

When is a Person?

Christian Perspectives on the Beginning of Life

There are complex and painful dilemmas raised in our society by abortion, infertility treatments and antenatal screening and when we turn from these challenges to the world of the Bible we are again struck by the gulf between the biblical world and our own. We cannot look for proof texts which will provide neat answers to complex problems. Rather we must immerse ourselves in the biblical worldview, seeing the world as the biblical writers saw it.

In orthodox Christian thought we are all unique and we are special in God's eyes because we are made in God's image. Philosophers such as Peter Singer and John Harris argue that the right to be treated with dignity, the right to be protected, the right to be regarded as a 'person', is a right which has to be earned. It is as though every human being has to pass a test before he or she is regarded as 'one of us', a member of the moral community. But in the biblical Christian worldview, no human being needs to earn the right to be treated with respect or dignity. Our dignity is *intrinsic*: it lies in the way we have been made, in how God created us, remembers us and calls us to himself.

God's creative involvement with human beings extends to foetal life

The biblical narrative is insistent that God's creative activity does not just start at the moment of birth. This is seen most clearly in Psalm 139, which is a wonderful and moving meditation on the awesome intimacy between God and a human individual. The Psalmist begins with a profound awareness of God's presence, an unsettling sense that God has invaded every aspect of his life (verses 1-5). The extent of the divine knowledge is wonderful, bringing a sense of security in God's all-encompassing presence. But this presence is not entirely welcome. There seems to be an element of ambiguity in the psalmist's response, a very human sense of emotional claustrophobia. So, he embarks on a thought experiment. Is there any place in the cosmos where I could escape from God's all invading presence? No. The search for emotional space is doomed to failure. See verses 7-10. Wonderfully and terrifyingly, the search for a space from God is doomed to failure. The narrative of a human life is invaded by God from its intrauterine origins. Of course, this is poetry and not a textbook of embryology. In the OT world, virtually nothing was known about the biological processes which occurred in the womb.

What then can we learn from Psalm 139 about God's involvement with the unborn child? John Stott in his book *Issues Facing Christians Today*, helpfully draws out three headings.

The first is *creation*. The clear emphasis of the passage is on God's individual and minutely detailed creative activity within the womb. Human development is not just an anonymous, deterministic, biological mechanism, a routine proliferation of cells. Yes, molecular biology is uncovering many of the cellular mechanisms which control the formation of the human organism, but we must avoid a crude biological or genetic determinism. The language of developmental biology is impersonal, mechanistic and ultimately random. But in contrast, the language of the Psalm emphasises that what is happening in the womb is *personal and intentional*. At the same time that the biological mechanisms are ticking away, the divine artist is creating a unique masterpiece. For some Christian writers it seems that the Psalmist is consciously echoing the creation narratives of the first chapter of Genesis. The womb is dark, mysterious, the secret place; the action takes place in the depths of the earth; the body is unformed. This is the secret creation chamber of the infinite God. Inside this womb is a microcosm of miracle of the creation of the universe.

The second theme is *covenant*. Throughout the psalm, the writer is self-consciously using the language of covenant, unconditional commitment. God the Creator is in covenant relationship with the psalmist. 'You know me God'. This is not just intellectual awareness. This kind of knowledge implies a committed intimate involvement. The emphasis is not on foetal awareness of God. No, what matters is that God knew the foetus.

The third theme is of *continuity*. There is the past ('you searched me'), the present, ('you know when I sit and when I rise'), the future ('your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast'), and the antenatal history, ('when I was woven together in the depths of the earth').

The foetus is an actor within the human drama

Luke, the physician, records in his Gospel a domestic incident: the excited meeting of two pregnant women, to share their experiences (Luke 1:39) Read Luke 1:41-44. It is interesting to consider why out of all the material that Luke must have accumulated before he wrote his Gospel, did he choose to record such a commonplace domestic incident.

Was it because Luke wanted to emphasise that Jesus' earthly ministry commenced even before birth? At first glance there are only two people in the room. But Luke implies there are four. Elizabeth and the unborn John, Mary and the unborn Jesus. Perhaps what captivated Luke was the recognition that John leapt for joy at Jesus' presence, only a few weeks after his conception.

Is there a biblical distinction between the early stages of conception and the later foetus?

Some such as Professor Sam Berry, have argued that the biblical material such as Psalm 139 can be used only to argue in retrospect: If I know that I exist, then I know that God must have been involved with me when I was a foetus: Once a person exists, one must reckon with his or her whole life history as a linked sequence of divinely guided and appointed processes and events. But Psalm 139 says nothing whatsoever about those who are not "persons". Berry goes on to say that we have no biblical authority for saying that there was a 'person' present in every spontaneously aborted fertilised ovum, despite all its marvellous complexities and potentialities. 'If we are honest we need to be agnostic about the relationship between God and early embryos.'

The subject remains a matter of painful controversy and debate between Christians. A number of modern theologians and Christian doctors argue that the early embryo and foetus cannot be regarded as a human individual who is worthy of respect and protection until later in pregnancy. They point to other evidence from modern embryology and genetics to support this view. It is now thought that more than 50% of all embryos created naturally following sexual intercourse fail to implant (many have gross genetic abnormalities which are incompatible with life) and are lost through menstruation.

Professor Donald Mackay argues that in the development of the foetus a critical level of complexity was required before the foetus could be considered a 'conscious personal agency'. In particular, a degree of brain development allowing self-regulation and information processing was necessary. The implication of this argument is that early abortion, although always painful and less than ideal may be a Christian action, the lesser of two evils, and act of compassion and even, at times a Christian duty. Similarly, the creation and destruction of human embryos in research, to help more mature human beings can be seen as worthwhile, provided that significant benefits are likely to accrue in medical advances.

