

# Maternal Martyrdom

by Ed Suominen

Laestadianism's rejection of contraception is an important topic, literally a matter of life and death for some women. There is no excuse for an institution to discourage its members from considering all viewpoints on such a grave matter, especially when it claims that those members are accepting life-threatening pregnancies in accordance with their individual consciences. Read on, and let others do the same.



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Like the Second Temple Judaism that preceded it, Christianity is a religion based on blood sacrifice. That may seem like a jarring summation of a faith that is, for the average believer, less about theology than the happy commotion of little children playing, the smell of hot dish warming in the church kitchen, and the joy of singing songs that are as beloved and familiar as the hundred other voices ringing out from the pews alongside you. But it's the harsh reality behind all the love and comfort: Jesus' "blood of the covenant" was "poured out for many" (Mark 14:24, NASB), just as Moses took the blood of young bulls "and sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (Exod. 24:8, NASB).

The sacrificial victims were not just animals or the one who was called the Son of God. Judges 11 tells us of Jephthah vowing to God that he would make a human sacrifice in exchange for permission to do a bunch of other killing, and fulfilling the vow with his own daughter. God even commanded the Israelites to give him “the firstborn of your sons,” the same as they were to do with their oxen and sheep. “It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me” (Exod. 22:29-30, NASB). Then there is the Old Testament’s most famous story of human sacrifice, where Abraham was about to slice open his 12-year old son until God stopped him.



*The Sacrifice of Isaac* by Caravaggio ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

Ever since the Epistle to the Hebrews, that incident has been showcased by Christian writers and preachers as a test of faith that Abraham passed. “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son” (Heb. 11:17). This past Father’s Day, the

pastor of the Rockford, Minnesota LLC devoted his sermon to Abraham's "leap of faith," the fact that "he had to kind of shut down his thinking." He couldn't think about it, or "use his carnal reason," because, the preacher admitted, "what God asked of him was inhuman, was—if we say, in a human language—it was wrong. It was something nobody should do."<sup>1</sup>

Well, what are you *supposed* to do when God (or the voices in your head) tell you to "take your son and offer him as burnt offering unto me"? Never mind your natural response that "This is inhuman. This is wrong."<sup>2</sup> Just obey: "If you don't understand, you believe."<sup>3</sup>

## Mothers on the Altar

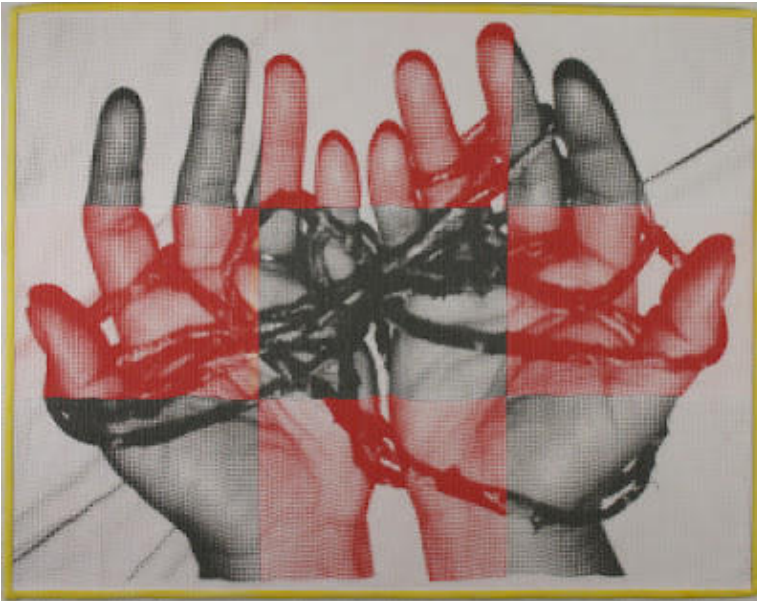
The same blind obedience is being expected of Conservative Laestadian women regarding contraception, even when their lives are at risk. They must put their bodies on the sacrificial altar, or risk the damnation of their souls instead. It is a picture that Hanna Pylväinen paints vividly in her new book *We Sinners*, with the story of a Laestadian mother having her seventh child, an experience that torments her economically, emotionally, and physically.

