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The Secret of the Heart and the Voice of the Machine

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Abstract. What do we expect from the Doppler machine? Participation? Compassion? Or mere emotional influence? Do we sacrifice Protestant responsibility on the altar of moralizing? The fetal heartbeat bill does not primarily ask what we think about abortion; it asks how we stand in relation to communio. The instrument makes the sign of life perceptible and audible. Yet when we expect from this experience an awakening of personal conviction, a turn of conscience, and responsible decision-making, we assign the instrument a role that goes beyond mediating the sign of life. What happens, in the meantime, to the heart's secret - in the biblical sense? And what happens to the community that ought to bear the risk of this decision-making process?

Keywords: Hungary's "heartbeat decree"; communio; communal responsibility; theological ethics; biblical anthropology; freedom of conscience; the Lord's Supper; the biblical understanding of the heart

The "Heartbeat Decree" and the Responsibility of Communio

The 29/2022. (IX. 12.) decree of the Ministry of the Interior—known in common parlance as the "heartbeat regulation/law"—modified the documentation required in connection with a request for termination of pregnancy. The medical report presented must record that the healthcare provider has, in an unambiguously identifiable manner, presented to the woman an indication of fetal life functions.[1] The text does not explicitly prescribe listening to the heartbeat, but public discourse has interpreted it as referring to the heart and hearing.

[1] 29/2022. (IX. 12.) BM rendelet, 1. melléklet, 2. pont. Nemzeti Jogszabálytár.

This study examines the heartbeat regulation from the perspective of the Christian community's responsibility. Its first question is what moral task we assign to the mandatory presentation of a bodily sign of life. First, the biblical interpretation of the heart makes the limits of this task clear. The study then asks, based on the ethics of responsibility of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Ferenc Szűcs, what taking responsibility means for a Christian, and what risks it entails—what the Christian community takes upon itself in a concrete situation of life. In Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, we seek the theological foundation for this communal commitment.

What does the Old Testament know and say about the heart?

In *The Anthropology of the Old Testament* Hans Walter Wolff notes that the heart is the anthropological concept used most often in the Old Testament. The word forms *lēb* and *lēbāb* appear even more often than *nepeš*—a total of 858 times—sometimes referring to God's heart, sometimes serving as a natural metaphor, but most often denoting the human heart.[2] What, then, does someone in the Old Testament know about the heart?

The Old Testament precisely identifies the heart's location within the human body: "*I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and I will tear open their chests*" (Hosea 13:8). It knows that the heart's functioning is essential to life: "*In the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became like a stone. And about ten days later the LORD struck Nabal, and he died*" (1 Samuel 25:37–38).[3] The Old Testament therefore understands that the beating of the heart signifies life.

Yet the way it understands the heart is far more layered. The heart is the seat of emotions, thought, will, and resolve. *The discerning heart seeks knowledge* (Proverbs 15:14); the wise heart increases learning (Proverbs 16:23). Solomon asks for a "discerning heart," so that he may distinguish good from evil (1 Kings 3:9). The heart is the centre of a conscious human being. The richness of this inner world is preserved in Christian tradition by the image of Pseudo-Macarius: the heart is a small vessel, yet it can contain abysses, wickedness, God, angels, and the treasures of grace. The place of spiritual struggle and of divine presence is the same: the heart.[4]

At the same time, the heart is hidden. According to Wolff, what remains constant in biblical testimony is that the heart is always regarded as an inaccessible, concealed organ within the body.[5] This hiddenness is something that also represents the human being's inner reality. The heart is, as it were, the substance of the person: in it comes to light who one truly is. In its fullness, only God knows it.

[2]Wolff, Hans Walter: *Az Ószövetség antropológiája.* Budapest: Harmat–Pápai Református Teológiai Akadémia, 2001, 62.

[3]Wolff: *Az Ószövetség antropológiája*, 63.

[4]Pszeudo-Makariosz: *Lelki homíliák*, XLIII.7.

