

# When does human life begin?

Christian thinking and contemporary opposition

**JOHN R LING**





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The substance of this booklet is an extract from *The Morning-After Pill – Uncovering the Truth*, published by The Christian Institute in 2007:

<http://www.christian.org.uk/resource/the-morning-after-pill>

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First printed in June 2011

Reprinted in May 2015, August 2017 and May 2022

ISBN 978-1-901086-47-8

Published by The Christian Institute  
Wilberforce House, 4 Park Road, Gosforth Business Park,  
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE12 8DG

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# 1. Introduction

When does human life begin? This is arguably the most significant question in the whole of bioethics. It is also the most frequently asked. The answer you give will shape your thinking on practically every bioethical issue, including abortion, assisted reproductive technologies, human embryo experimentation, infanticide, stem cell research, prenatal screening, cloning, contraception, euthanasia, and so on. But, in particular, it will reveal your understanding of the nature and status of the human embryo.

When does human life begin? It is certainly a big question. It therefore demands a careful answer. Yet people are often dreadfully confused about the beginning of human life – how strange it is that we can be so unsure about when and how we began.

Some regard birth, or twenty-eight weeks, or viability, or fourteen days, or implantation, as the decisive time at which human life begins. The very range of these possibilities demonstrates just how arbitrary each of them really is. They cannot all be correct. Indeed, each has profound shortcomings.

Suppose, for example, fourteen days is your answer. What then is present a day before that? Is it non-human life? What about an hour, or a minute, before? Is it then human non-life? Can you see the philosophical, let alone the practical, predicaments produced by these various options? The truth is that none is sufficient to count as the defining moment before which there was something of no consequence, but after which there is valuable human life. Can anyone say, without intellectually blushing, “Before this or that developmental event, I was not, but after it, I was”?

These, and a host of other ingenious beginning-of-life markers,

are bioethical smoke screens. They are used to avoid the sometimes unpalatable, sometimes inconvenient fact that human life begins at the earliest time point, namely, conception. Conception and fertilisation are synonyms for what happens on day one. This is when a man's sperm fertilises a woman's ovum. As a result of this irreversible event, a new, genetically unique, single-celled entity, technically known as a zygote, is created. This is the beginning of human life.

Why is it so necessary to answer this great question? Because when you hear the news, read newspapers and discuss bioethical issues, you are confronted with zygotes and blastocysts and embryos and fetuses. You need to know what is being talked about. Are they mere biological materials, or are they 'one of us'? Are we dealing with human life or something else? If so, what is it? We need to establish and grasp the truth.

But how can we be sure, beyond any doubt, that conception is the correct answer? Although there is much supporting evidence from the biological and medical sciences and from other sources, such as philosophy and history, the Christian will, above all, be interested in what the Bible has to say. The primary purpose of this booklet is to explain just that.

# 2. The answer from the Bible

The Bible is the ultimate frame of reference for all mankind. As Schaeffer and Koop so neatly put it: “God gives the pages, and thus God gives the answers.”<sup>1</sup> The Bible is certainly not a textbook of embryology or medical practice. But neither is it silent on these matters. Scripture contains sufficient truth to guide us in all matters of faith and practice, and hence, in these bioethical issues too. In other words, the Bible is not exhaustive, but it is sufficient – it does not tell us everything, but it does tell us enough.

There is a wonderful unity in Scripture and its true meaning and teaching on any particular topic is determined, not from an isolated verse or two taken out of context, but by comparing and contrasting all of its content, concepts and themes. So what follows is not an attempt at simplistic ‘proof-texting’ but rather the exegesis, albeit briefly, of several key passages. The outcome of examining these verses is an insistent authority and an irresistible momentum that will constrain us to conclude that the Scriptures teach: first, that human life does indeed begin at no time other than at conception; and second, that all human life from day one onwards is special and precious, to be protected and cherished. In other words, the nature and status of the human embryo are clearly delineated.

## 2.1 THE NATURE OF MAN

There is no place to start like the beginning. And the foundations

of a proper view of the nature and status of all human life are laid out on the opening pages of the Bible. Genesis 1:27 explains that man is made in the image of God – we all bear the *imago Dei*, which makes us special and makes us distinct from the rest of the created order. Men and women, boys and girls, all human life is extraordinarily distinguished in that we all can know our Creator.

This great doctrine also explains the purpose of redemption, culminating in the Cross. Why has God been so determined to rescue us, at such an immense cost? Would He have launched such an extravagant rescue mission for something insignificant or of trifling worth? No! God made man as the pinnacle of His creation. We have extrinsic dignity – derived from the intrinsic dignity of the one whose image we bear.<sup>2</sup> That is why each of us is unique and each of us is special – we are the bearers of the *imago Dei*.