The woman's pregnancy is a dangerous one, and the latest in a long parade of C-section deliveries puts her on an operating table, studying the looming medical equipment: "bags of blood hanging like deflated lungs, collapsed balloons, and their readiness paralyzed her" (2012, 145). She describes the sensations ("a pinching in her chest," "the feeling of being made of many numbed parts") and the despair ("she had run out of fantasies—out of husbands to imagine, homes to build, pianos—there was nothing, only life itself, only long and hard and always more of it, always more," p. 145). Then an image comes

to her of her abdomen as prey, ants to jelly on the counter, jelly on the knife, and she thought about Abraham and Isaac, about Abraham tying Isaac to the table, and she wondered

how long it took him, and did he tie Isaac carefully. She thought she would try to get up, but she couldn't, she was bound, or her muscles were, and she said, or thought she said, I don't want to die, as if to ask God Himself to hold the scalpel. [p. 146]

The cords binding mothers to the birthing bed and operating table were very real in the 1970s. It was a "lenient mind" that would put "pity for the mother before having love in the truth concerning family planning, especially then when humanly speaking, the birth could appear dangerous," according to the August 1976 edition of the LLC's *Voice of Zion* newspaper. In 1979, from the other side of the Atlantic, the SRK's *Päivämies* matched the dogmatism: "Never in any form does the prevention of human life come into question for God's children." But, there is always the eternal consolation prize: "Even if it were to happen that a believing mother or child would die in childbirth, or during pregnancy, they would go to heaven."



*Nine Patch Self-Portrait* by Linda Frost

It may be tempting to consider all that an artifact of a harsh and misguided period of Laestadian history, when wrong spirits ran rampant and caretaking meetings of wayward church members were a weekly spectacle. But the pastor of the Phoenix LLC dispels any such illusion in his Mother's Day sermon from this year. He tells the story of a "dear sister" who was faced with "a childbirth that was going to cause her to die." She had been warned by her doctors "that if you have another child, the chances are very great that the mother will die." She and her husband decided—on their own! As if the expectations of a high-pressure religious environment played no part—"that they would trust in God's goodness."<sup>4</sup>

Well, "God's will" turned out to have little to do with the mother's health. She became pregnant and, "after the birth of that child, it became evident that there was nothing the doctors could do to save this mother's life." No, they had already *done* their job—by warning the mother that she was playing Russian roulette with her uterus. With evident emotion, the pastor recounts the dying mother's denial of any bitterness about the outcome, and how she said, "I would much rather go to heaven with a clean conscience." I don't know if she left any kids behind, but if so, any pangs of guilt about leaving them without a mother are never mentioned. And again we hear the praise of blind, uninformed faith: "How simply this husband and wife trusted in the goodness and the protection and the care of the Heavenly Father."<sup>5</sup>

Now, the "pillar and ground of truth," which Conservative Laestadianism has the conceit to call itself, can't quite bring itself to talk this way when it knows the public is listening. Then it mutters acknowledgments that the wisdom of man, in the form of medical professionals, might just have something to say on the topic. The SRK Secretary-General Tuomas Hänninen's recent statement in response to a question from the Finnish news site *Kotimaa24* is an example of the doublespeak:

The use or rejection of contraception is not a matter of authorization for each individual case, but rather a question of faith. Life is full of choices, and a person who wants to preserve faith and a good conscience makes the choice from that basis. *In extreme cases, and for health reasons, it is good to listen to the treating physician.* [Ijäs 2012, emphasis added]

Another example is from a few years earlier, in the SRK's *Päivämies* newspaper:

Believing fathers and mothers have comprehended as an unrelinquishable value the scriptural teaching that God is the Lord of life and death. He has the power to give life and the power to take it away. For this reason in our Christianity, we have considered children as gifts from God; they bring blessing, joy, meaning, and richness to our lives. That's why even the parents of large families have wanted to accept children, even though it has perhaps meant that they have had to give up certain things. The basis for Christian parents' decisions has been obedience to God's Word, faith upon God as the omnipotent Creator, and trust in His guidance and care. . . . The preservation of the life of both the mother and child is important. *A doctor, who has great professional ethics, helps humanity and respects a patient's wishes by preserving life and maintaining health. Surely parents do not relate belittlingly to their doctor's assessment given from a medical perspective.* In difficult situations, faith guides us to make decisions based on preserving life according to God's Word. [No. 5, 2009, emphasis added]