[5]Wolff: *Az Ószövetség antropológiája*, 65.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine formulates this as the edge of human knowability. The eyes, ears, and mind of others have no access to that inner place where one is who one is. Indeed, even before ourselves we are not fully transparent; only the Eternal One knows us.[6] The heart's secret, therefore, is not merely information withheld from others; a person cannot fully know or possess even themselves.

In the Book of Proverbs, the heart's hiddenness appears in the image of the sea: "*Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin*" (Proverbs 30:18–19). The phrase "*high seas*" in the Hungarian translation is, in the Hebrew text, a natural metaphor: "the heart of the sea." Wolff contrasts the ship's path across the sea with coastal navigation: in the heart of the sea, the ship leaves behind the known and the safe.[7] Here the heart is the unknown depth, the place of mystery and risk—a path that, as human beings, we cannot fathom; a risk where familiar points of orientation no longer provide safety.

The risk of exposing the heart is made clear when Delilah presses Samson until *he has disclosed to her all that was in his heart* (Judges 16:15–17). By laying bare his heart, Samson fatally delivers himself into her hands.

Yet in the depths of the heart something may happen that remains hidden even from our own perception. According to Diadochos of Photike, from the event of baptism on the grace hidden in the depths of the intellect is first imperceptible even to the person. Its presence unfolds gradually in the spiritual life; when remembering God, from the depths of the heart awakens the longing for the Eternal One.[8] Interpreting the beatitude of the "pure in heart," Gregory of Nyssa speaks of the purification of the heart as the divine beauty shining forth in the human being, and the divine image becoming visible.[9]

We can see that we may determine the heart's bodily location and perceive its functioning. Even this is an infinitely intimate experience—consider how many people's heartbeat we have heard and how many have heard ours. Yet knowing the heart's bodily function grants no one power over the heart. "In Scripture, the heart above all means the centre of the consciously living human being, whose most important characteristic is that it is called to be a person of wisdom—and, within that, to hearing the word of God."[10]

The heart, then, is a mystery, set apart and sacred: the ultimate knower of its secret is the Eternal One. The instrumentally detectable functioning of the child's heart is a bodily sign of life. The heart in the biblical sense is the human being's inner centre; knowing it and its life-long formation cannot be derived from the perception of this bodily sign. The expectation surrounding the heartbeat regulation connects the two

[6] Augustinus: *Confessiones* (*Vallomások*), X.3.4; X.5.7.
[7] Wolff: *Az Ószövetség antropológiája*, 65.
[8] Photikéi Diadokhosz: *Száz fejezet a lelki ismeretről és megkülönböztetésről*, 77; 79.
[9] Nüsszai Gergely: *De beatitudinibus* (*A boldogmondásokról*), VI; *Patrologia Graeca* 44, 1272A–B.
[10] Wolff: *Az Ószövetség antropológiája*, 81.

meanings: from the detectable functioning of the child's heart, we hope for an inner change in the human being in question —the woman. We thus attach to the bodily sign a moral task that the sign itself cannot fulfil. The Doppler machine can make a sign of life perceptible, but it cannot take responsibility for something. Moreover, even this act of making something perceptible is questionable. What boundary do we cross when we make this intimate bodily experience an instrument of mandatory moral address? Does the question of sacrilege not arise when we place the heart's secret in the service of an expected decision?

The Doppler machine and Protestant responsibility

From the question of the abolishing of the heartbeat regulation, the discussion immediately turned into a debate about abortion. On the conservative side, arguments for retaining the regulation argue for the protection of fetal life; on the liberal side, feminist voices defending women's self-determination generally support its abolition. Both have their place. Yet both lines of argument can lead to the failure of communio insofar as they avert personal care and concern. Indeed, the failure may already begin here: by replacing real participation in another person's life with supporting an exclusively correct position.