That is the glorious privilege of being a human being. But there is also a sinister downside, something ugly about being human. It is sin – that transgression of the moral law of God; our rebellion against our Maker. King David makes clear this foundational Christian truth. He confesses: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5) Furthermore he declares: “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, not even one.” (Psalm 14:3) Here are the two-fold inglorious conditions of every human being – sinner by nature *and* sinner by practice.

First, man is a sinner by nature. Sin is not just an annoying blemish that we have somehow acquired from somewhere during our development. Sinfulness is that inevitable and integral part of me that arose as soon as I became a full and comprehensive member of the human race. And when did that occur? At conception, “... from the time my mother conceived me”.

And second, there is worse to come, because this sinful nature cannot help but sin. All of us are sinners, not just by our nature, but also by our practice. As soon as we are born, we practise, we commit, sins. Nobody taught us – it came entirely naturally because

we are sinners by nature. We cannot do otherwise. Just as oak trees produce acorns, so sinners produce sins. It is the expression of our true fallen nature.

When it comes to defining the nature of human life, Scripture repeatedly returns to these two foundational doctrines of ‘made in the image of God’ but ‘sinner by nature and practice’. And both of these doctrines presuppose that human life begins at conception, otherwise the whole Bible begins to make no sense whatsoever. These two pivotal doctrines are further developed throughout the Book by, for example, expounding the remarkable themes of God’s foreknowledge, God’s incarnation and God’s redemption. Understanding these themes will lead to a greater understanding of human life and its beginning.

## **2.2 THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD**

Foreknowledge is one of the attributes of God – Scripture abounds with this truth. Yet for us it remains a largely incomprehensible trait. How can we grasp that God knows the end from the beginning? Then again, without such an attribute, how could He ever be sovereign and worthy of the title, God?

Well, something of this great truth can be unravelled by starting with Genesis 25:21-26, which narrates the pre-born and newborn lives of Esau and Jacob. These twins in Rebekah’s womb are described not as vague non-entities, nor simply as bits of biological material, nor even as potential lives. No! In the foreknowledge of God they already possessed identity and significant purpose – they were to become two great leaders, the progenitors of two vast nations (Genesis 25:23). The omniscient God already possessed the foreknowledge of the entire lifespan of these two boys – from womb to tomb – and He communicated something of it to their mother.

A similar theme is found in Judges 13:1-7. Here an angel of God tells Samson’s mother, “...you are going to conceive and have a son.”

She is further instructed: “Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean...”. Why these constraints? Because her child-to-be, Samson, was to be a Nazirite and therefore such drink and food were never to enter his body, not even from across his mother’s placenta. Why then, if the embryonic, or the foetal, or the pre-born Samson was not Samson proper, was his mother hedged about with such limitations during her pregnancy, and just to make sure, even before she conceived him? There is only one answer: because what was going to be in Manoah’s wife’s womb was going to be the real Samson, minute but with real identity – it was Samson from conception, Samson from fertilisation, Samson from day one.

Again, in Jeremiah 1:5 God states: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...” In the foreknowledge of God we each, like Jeremiah, have – from eternity – an identity and purpose in the Creator’s mind. That is, we all have a ‘pre-history’. The physical outworking of this begins for us at fertilisation. It is therefore evident that God oversees our entire prenatal and postnatal life.

Grasping something of the foreknowledge of God gives an insight into the ways and purposes of God. Here, we are arguing for the highest status to be assigned to the human embryo simply because that life comes into being materially at conception – but in the foreknowledge of God, we have been known and purposed by Him long, long before that landmark event. He not only foresees what we will be – He ordains it. If He so carefully superintends all human life, how can we ever be dismissive of the human embryo?

## **2.3 THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST**

The themes of the beginning of human life and its inherent value are expounded, perhaps above all, in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a cardinal truth of Christianity that the Second Person of the Trinity became a man. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

This incarnation did not suddenly occur in that stable at Bethlehem. It started nine months earlier. In Matthew 1:20 Joseph is told, "...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Mary was carrying the embryonic Immanuel – the ‘God with us’. Here indeed is “very God and very man”.<sup>3</sup> And how did the incarnated God start His earthly life? As a zygote – just as we did. As the writer to the Hebrews affirms, "...he had to be made like his brothers in every way..." (Hebrews 2:17) True, His conception was different from ours, in the sense that it occurred without human sperm. Yet it is conception that remains the common start of all human life – His was supernatural, ours was natural.