## Why?

If you are an exhausted, desperate mother faced with the possibility of yet another pregnancy, perhaps a life-threatening

one at that, the stakes are unthinkable high. Don't you have the right to understand just why you should subject yourself to that peril? Or should you just tune out everything but the men who sit at their pulpits and urge you, as the Rockford pastor did, to put blind trust in God, "trust his congregation. Let us trust this congregation more than ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

It is telling that he describes the reasonable speculations Abraham might have had after hearing the divine death sentence pronounced on his innocent son, to wonder "if God exists, if this is just nonsense, foolishness, the creation of my own mind. Maybe I should turn back, go back home, and try to forget the whole thing."<sup>7</sup> But God was there, the preacher says, and showed Abraham what he was to do. And when *God* speaks, you'd better listen. As Luther put it, "we must simply maintain that when we hear God saying something, we are to believe it and not to debate about it but rather take our intellect captive in the obedience of Christ" (*Lectures on Genesis*, Ch. 3, v. 5).

Perhaps the most detailed attempt at a defense of Conservative Laestadianism's anti-contraception position to ever see print is a [document](#) that Seppo Lohi presented at the SRK's 2009 Summer Services. His argument is mostly grounded in tradition, with little biblical support. First, he cites the Genesis commands to "be fruitful and multiply," which he considers to have established "new life" as "a fundamental task of marriage." He makes a bizarre appeal to Mark 10:6-9, Jesus' directive about the permanence of marriage. And he rounds things out with statements in Mark 10:14 and a few verses in Matthew 18 about receiving and becoming as children (Lohi 2009).

The Genesis commands are the strongest of some very weak arguments. Lohi gets some help from Luther there: "Therefore, the word of God, 'Be fruitful, and multiply,' is not a command, but more than a mere command, namely a Divine Act, not being in our power to hinder or neglect" (Lohi 2009). But Mark 10:6-9 (What

God has joined together let not man put asunder) has absolutely nothing to do with contraception. Neither do Mark 10:14 (“Whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me”) or the verses in Matthew 18 (e.g., “Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven”).

This is all explained in §4.7.6 of my book, under the subheading “Human Rights Concerns.” And, as discussed there, it is a tricky business to rely on the Bible to establish the sanctity of life. Exodus 21:22 imposes a mere civil penalty for hurting a pregnant woman and causing her to miscarry. Leviticus 27 places monetary valuations on human life (less for women than men, naturally), and assigns *no value at all* to infants less than a month old. Hosea rants against Ephraim that he will “slay even the beloved fruit of their womb” (9:16). The people of Samaria had “rebelled against her God,” according to Hosea, so “they shall fall by the sword: their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their women with child shall be ripped up” (Hos. 13:16). When Judah learned that his daughter-in-law was “with child by whoredom,” his response was, “Bring her forth, and let her be burnt” (Gen. 38:24). Not much concern there for the unborn child. It was only when she produced some things that Judah had left during *his own* sexual encounter with her that he backed down. Oops, never mind!

Well, then, is there no biblical position against contraception worth talking about, other than that “be fruitful and multiply” business? In her book *Quiverfull*, Kathryn Joyce cites those Genesis passages, and also two others that fundamentalist Christians have relied on to oppose contraception: Psalm 127, with its talk about the fruit of the womb and arrows in a quiver, and “the biblical story of Onan, slain by God for spilling his seed on the ground” (2009, 146). Let’s take a look at these three main points in turn.

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Psalm 127:3-5 says, “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.” It was very important for a man (certainly not a woman) in that patriarchal society to have heirs who could continue and extend his household with its livestock, landholdings, buildings, slaves, etc. Look at the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how important it was for him to have a legitimate heir. (Ishmael got pushed aside as soon as Isaac was miraculously born, as the story goes.)

Laestadian doctrine has long fancied that there is some vague cloud of unconceived children floating out there somewhere who are all God’s property. They wait to be conveyed into existence one after another by women who have no option but to bear them and fill some man’s quiver. Along those lines, the Phoenix pastor makes much of the way his sermon text (1 Sam. 1:27-28) says that Hannah (the biblical figure, not our new novelist) “lent” her child to the Lord.