Amid the loud defence of the heartbeat regulation, initiatives that would create the necessary conditions for taking concrete responsibility, such as seriously involving sociological, legal, and psychological knowledge; supporting the mother and father in crisis; congregations prepared for helping in everyday life issues; mothers' homes; and building a sustaining social network are less visible— though these were already emphasized by a 1991 statement of the Reformed Church.[11] There exists a clear demand for confrontation; it is less clear who will take responsibility for what happens in the lives of those affected.

Responsibility is evaded when defending the heartbeat law by presenting the expected sign is already regarded as a fulfilled moral task, while no further role is taken on in the affected person's life situation. The woman would thus have to make alone the decision which the community regards as the desired moral direction, while taking no part in the conditions associated with the decision and its consequences. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer rejects precisely this image of an isolated individual and a clear absolute moral standard presented to them. Neither does the isolated individual exist, he argues, nor is an absolute measure of the good-in-itself available to us.[12]

The absolute measure of the good-in-itself turns the good into a lifeless law: into Moloch, to whom every life and freedom is sacrificed. Obligation-in-itself is also lost, since what is missing from this metaphysical image is precisely a relation to real life.[13]

[11] Magyarországi Református Egyház: Állásfoglalás a magzati élet védelmében. 1992. május 5. Zsinati jegyzőkönyv, 108–109. o. Link (Letöltés: 2026. október 10.).

[12] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Etika.* Ford. Visky S. Béla. Kolozsvár: Exit Kiadó, 2015, 147.

[13] Uo., 147.

"The decision between good and evil, when imagined as being able to be seen with crystal clarity, excludes human knowledge from this process; thus it sees the ethical problem in the struggle between a knowledge that is constantly correctly oriented and a will that opposes it. In doing so, it misses the real decision, which means that the human being—including her knowledge and will—can, amid the manifold ambiguity of a given historical situation, only seek and find the good in the courage to act."[14]

The moral failure, then, consists in the fact that no actual encounter takes place with real life and with the other person. Instead, something alien, false, artificial, phantasmagorical, and tyrannical occurs—something that does not touch the human being at the depth of her being, does not transform her, and does not move her to decision-making.[15]

In *Theological Ethics*, discussing abortion, Ferenc Szűcs writes that "sinful human beings, in situations corrupted by sin, almost always choose between two evils."[16] Reformed ethics therefore approaches this borderline situation from the perspective of God's judgment and grace. Theoretical deliberation does not replace action: "Life, however, consists of practical decisions. Not making a difficult decision is also a decision, and fleeing from it can by no means be called moral."[17] The community must also take this upon itself when it shifts its own responsibility on the machine and the burden of the decision on the woman.

Szűcs regards a prophetic representation of the commandment "You shall not kill"—valid for every human being—to be the duty of the church. Yet this testimony does not grant the power to extort the answer of faith from others. "But we cannot stand one-sidedly on the side of the law. For we know that the love of and reverence for life cannot be achieved merely through stricter regulations."[18] The church cannot redeem its own communal responsibility by representing the commandment: "at these borderline situations of life, the Christian community must not leave the individual entirely to themselves."[19] Where life conflicts with life, the community too must take on the burden of the concrete situation. The prophetic word and responsibility undertaken for the other person cannot be divorced from each other.

For Bonhoeffer, responsibility belongs closely to the human calling, which extends beyond professional tasks to include personal relationships. Christian vocation is defined by Christ's calling address; fulfilling our vocation is thus an expression of responsibility toward Christ, which binds us to other people and to community.[20]

The individual Christian cannot evade this responsibility; neither by overemphasizing human sovereignty, nor by making an idol of enforcing the law. Bonhoeffer

[14] Uo., 148.
[15] Uo., 148.
[16] Szűcs Ferenc: *Teológiai etika.* Budapest: Református Zsinati Iroda Tanulmányi Osztálya, 1993, 129.
[17] Uo., 129.
[18] Uo., 129–130.
[19] Uo., 129–130.
[20] Bonhoeffer: *Etika*, 177.