A few days after receiving this astonishing news, the newly-pregnant Mary goes to meet her cousin Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant with John the Baptist. The pregnant women greet one another, but John the Baptist, as a spiritual being, recognises that he is in the presence of the Christ-child, albeit as a two-week-old embryo, and what does he do? He leaps for joy. The two pre-born boys are already demonstrating what it means to be fully human, spiritual beings, bearers of the *imago Dei*. In the meantime, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims that Mary is indeed “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:39-45). Here is post-incarnational, prenatal recognition, and holy joy.

The Bible’s account does not permit us to believe that deity was somehow poured into Christ’s body at a later date, or that this ‘mere man’ was subsequently promoted to become the Son of God. The plain truth is that Jesus was incarnated at conception, as a zygote, fully God, yet fully human – one person with two natures (John 1:1, 14; Colossians 2:9). All else is heresy. And the theological upshot is that we too began our human lives at conception. There is no room for reckoning that we somehow became human at a later date, or that personhood was subsequently attached. The Bible knows of no such gradualism.

If you doubt that human life begins at fertilisation, or if you regard the human embryo as a mere thing, then you have a

fundamental argument with Scripture. Many of the major doctrines of orthodox, historic Christianity – among them, the nature of man, the foreknowledge of God, the incarnation and our redemption – depend four-square upon these propositional truths.

## **2.4 HIS WORK OF REDEMPTION**

Hebrews 2:17 is a key verse that links both Christ’s incarnation and His work of redemption. Part of the amazing condescension of Christ for His people is that He “is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Hebrews 2:11). From His incarnation onwards Christ, “...had to be made like his brothers in every way...” (Hebrews 2:17), meaning that His development, in utero and ex utero, from conception onwards, was entirely like ours, the only difference being that He did not possess our sinful nature – He “was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). As a consequence, the Second Person of the Trinity became a true and full member of the human race from His conception. Truly He was ‘very God’, but also ‘very man’.

But there is something equally breathtaking here too. This “in every way” incarnation means that He also was composed of flesh and blood, just like us (Hebrews 2:14). And herein lies the genius of God’s plan of redemption – this incarnated Christ was to become our High Priest, but more than that, this incarnated Christ was also to become our Redeemer. That role required flesh and blood (Hebrews 9:11-28). Without such flesh and blood, how could His great work of salvation ever be accomplished? Without torn flesh there could be no shed blood, and so there could be no propitiation. Therefore the wrath of God could not be appeased, so there could be no forgiveness for us. Can you grasp the sheer immensity of it all? Without this incarnated Christ, there is no flesh, no blood, no sacrifice, no redemption, no hope – no Christianity. And this incarnation all started with a zygote!

## 2.5 THE CONTINUITY OF HUMAN LIFE

And there is still more to consider. Human life is a continuum from fertilisation until natural death. Neither the Bible nor biology knows of any stage or event that is so definitive that it can be said, “Before this, I was not, now I am”. In other words, there is a demonstrable continuity throughout each human life.

This continuity theme is beautifully expressed in three ways in Psalm 139:13-16. First, King David acknowledges God’s creational oversight of his earliest days: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” It is God the Creator who directs and purposes the beginning of prenatal life.

Second, there is the repetitive use of the personal pronouns, ‘I’ and ‘me’. This usage establishes the continuity of life between the adult David and the just-conceived David, as both the writer and the subject of this Psalm. At whatever stage and whatever age, whether in the womb or on the throne, it was always David. In other words, once fertilisation has occurred, there is a real, live human being, whether it is David or you, launched onto the continuum of zygote, morula, blastocyst, embryo, foetus, unborn child, born, baby, infant, toddler, youth, teenager, adult. Scripture and biology simply reinforce one another.

Third, there is an additional couplet of pronouns here, that of ‘I’ and ‘you’. This is a tender expression of a man (‘I’) knowing God, as well as a man being known by God (‘you’). The created and the Creator are in communion. Here is the most profound demonstration of what it means to bear the *imago Dei*. We are never just a potential human being, we are, from conception onwards, real human beings already possessed of innate identity, value and dignity.

These verses of Psalm 139 are a remarkable articulation of God’s intimate involvement in the conception, continuance and consummation of every individual human life. Each of us is a work of God.

This continuity theme is reinforced in the New Testament when

Luke, the doctor, uses the one Greek word *brephos* for Elizabeth's pre-born child (Luke 1:41, 44), as well as for the newborn Christ child (Luke 2:12, 16), and also for the young children brought to Jesus for blessing (Luke 18:15). Scripture knows of no discriminatory developmental demarcations, in either prenatal or postnatal life.