Well, *of course* she did; the child was Samuel, who was destined to become an important prophet. But you can’t make that a generalization of God’s views about children, not when he slaughters so many of them without hesitation—in Sodom (children weren’t even considered as part of the ten “righteous” whose presence would have spared the city, Gen. 18:32), in Egypt (the passover plague, Exod. 12:29-30), and in Midian (“kill every male among the little ones, Num. 31:17). Remember, this was the God who inspired the Psalmist to write, “O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones” (Ps. 137:8-9).



*Anna presenting her son Samuel to the priest Eli,*  
Gerbrand van den Eeckhout ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

There is a subtle but important issue in calling the fruit of the womb “his” reward, as the KJV does. With such wording, it is understandable that one might view the fruit of the womb as something God can demand as his own. But other translations render the passage without that possessive pronoun, and with no such implication of ownership or control:

**NASB:** “Behold, children are a gift [or heritage] of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward.”

**Luther** (my translation from German): “See, children are a gift [*Gabe*] of the Lord and the fruit of the womb is a present [*Geschenk*].”

**Finnish** (1776): “Katso, lapset ovat Herran lahja, ja kohdun hedelmä on anto.”

One could see the same possessive implication in the KJV when it calls the fruit of the womb a “reward.” The other translations call it a “gift” or “heritage,” putting the emphasis on the child as something *from* God. Wasn’t the next generation more a bounty given to mankind—when God looked favorably on them—than a tribute owed to him? In the ancient world where women were expendable, dominated, and possessed, the “fruit of the womb” was produce, in an all-too-literal sense.

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This leads to the second point of Scriptural support: God’s command to be fruitful and multiply. He said it twice, first after the creation of Adam and Eve and then after Noah parked his ark on the mountainside. Well, actually it was *never* said. Not in either of those stories, anyhow, because the stories are not true.

Evolutionary science completely disproves the ancient Creation myths of Genesis. (Yes, *myths*, plural—there are two conflicting stories in Gen. 1 and Gen. 2-3.) At no point was there any first pair of humans standing around having to be told to make babies and populate the earth. Every early human, no matter how many thousands and millions of years back you go in prehistory, had parents who had reproduced without any divine sex education and were pretty much human themselves. “In a series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he now exists, it would be impossible to fix on any definite point where the term ‘man’ ought to be used” (Darwin 1871, 226). And it is just not possible for the entire human race to have descended from a single father and mother. Genetic evidence now makes clear that there have never been fewer than about a thousand members of *Homo sapiens* throughout the more than 100,000

years of its existence (Coyne 2011), which began in Africa, not Mesopotamia.

Noah's flood supposedly concluded with kangaroos continent-hopping around the world to Australia, and with God making his second pronouncement about replenishing the earth. Those who believe this story, an obvious adaptation of the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, are in a dwindling minority even among Conservative Laestadians, certainly among those in Finland. One ordained SRK priest with whom I've corresponded expressed shock and disbelief that people in the LLC actually take the story seriously. The LLC preacher who said to someone back in 2009, *Why is Ed worried about Noah's Ark? None of us believe it, either*, was just being honest about the situation. (Though not so much when he took part in a meeting a year later, where I would be pressured to profess belief in, among other things, Noah's Ark.) Rather than belabor this posting with the devastating critique that the story deserves, I refer interested readers to Jason Long's [101 Reasons Why Noah's Story Doesn't Float](#).

Now, let's suppose—against overwhelming evidence—that the Eden and the Noah stories are true. Do they actually have anything to do with Christian doctrine? No; despite centuries of earnest exposition by Christian preachers from the Gospel writers onward, they do not.

The Fall myth wasn't even about original sin. The Bible mentions nothing about it until Paul finally comes along with his “one sinner, one redeemer” idea in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. What happened here (as with the supposed messianic prophecies that never quite add up) is that Christian theologians went back and looked over the ancient Scriptures and invented ways to give historical credibility to their new story about Jesus. Another example is God clothing Adam and Eve with animal skins in place of their fig leaf aprons. Saying that God did so as a precursor to Jesus' sacrifice is just something Christian

theology made up. One could just as easily say that God replaced the fig leaves because he knew that Jesus would someday curse a fig tree. He did, and it is just about as relevant—that is, not at all.