Professor John Wyatt in his *book Matters of Life and Death* writes that as a medical student and doctor he was convinced by this argument, but he has since changed his mind. Why?

Arguments in favour of protecting the early foetus and embryo

The traditional distinction between the formed human foetus and the unformed sub-human foetus is for Wyatt not a biblical concept, nor is it consistent with modern biological understanding. There is no stage in foetal development which represents a biological discontinuity, and which might be interpreted as the transition from an animal to human form.

Secondly, it is pointless to expect biology to reveal conclusively the point at which God's covenant involvement with a human individual commences. Biology and genetics can only suggest certain points at which personal identity may commence. We do not know whether any one particular embryo or foetus will survive the hazards of embryonic development to emerge as a responsive individual whose personal qualities we can identify, but this does not absolve us from the responsibility to demonstrate a moral commitment in advance to treat each embryo or foetus as though it was destined to manifest its personality in future.

Thirdly for Wyatt, the thrust of historic biblical theology places the emphasis on what human beings *are* by creation, in the stuff of their being, and not on what they can *do*, on their attributes or functional abilities. God's grace as revealed in the Christian gospel is precisely love to the unresponsive. The covenant relationship of loving commitment does not depend on reciprocity.

Fourthly, the Bible views all human beings as called by God to share in his life. When God calls us, he calls us *as a person*, he calls us by name. We cannot think that there was a time in our personal history when we were outside the call of God.

Fifthly, Christian thinking emphasises our responsibility to be neighbourly, to a duty of care and protection for vulnerable, weak and defenceless human beings. In the Christian understanding of community, we are locked into bonds of loyalty and responsibility, even to those who appear alien to and different from us. The early embryo and foetus seem to represent par excellence those vulnerable human strangers to whom we owe a special duty of care and protection.

Theological themes and the human embryo

The human embryo is a unique type of being. We cannot think of it simply as a baby who happens not to have been born yet. Nor can we think of it merely as a biological mechanism, a collection of genetic material, a blob of jelly, which happens to have the potential to become a baby. We have to create a new category of thought for this being. And in thinking biblically about this strange entity, we must hold onto two familiar tensions which crop up repeatedly in Christian theology. First, we must retain the *tension between the physical and the immaterial*. Every human being has a physical aspect (genetic codes, miles of electrical wiring etc) and an immaterial aspect (a person who mysteriously reflects God's character; a strange God-like being who loves and is loved, a unique individual with a unique life history, known by God and destined for eternity). These two aspects of our being are locked together in our humanity.

The reductionist says that human beings are *really* sophisticated self-replicating survival machines who happen to have achieved self-consciousness. Dualists say human beings are *really* spiritual beings who happen to be attached to a body for a period of their existence. Biblical anthropology denies both of these alternatives. Human beings are, at one and the same time, fully physical and fully spiritual beings. This is a tension familiar in biblical theology. Jesus was at one and the same time completely human and completely divine. We see it in the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture: the words of the Bible are at one and the same time the words of human writers and the words of God. We see it in the doctrine of the sacraments: the bread and wine, and the baptismal water are both physical elements and at the same time a pointer to a hidden spiritual reality.

The second familiar biblical tension that needs to be retained is the *tension between the already and the not yet*. The embryo is just one example of the tension which runs through the whole of human existence. We are already human beings, but in Christ, we are also becoming something else. We have not yet arrived at our final destination which is to become fully human. We are becoming what we already are. We have been saved by God's grace, but in God's grace we have yet to experience the full reality of that salvation. It is the same tension which holds together the two biblical senses of the image of God. All human beings are made in God's image, but Christ himself is the unique image of God. We are already made in God's image, but in God's grace we are being transformed to become like Jesus, the image of God.

Foetal screening

John Wyatt in his book *Matters of Life and Death* argues that the very existence of foetal screening and the availability of abortion until even late in pregnancy tend to imply that the commitment of parent to child is tentative or conditional. It offers anxious parents the possibility of the security and confidence that my baby will be 'all right'. But the sad truth is that no technology can offer this confidence to parents. As BK Rothman put it, 'The possibility of spending the rest of one's life caring for a sick or disabled child can never be eliminated by prenatal testing. I worry about women who say that they only dare have children because prenatal diagnosis is available. Motherhood is, among other things, one more chance for a speeding truck to ruin your life.' If abortion for foetal abnormality falls short of genuine Christian compassion, does this mean that all foetal screening is valueless? What about the argument that foetal screening is helpful because it allows us to prepare ourselves psychologically for a disabled baby? Again, John Wyatt challenges this view. He argues that waiting weeks for the birth of a baby is who known to be impaired may cause increasing anxiety and psychological distress rather than benefit. In some cases, he believes it seems as if the medical knowledge provided by foetal screening has harmed the normal relationship between the parents and the unborn child. He speculates that in the original creation order, we are designed so that we start to love our unborn baby in secret, before we meet them face to face at birth.

Lewis Smedes calls the status of a foetus a 'deep ontological ambiguity' - the ambiguity of not being something yet and at the same time having the makings of what it will be. This brings John Stott in his chapter on these issues in 'Issues Facing Christians Today' back to Psalm 139. He writes that the reason for the Psalmists sense of continuity is God's steadfast love. It is God's loving personal commitment to the unborn child which make him uncomfortable with Donald Mackay's reluctance to attribute personhood to the newly conceived foetus because as yet it has not brain to sustain either self-supervision of conscious relationships. But supposing the vital relationship which confers personhood on the foetus is God's loving conscious commitment to him or her rather than theirs to God? A unilateral initiative is what makes grace to be grace.