## 2.6 THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

Protection of human life is a recurring theme in Scripture. Uniquely in the created order it is only the lives of human beings that enjoy this special protection. The Sixth Commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13), stands out as a great beacon to protect all innocent human life. 'Innocent' here does not mean those 'without sin', but those 'without harm'. Killing is permitted in the cases of capital punishment, just wars and in self-defence, but killing of the innocent is strictly forbidden. Even the accidental killing of another human being was to be punished – the killer had to flee to a city of refuge (Numbers 35:6-34). And the builder of a new house had to construct a parapet around the flat roof to prevent people falling off and hurting, even killing, themselves (Deuteronomy 22:8). These are examples of God's care for those made in His image. He wants none of us to come to harm. God is pro-life – we should be too.

Moreover, according to Christ, anyone who merely hates another person is in breach of the Sixth Commandment (Matthew 5:21-22). And again the same stringent ethic appears in Romans 13:10: "Love does no harm to its neighbour." And who, it should be asked, is my neighbour?

Destroying an embryo is killing a human being, 'one of us'. It is wishing someone was dead – a straightforward breaking of God's law. At the very least, it is a form of hatred which flies in the face of the command to love our neighbour.

This non-negotiable prohibition of killing innocent human beings was originally set out in Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of

God has God made man.” And what is the basis for this protective law? It is based not upon complex and specious arguments, rather it is grounded in this one simple fact – we all bear the image of God, the *imago Dei*.

It must be added that these are not the only passages of Scripture relevant to the issues of early human life. For example, Jeremiah 20:16-18; Job 3:16; and Job 10:18-19 are fascinating passages, and there are many others which bring additional weight to the arguments already established here.



# 3. The view of the early church

The early church, unlike us, had no detailed knowledge of embryology. Furthermore, human life was a very cheap commodity in many of the ancient civilisations – abortion, infanticide and euthanasia were widely practised. So it is perhaps surprising that the Old Testament people of God, as well as the New Testament Christians, held such a high view of human life and, almost without exception, strove to protect it. And their reasons for doing so, and thereby resisting the practices of their surrounding cultures, were based solely on the teachings of the Bible, particularly those outlined in the previous pages.

Furthermore, these people of God were fully persuaded of the continuity of human life and they therefore made no distinction between pre-birth and post-birth life. As Brendan McCarthy states: “Even if the ancients had little understanding of embryology, they did understand the difference between a fully formed foetus, about to be born, and the early embryonic ‘seed’. They understood that conception took place nine months before birth and that the early embryo was very different in size and form from the later foetus. The fact that they make no distinction in their arguments, but assert that abortion is murder, indicates that we may view early-church tradition as supporting the view that the human embryo should enjoy a status equal to that of a child or adult.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, it was these self-same Judaeo-Christian doctrines that, together with the Hippocratic Oath, buttressed the ethics and

practice of early medicine in the West and then kept life in the womb largely safe for the next twenty centuries and more. That is no small feat and we should be proud of, and humbled by, such a rich heritage.

Thus the ancient people of God were constantly and consistently exerting their influence as salt and light within their own generations. Again, this can be seen in relation to the practice of infanticide. At the time of the ancient Israelites, it was commonplace for children to be sacrificed to Molech, “the detestable god of the Ammonites” (1 Kings 11:5). Yet this practice was resolutely denounced by the Jews, who upheld the death penalty for any parent committing such a crime (Leviticus 20:2). However, it must be conceded that, during times of disobedience, even some of these Israelites were involved in such heinous acts (Jeremiah 32:35).

Likewise, abortion was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world. Yet the early church’s opposition to the practice was so universal and so staunch that many believe it was responsible for purging abortion from the Roman Empire. William Lecky asserts that: “With unwavering consistency and with the strongest emphasis, they denounced the practice, not simply as inhuman, but as definitely murder.”<sup>5</sup> The *Didache*, an early Christian teaching manual, stated bluntly: “You shall not commit infanticide, nor procure abortion.”<sup>6</sup>

Among the citizens of the Graeco-Roman world, abortions were procured either by crude mechanical means, or more commonly by the use of abortifacient drugs, the so-called *pharmakon*, often in the form of pessaries. One of the leading gynaecologists of the time, Soranus of Ephesus (AD 98-138), classified these abortion methods as either *phthorion* (which destroys what has been conceived) or *ekbolion* (which expels what has been conceived).<sup>7</sup>

The Greek word used for the medical practice of the times, in the *Didache* and elsewhere, was *pharmakeia*. This was often ‘folk medicine’, which embraced abortion, linked to occult practices. In English versions of the Bible this word has generally been translated

as ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft’. For example, in Galatians 5:20, the apostle Paul condemns the practitioners of such ‘medicine’.<sup>8</sup> John Noonan considers that: “Paul’s usage here cannot be restricted to abortion, but the term he chose is comprehensive enough to include the use of abortifacient drugs.”<sup>9</sup>