Even if you make the two gigantic leaps of accepting the stories as accurate and also relevant, there is still the issue of God's commands in the Old Testament being overruled in the New. Through his claim representatives or directly, God commanded all sorts of crazy and horrible things in the Old Testament. Almost all of it is forgotten and ignored by Christians today. The usual excuse is that Jesus fulfilled the law and thus the Old Testament doesn't apply. Of course, for some reason, one still must honor one's father and mother, avoid "sitting in the seat of the scornful," and not hunt or fish on Sunday. When there is a handy verse to be found in the Old Testament that supports somebody's idea of right and wrong, they don't hesitate to pluck it out and quote it.

"Be fruitful and multiply" fares no better than the command to avoid sitting on furniture used by menstruating women (Lev. 15:20), for a number of reasons. First, with seven billion people, the earth has been replenished beyond the Genesis writer's wildest imaginings. The whole point of the command has been achieved, and then some. If covering the face of the planet with billions of people—many times more than have ever lived—is not "replenishing" it, then the term is meaningless. Second, perhaps surprisingly, some New Testament writers viewed children very differently than as a welcome gift. Look at how Paul felt about marriage in the seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians. Not only did he view it as more favorable to be unmarried, but he even told men "that have wives be as though they had none" (1 Cor. 7:29-30). The time was short, and there was no point bringing children into this world that was about to end. The way to avoid that back then, of course, was celibacy.

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The third point, the Onan story (Gen. 38:3-10), was all about fulfilling the Old Testament requirement to raise up an heir. Again, that was very important back then, and was a duty that Onan owed to his dead brother. God specifically ordered Onan to undertake the task, and he disobeyed the command. God killed him, as he threatened and killed many others for disobeying his commands.<sup>8</sup>

There's nothing special about the life of a speculative not-yet-conceived child here. It's all about submission. That is, I think, also largely the case in Laestadianism.

## **Enough Already**

Despite what is claimed by Laestadian preachers who know almost nothing about biblical scholarship, the collection of essays we call "the Bible" is *not* a single book with a unified message. It is futile to dig through "the Bible" looking for what "it" has to say on such a modern subject as the health of women, who were expendable and pretty much treated as property, when different passages provide contradicting answers about such fundamental things as whether God wants everyone to be saved, the value of the Old Testament sacrifices, and salvation by faith or by works.

The contradictions we've seen here concerning the value of children are just a small example of the conflict lurking between those mostly unread pages whose gilt edges sparkle under the pulpit lights. The writers of Genesis couldn't even agree on details of the Flood story (Seven pairs of ritually clean animals, or one? Forty days of flooding, or 150? See §4.3.2 of my book), so both conflicting versions are interspersed with each other. None of the Old Testament writers were remotely the same kinds of "believers" as the writers of the Gospels, who themselves disagreed about such a fundamental point of doctrine as whether Jesus was divine

(John 14:9-11) or not (Mark 10:17-18) and whether he revealed esoteric meanings of his parables to the disciples in secret (Mark 4:11; Matt. 13:11; Luke 8:10) or always spoke openly, saying nothing in secrecy (John 18:20).

Of course, this will not stop the preachers from citing and creatively interpreting their hand-picked passages from “God’s Word,” claiming the authority of God as they do so. *They* are the Holy men who speak as moved by the Holy Ghost, they claim, ironically citing a passage (2 Pet. 1:19-21) from the single most discredited book of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup>

When any criticism is raised, they point to the Serpent’s question of Eve: “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” (Gen. 3:1). There is a sad irony here, too: They are citing a character in a mythic story—long since proven false—to keep you from entertaining the possibility that what *they* say might be false. And remember that, even in the story, the Serpent was actually the one who told the truth: Adam and Eve did *not* die upon touching the fruit (Gen. 3:4). Instead, as he said would happen, “the eyes of them both were opened” (3:7).

Laestadian women need to open their eyes as well, before any more of them bleed to death on the sacrificial altar of a faith that requires their fertility for its survival. At long last, some of them are choosing to be the survivors instead, finally claiming their lives, their minds, and their bodies as their own. It’s about time.

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<sup>1</sup> Haapsaari 2012, 14:30-18:00 – God told Abraham to kill his only son (Ishmael didn't count). This was a great trial. "And I think, when there are people who dare to say that I don't believe if I don't understand—that I only am willing to accept and believe this which I can understand—I think they should read about Abraham. He did not understand. Or what do you think? Do you think that he understood? Do you think he saw plainly what was going to happen? No way. He didn't. He had to take this leap of faith. He had to kind of shut down his thinking. He could not think. He could not use his carnal reason. Because what God asked of him was inhuman, was—if we say, in a human language—it was wrong. It was something nobody should do."

