity and concern for all mankind as well. This includes the sharing of material abundance with the neighbor – understood as anyone in need (Luke 10:30-37). In our day, when the planet has indeed become a “global village,” our concern must extend to the malnourished and starving multitudes of other parts of the world as well as to the poor in our midst.

131.5.2. Concern for the poor must go beyond relief measures intended to alleviate acute suffering (Romans 15:25-27). We must also attempt to identify and deal with the underlying causes of poverty. When it results from laziness (2 Thessalonians 3:10) or lack of prudence (Proverbs 6:6) it is our duty to try to counteract such personal and social attitudes through education and economic assistance designed to enable persons to provide their own personal and family necessities.

131.5.3. When poverty is increased or sustained as a result of political and economic oppression by affluent nations or wealthy classes within a society (Jeremiah 22:3; Micah 2:2; James 2:6), we are obliged by love for the neighbor to speak out against economic and political injustice and to strive for a more equitable distribution of the earth’s ample, but limited, resources.

131.5.4. The enduring problems of poverty and hunger must never deter us from being God’s agents of hope nor prevent us from preaching the gospel, which can meet the economic and social as well as the spiritual needs of mankind.

131.6. Pornography

131.6.1. It is often difficult to define precisely what is pornographic or obscene. It is clear, however, that certain forms of communication distort and degrade human sexuality. These impose a harmful influence upon individuals, especially the young, upon the family, and upon society as a whole.

131.6.2. The production and use of obscene materials violate the biblical injunction against carnal lust (Galatians 5:16), falsify the place of sexuality in human relations, and transform persons made in God’s image into impersonal things to be used in gratifying sinful human passions and weaknesses.

131.6.3. The legalization of pornographic materials or of prostitution is unacceptable to the Christian since these activities necessarily involve the exploitation of persons – willingly or unwillingly – for degrading and dehumanizing purposes that border upon blasphemy against God Himself through the degradation of persons made in His image (James 3:9). Out of love for God and neighbor, then, the Christian has the right and obligation to oppose pornography in all its forms through available legal means.

131.6.4. It must be remembered, however, that obscenity goes beyond the area of the sexual. It includes violence and all acts and attitudes, including prejudice, that demean the worth of a fellow human. We must also guard against the less obvious but more pervasive and potentially more subversive influence of forms of communication that glorify, or portray as normal, situations, attitudes, and living arrangements that flout the biblical teaching regarding the sanctity of marriage and the family.

131.7. Gambling

131.7.1. Our opposition to gambling, which involves the transfer of something of value from one person to another on the basis of chance, rests upon the following:

- 131.7.2. There is a high risk of loss by the bettor of the amount wagered. This may reach catastrophic proportions when compulsive gambling is involved.
- 131.7.3. The payoff to the winner(s) comes from the amounts wagered by other bettors, many of whom can ill-afford the loss.
- 131.7.4. By promising the possibility of gaining wealth with no effort, gambling appeals to the human emotions of avarice and greed.
- 131.7.5. Engaging in this activity is inconsistent with the Christian way of life. It is a distortion of the normal and unavoidable risk-taking involved in daily life and in the realization of human potential. The biblical view of work (Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12), stewardship (1 Corinthians 6:20), love of neighbor (Galatians 5:13-14), and proper use of influence (2 Thessalonians 3:9) rules out participation in all forms of gambling including lotteries and other games of chance sanctioned by the state.
- 131.7.6. These evils that accompany gambling preclude its use as entertainment or as a proper way to support worthy causes.