Analogous condemnation occurs in the pagan Hippocratic Oath, which forbade doctors from giving lethal drugs. It included a pledge, “...not to give a deadly drug [*pharmakon*] to anyone if asked for it, nor to suggest it. Similarly, I will not give to a woman an abortifacient pessary.”<sup>10</sup> The ‘deadly drug’ undoubtedly included a range of poisons used to perform acts of euthanasia, but, according to Soranus and other first-century medical practitioners, it also included an assortment of forbidden abortifacients (*phthorion*).<sup>11</sup>

Into the second century, the same prohibitions were maintained. The early Christian theologian, Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215), taught that Christians must not, “...take away human nature, which is generated from the providence of God, by hastening abortions and applying abortifacient drugs [*phthoriois pharmakois*] to destroy utterly the embryo and, with it, the love of man.”<sup>12</sup>

These examples support this simple thesis – the Old Testament people of God and the early church were united in upholding a high view of all human life. In practice, this meant that they were steadfastly and unambiguously opposed to abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. These people understood the Bible and they understood the quasi-medicine of their day – accepting the former and rejecting the latter. But, sadly, this robust biblical worldview was not to last.



# 4. The drift from the biblical worldview

The downgrade started when the biological analysis of Aristotle (384-322 BC) influenced the theological analysis of early Christians. Aristotle said it was the soul which gave an organism its characteristic form. But in Aristotle's writings the 'soul' meant something different from what many people mean by it today: "The word *psyche*, commonly translated 'soul', really has a wider meaning; plants as well as animals have *psyche*, they are *living*."<sup>13</sup> Aristotle attributed a 'nutritive' soul (and therefore vegetative existence) to the earliest embryo; the later embryo was claimed to resemble an animal and have a 'sensitive' soul; and finally the formed foetus was said to be recognisably human and have a 'rational' or 'intellectual' soul. These features of the soul were, Aristotle claimed, added to the previous soul – which was not replaced.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle maintained that a foetus was not 'differentiated' until around the fortieth day if male, or the ninetieth day if female.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently a distinction was drawn by Aristotle's successors between an 'unformed' and a 'formed' foetus.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle himself advocated abortion as a means of population control "before sense and life have begun"<sup>17</sup> and drew a further distinction between "effluxion" – the "destruction of the embryo within the first week" – and "abortion [which] occurs up to the fortieth day."<sup>18</sup>

The damage done by these beliefs derived from Aristotle has been widespread and enduring. Whereas Christians had previously

rejected any such distinction, they began to accept the notion that the unformed foetus lacked full human status. The Aristotelian view on the biology of formation came to define, "...the limits with which, in the later moral tradition, a foetus was held to be *formatus et animatus* and so indisputably human. And whereas the deliberate destruction of nascent human life at any stage was held to be morally offensive, the penalties were graded on the basis of that distinction."<sup>19</sup> However, while Augustine (AD 354-430) accepted the distinction between 'formed' and 'unformed' embryos, he did not believe this defined what was indisputably human and he opposed abortion.<sup>20</sup>

Aquinas (AD 1225-1274) adopted a similar distinction between the pre- and post-animated foetus.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that: "Aristotle's views on human reproduction acquired great historical weight in Christian Europe on account of their substantial adoption by the outstanding philosopher and theologian St Thomas Aquinas ... It is true to say that Aristotle's general views on the origin of the individual human being held sway from prior to Christian times right through to the Middle Ages and beyond for several centuries."<sup>22</sup> In fact, it was not until the seventeenth century, when William Harvey (1578-1657) presented irrefutable biological evidence, that Aristotle's biological theories were finally discredited.<sup>23</sup>

For many today the development of human life resembles the Aristotelian belief in a delayed origin of the human being. Aristotle's followers considered about 6 or 13 weeks (dependent on the sex) to be the decisive time. More modern alternatives include birth (about 40 weeks), viability (about 23 weeks), quickening (about 16 weeks), the detection of brainwaves (about 6 weeks), the appearance of blood (about 3 weeks) and implantation (about 1-2 weeks). And the most recent, and also perhaps the most pernicious example, has surfaced as the appearance of the primitive streak (about 2 weeks), as proposed by the Warnock Committee<sup>24</sup>, and subsequently incorporated into the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act as the 14-day rule.<sup>25</sup>