<sup>2</sup> Haapsaari 2012, 19:00-19:40 – "And now God says, take your son and offer him as burnt offering unto me. What would you have done? [Would you have] run away? [Would you have] said, I can't? This is inhuman. This is wrong. This is impossible. Whatever else, but not this."

<sup>3</sup> Haapsaari 2012, 21:30-23:00 – "So what do you do if you don't understand? There is only one way to go over it. There's only one bridge, and that's faith. If you don't understand, you believe. Then faith is the most important matter. There is no other way to go over it but through faith. So we see how understanding and believing are kind of opposites to one other. It's not wrong if we understand something about the matters of faith and doctrine. It's not wrong if we understand the matters of this life well. If we have good gifts for this temporal life, it's not sin. It's not a questionable issue. But we see that no one could by

their own human reason go over [overcome] this trial without faith. It's impossible."

<sup>4</sup> Jurmu 2012, 38:10-39:00 – "One dear sister once said, as she was struggling with her own life, she had a very difficult . . . in fact, a childbirth that was going to cause her to die. Prior to her pregnancy, the doctors had told them, husband and wife together, that if you have another child, the chances are very great that the mother will die. The husband and wife visited over this matter with the doctor and then amongst themselves personally. And they decided, amongst the two of them, that they would trust in God's goodness."

<sup>5</sup> Jurmu 2012, 39:00-40:10 – "And what is God's will? As it turned out, this wife became pregnant. And after the birth of that child, it became evident that there was nothing the doctors could do to save this mother's live. And in the final visit that the husband and wife had together, the husband asked his wife, 'Are you bitter to God because of our decision?' The wife said, 'Not at all.' She said, 'I would much rather go to heaven with a clean conscience.' How simply this husband and wife trusted in the goodness and the protection and the care of the Heavenly Father."

<sup>6</sup> Haapsaari 2012, 36:00-38:00 – "And I guess quite often we have decided, haven't we, 'I want to believe. I don't want to give up, whatever trials God gives unto me, I want to believe, I want to trust God.' And sometimes we think that this is so simple and clear. Why have I ever doubted? I'll stop doubting! I'll never doubt any longer! That's what we are. We doubt, and God knows our weakness. Dear brothers and sisters, may this text teach us to put a blind trust on God. What does it mean? Let us trust his congregation. Let us trust this congregation more than ourselves. Let us hear what the spirit teaches in the congregation. This congregation is God's congregation. God takes care of that. God guides it and blesses it. And if I am a member of this congregation—no matter how small and weak, and tried, and fearful, and sinful I am—when this congregation is being raised from this world, I will be raised, too. Although I am a very small and weak member of it, I will be raised too. So, we have a father in heaven, but we have a mother upon this earth. We are the most fortunate people on this earth, that we can believe."

<sup>7</sup> Haapsaari 2012, 24:00-25:00 – “[I]n the midst of this trial, God showed him the way. God showed him the place where to go. He may have had so [many] trials, temptations, and doubts that he might have even thought during this trip, [wondering] . . . if God exists, if this is just nonsense, foolishness, the creation of my own mind. Maybe I should turn back, go back home, and try to forget the whole thing. So God showed him, ‘There you are to go.’ It must have been a painful, but also in a way comforting, sight. God is there and he shows me what I am to do.”

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 26 provides a lurid example of God’s threats for disobedience. He will inflict sudden terror, consumption and fever on the disobedient that will waste away their eyes. He will cause their enemies to rule over them. If that doesn’t make the people obey, he will punish them seven times more, rendering the land barren. If that doesn’t work, he will increase the plague seven times again, letting loose the beasts of the field to kill their children and cattle, and reduce their number until their roads lie deserted. If that doesn’t do the trick, he will send pestilence among them. Finally, as a last resort, he will act with “wrathful hostility” against them, whereupon they will eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, he will heap their remains on the remains of their idols and lay waste their cities. At least the idea of eternal torture wasn’t contemplated, here or anywhere else in the Old Testament.

<sup>9</sup> “There is less debate among scholars of the New Testament about the authorship of 2 Peter than for any of the other books sometimes considered forgeries. Whoever wrote 2 Peter, it was not Simon Peter” (Ehrman 2011, 68).