states that responsibility assumed in a concrete historical situation may lead a person, for the sake of fulfilling the law, to risk suspending it. This is not a general license to break the commandment. Whoever makes such a decision must be conscious of the full weight of transgressing the law. What distinguishes action arising from responsibility from cynicism is that the actor takes upon themselves the actual guilt of the transgression.[21]

Responsibility, therefore, is not exhausted by demanding that another one fulfil a requirement: we must also decide about our own action in our encounter with them. This cannot be outsourced to a machine. Only the human being is capable of this sympathy in her response to Christ's call. Naturally, this involves risk-taking. We cannot make our sympathy or assumption of responsibility conditional on the other's decision conforming to our expectations. Our duty to support the woman does not arise only if she keeps the child. The community's taking responsibility must also appear in an uncertain outcome, in loss, and in bearing the burden of guilt. The decision for abortion is necessarily a pain of communio, but not its failure. The failure of communio is when, out of fear of risk, we avoid encounter with our neighbour in a human borderline situation.

What community do we undertake in the Lord's Supper?

According to Ferenc Szűcs, individual and communal ethical decisions are balanced out when the church becomes not merely an institution but a communio.[22] The fullest representation of this communio—this community—is the Lord's Supper, experienced again and again.

From Bonhoeffer, we saw that responsibility is action undertaken in a concrete relationship, whose outcome we do not possess. At this point, the eucharistic communio asks what binds together those who take on responsibility. The church's participation in Christ creates community, and this community has consequences for how we turn toward one another's needs.

Calvin justifies frequent reception of the Lord's Supper also by saying that it "nourishes mutual love." We see the binding bond of this love in the unity of Christ's body: in the Lord's Supper, "we mutually bind ourselves to perform all the duties of love."[23] In communion with Christ, we commit ourselves to one another as well. The other person's need, question, including borderline situations, are therefore the concern of our eucharistic community.

The basis of the universality of communio is Christ: unity in him extends the boundaries of our own congregation. The love undertaken in the Lord's Supper makes us responsible also for the need of the person living outside of the community.

[21] Uo., 180.

[22] Szűcs: *Teológiai etika*, 16–17.

[23] Kálvin János: *Institutio, A keresztyén vallás rendszere.* Ford. Buzogány Dezső. I–II. kötet. Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2014, IV.44.

We therefore cannot make the other person's church affiliation, or prior approval of their decision, a condition of offering help.

In the Lord's Supper, a mystery takes place: we participate in Christ. The community confesses sin as one body, receives absolution as one body, and professes its faith as one body. Thus, if an individual were incapable of any of these, this one body—the body of Christ—carries them into the mystery of the Lord's Supper. In this way, through the bearing of their brothers and sisters, they participate in death, resurrection, and eternal life. The essence of this participation is not exhausted by perceiving the visible sign in itself: the bread and wine, by themselves, are merely a piece of bread and a sip of wine. Yet communion with Christ and with one another forms all of us; it is in this relationship that the human being's hidden essence—the heart—is formed.

Here we return to the critique of the heartbeat regulation: the community expects the other person's inner change, but it cannot bypass its own involvement and change; otherwise, it rejects communio. The Holy Supper is not valid only at a given moment, just as the liturgy's exhortation says: "bear one another in love." We apply Calvin's teaching on eucharistic love to the situation examined in this sense. In the Lord's Supper, "we mutually bind ourselves to perform all the duties of love," so that we permit nothing that would offend our brothers and sisters, and we do not fail to give them help when necessity demands it and we have the opportunity.[24]

What exactly, then, do we expect from the heartbeat regulation? What moral change do we hope will follow from the presentation of a bodily sign of life—and what, meanwhile, do we take on in the lives of those affected? If we amplify the sound of the child's heart, will our community make its voice heard alongside it? Or do we need the sound of the machine so that we will not be troubled by our own silence?

[24] Kálvin János: *Institutio*, IV.44.