This Aristotelian analysis also manifests itself in the erroneous reading of one particular passage in the Bible. Exodus 21:22-25 deals with the case of two men, who, while having a fight, accidentally injure a pregnant woman. The Septuagint rendered this passage so that if an ‘unformed’ unborn child dies, then only a fine is imposed, whereas if the child is ‘formed’ and dies, then the assailant incurs the death penalty.<sup>26</sup>

This passage has become the cornerstone for those who wish to argue that Scripture asserts that the early (unformed) unborn child has a lesser status than the adult mother, or even that of the later (formed) child. Hence, an embryo, a foetus, an unborn child are considered to be of limited value, and certainly less than that of an adult. Hence, abortion and the destruction of human embryos are justifiable practices. For example, Bruce Waltke wrote that “... God does not regard the foetus as a soul [Hebrew *nephesh*], no matter how far gestation has progressed...[this] can be demonstrated by noting that God does not impose a death penalty for the destruction of a foetus ... according to Exodus 21:22 ff. the destruction of a foetus is not a capital offense.”<sup>27</sup>

The dispute centres on verse 22. Translations influenced by the Septuagint, such as the Revised Standard Version, have translated this to mean that ‘a miscarriage’ occurs – that is, the unborn child dies as a result of the damage inflicted by the fighting men. Even if this translation is correct, an offence has still been committed and it does not allow us to argue that the unborn child is not fully human. However, this is a most improbable interpretation for several reasons.

Correctly translated the verse refers to ‘a premature birth’ – that is, the unborn child is born alive, but simply unexpectedly early. The Hebrew noun used is *yeled*, which is a common word for ‘offspring’ or ‘child’, and the verb is *yatza*, which means ‘to go out’ or ‘to come forth’. It refers to the ordinary birth of children, as in, for example, Genesis 25:26; 38:28-30, Job 3:11 and Jeremiah 1:5; 20:18. In none of these instances is a miscarriage indicated. In fact,

there is a perfectly good Hebrew word, *shakol*, for miscarriage, and it is found in Exodus 23:26 and Hosea 9:14, but not in Exodus 21:22.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, the word for ‘injury’ in this passage is non-specific, that is, it could refer to either the woman, or the child, or both. This means that the woman and the unborn child are to be treated equally – the man who caused the injury is to be fined if the damage is minor, and if it is serious, then the compensation is an eye for an eye, and so on, the well-known *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation. The idea that a mere fine is levied when there is “no serious injury” could hardly describe a situation that resulted in a death by miscarriage. Indeed, this Old Testament passage, far from demeaning the status of the unborn human life, actually elevates it by instituting penal sanctions against those who would damage or destroy such life. And those penal sanctions were to be the same as those that protected adult human life.

Finally, it should be noted that this passage of Scripture deals with punishments for an *unintentional* assault upon unborn human life – an *intentional* assault would, of course, be treated more severely.

The case presented by those who claim that Exodus 21 proves that the unborn are other than “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God (Psalm 139:14), are of lesser value than the born, and can therefore be intentionally destroyed, is both illogical and unsound.

# 5. Refuting six common answers

The fundamental question remains: “When does human life begin?” Many reject the answer of conception, fertilisation, day one. For them, that answer is simply too simple. They prefer something vaguer, more philosophical, even a little mystical.

But being uncertain and unclear about the beginning of human life, and *ipso facto* the nature and status of the human embryo, is not a virtue. Such a deliberately agnostic stance is reprehensible. First, it empowers men and women to destroy human life, especially unborn human life. Second, it allows them to continue in the self-deception that they are acting entirely honourably, both intellectually and bioethically. Third, their erroneous views allow them to evade the reality of their actions. They can then say: “If human life does not begin until implantation (or fourteen days, or later), we can experiment, clone, manipulate and finally destroy human embryos, prescribe and use abortifacient ‘contraceptives’, sanction permissive laws, bend the truth, redefine facts and misinform others.”

So what reasons do such men and women raise to justify their thinking and practices? They have six favourites. These will now be reviewed and refuted.

## 5.1 THE POTENTIAL ANSWER

While denying full human status for the human embryo, some

would maintain that the embryo does have potential – the potential to ‘become’ a human life. But this argument hugely underestimates the true nature and functioning of the human embryo.

Consider four objections. First, there is the origin of the gametes involved. The resultant embryo must already be undeniably human – it is genetically programmed to be nothing other than human. Second, it is undeniably alive – cell division and differentiation are already occurring. The living embryo is already enjoying human life. Third, some will say that it does not look human, meaning it does not look like a pre-born or newborn child. This is true. Rather, it looks exactly like an embryonic human, because that is precisely what it is. Fourth, given the opportunity to develop, the embryo will become nothing other than what it essentially already is, namely, a human being. The three adjectives that most accurately describe this entity are, ‘human’, ‘living’ and ‘embryonic’.

So, the answer based on ‘potential’, though beloved by some, is essentially flawed because it belittles what is already present and it detracts from what is already happening. A human embryo is not a potential human being – it is *a human being with potential*.

## 5.2 THE INCAPABLE ANSWER

It is often argued that human embryos are incapable of certain human functions and therefore they should not be treated as being fully human. For example, it is typically claimed that they cannot communicate or form relationships (though in the light of what we now know about the biochemical signalling between embryo and mother this might be seriously questioned).<sup>29</sup> Yet it is patently obvious that human embryos cannot do all that human adults can do. But why should early embryos be assessed by the marks of mature adulthood? Of course, the simple answer is that it is adults who are doing the adjudicating. Yet, judged by those criteria, it is not only embryos, but also babies, the comatose and many elderly people who would be condemned as incapable, and therefore non-

human. To determine the value of human beings by what they can, or cannot, do, rather than by their God-given dignity and status, is a sure step onto the path of prejudice and discrimination.

This incapable argument can also appear under another muddling guise, namely, theological dualism. Dualism maintains that true human beings are composed of the physical and the spiritual – they have a body (the material part) and a soul (the immaterial part). And unless the soul is present, a proper, valuable human being cannot exist. This harks back to the errors arising from the writings of Aristotle and the ensuing controversies surrounding ensoulment.

The first point to note is that the Bible does indeed teach that all those made in the image of God possess ‘a body’ and ‘a soul’<sup>30</sup> (sometimes also referred to as ‘a spirit’ – compare, for instance, John 12:27 and 13:21 KJV/ESV). These are distinct, but not opposed. The Bible teaches duality, not dualism. Second, the teaching of the Bible is that each of us is a body-soul, “unity-in-duality”<sup>31</sup> – you *are* body and soul. Thus the Hebrew word *nephesh* used when Adam became a “living being” (Genesis 2:7) can also be translated as ‘soul’.<sup>32</sup>

Arguments founded on incapability and dualism are wrong because they are derived from a faulty understanding of the true nature and development of human beings.

## 5.3 THE GRADUALIST ANSWER

Many people would argue for a ‘gradualist’ approach, that is to say, that as the embryo or, from about 8 weeks onwards, the foetus develops, it becomes progressively more human, more valuable. For example, in the 1980s the Warnock Committee concluded that destructive experimentation could be conducted on human embryos up to 14 days, but after that time, when the primitive streak has appeared, such experimentation must be halted (see section 5.5 below).<sup>33</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are people like Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, who are quite happy to recommend that

the unborn, and even the newborn up to 28 days after birth, should be killed if they cannot demonstrate certain ‘normal’ human attributes.<sup>34</sup> Others favour alternative criteria such as viability, the appearance of blood or brain waves, 24 weeks (as the upper limit of most UK abortions), and so forth.

Two aspects must be firmly grasped. First, all of these criteria are always entirely arbitrary – they have been plucked out of the air. Take, for example, the 24-week limit. There is nothing especially significant that occurs at 24 weeks in the developing pre-born – a multitude of processes are already in full swing. This upper limit for current abortions in the UK (between 1967 and 1990 it was arbitrarily set at 28 weeks) was decided upon simply to reflect advances in neonatal care and the ensuing reduction in the age of viability, the survival of premature babies – after all, we would not want to abort a viable baby, would we? Similarly, the Warnock Committee decided that 14 days was somehow biologically significant. Nevertheless, the Committee itself recognised that this too was an arbitrary limit, opting for 14 days not because of some rational information, but because, “...we agreed that this was an area in which some precise decision must be taken, in order to allay public anxiety”.<sup>35</sup>

Second, these gradualists’ criteria make for philosophical, as well as biological, nonsense. What is the essential difference between a 24-week-old child and one who is 23 weeks and 6 days? Or what about the 14- and the 15-day-old embryo? The answers are nothing, and again, nothing! And, anyway, how precise is the timing of these different developmental stages? The rate of embryonic development, like all human development, varies from individual to individual.

How modern men and women are seduced by the gradualist answer. Initially, it has some attraction because we all get increasingly excited by the positive pregnancy test, then the first scan, then the kicks from within the womb, and so on. But these gradualists, while obsessed with the thought of the embryo or the

foetus developing and thus ‘becoming’ a human life, close their eyes to the key fact – that that life has already ‘become’, it has already begun.

## **5.4 THE MODERN MEDICAL ETHICS ANSWER**

The ethics and practice of medicine were founded upon a combination of the Hippocratic Oath and the Judaeo-Christian doctrines. These two grand ethical pillars undergirded medical practice for 2,000 years and more. They kept it safe and beneficial, and they prohibited the deliberate taking of human life, specifically, by abortion and euthanasia. In 1949, in the wake of the Nuremberg trials, these traditional ethical codes were reiterated in the form of The Geneva Convention Code of Medical Ethics. It included the following statement: “I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception; even under threat. I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity.” The world, and doctors in particular, were left in no doubt about what this meant – the hope was that unethical medicine, as perpetrated during the Nazi regime, would never again be practised.

However, today’s medical ethics has largely departed from these traditional, robust roots. Now it is mostly governed by fuzzy philosophies, such as situation ethics and secular humanism. And because its ethics are now so feeble, its practice has inevitably become unprincipled – today, medicine is a much more dangerous enterprise, especially for human embryos.

Therefore, there will be no satisfactory answer to be found from modern secular medical ethics – it has been corrupted.

## **5.5 THE MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY ANSWER**

*The Warnock Report* was published in 1984 as a result of the Government Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology. The Report was a bioethical landmark. Not only

did it set the framework for the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, but it also sought to establish the nature and status of human embryos and their use in assisted reproductive technologies, as well as in scientific research. Its conclusions have maintained a persistent and influential reach, both worldwide and into the twenty-first century.

The remit of the Warnock Committee was to resolve some of the great bioethical questions concerning human embryos. Faced with that greatest question of all, namely: “When does human life begin?”, it meaninglessly concluded that, “...when life or personhood begin ... are complex amalgams of factual and moral judgements. Instead of trying to answer these questions directly we have therefore gone straight to the question of *how it is right to treat the human embryo*.”<sup>36</sup> The authors of *The Warnock Report*, like many others, preferred to duck the great question by pretending that it is an unfathomable, philosophical issue, somehow beyond human comprehension. Yet amazingly, having signally failed to answer this momentous question and thereby resolve the debate over when human life begins, and thus, the status of the human embryo, *The Warnock Report* pragmatically moved on to consider how the human embryo should be used and treated. But how can you prescribe treatment if you are unsure who or what you are treating? This is modern moral philosophy at its very worst. Such evasion, deception and fudging of the issues discredits the whole undertaking. The world of the 1980s was waiting for the answer – Warnock sidestepped the question.

So how did the members of the Warnock Committee regard the human embryo? Their Report states: “We found that the more generally held position, however, is that though the human embryo is entitled to some added measure of respect beyond that accorded to other animal subjects, that respect cannot be absolute...”<sup>37</sup> And it recommended, “...that the embryo of the human species should be afforded some protection in law”.<sup>38</sup> So, according to *The Warnock Report*, the human embryo is a ‘sort of’ human being,

worthy of some respect and protection. This seems meaningless, especially since the Committee was happy to recommend that human embryos can be used as laboratory material, as long as they are killed before 14 days. The outcome initiated a new fashion for deliberately destroying early human life on an unprecedented scale. You are entitled to ask: “Where is the ‘respect’ and ‘protection’ in that?”

Sadly these pseudo-arguments derived from *The Warnock Report* have become embedded in much of the world’s thinking and practice with regard to the human embryo. Therefore, there will be no sufficient answer to be found from modern moral philosophy – it has become bankrupt.

## 5.6 THE ‘NEW BIOLOGY’ ANSWER

What is it to conceive? According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* it is to, “become pregnant with (young)”.<sup>39</sup> So conception marks the start of a pregnancy. “Oh, no it doesn’t”, cry those who state that implantation is the significant event. They argue that human life does not begin until the embryo implants in the womb.

Implantation is one of the myriad of processes that takes place, remarkably rapidly, and in a wonderful sequence, once an ovum has been fertilised. Of course, implantation is essential to the continuing growth and development of the embryo, but it marks neither the beginning nor the end of anything – it is simply one of the stages through which the human embryo must pass during pregnancy.

So where did this different answer to that old question of when human life begins come from? One of its earliest expressions came, almost unbelievably, from the British Council of Churches. In a 1962 Statement it declared: “A distinction must be drawn between biological and human life, and, in the absence of more precise knowledge, nidation (implantation) may most conveniently be assumed to be the point at which the former becomes the latter ...

A woman cannot abort until the fertilised egg cell has nidated and thus become attached to her body. Whilst therefore, we judge that any interference with the process of development after that date is wrong, we see no objection to the use of a technique which would prevent implantation.”<sup>40</sup>

This was an entirely novel way of thinking about the early days of human life to say that pregnancy did not begin until implantation. Yet within twenty years it had become political dogma, the get-out clause, the ‘new biology’.

Since then some have redefined ‘conception’ to be synonymous with implantation – so that a woman only ‘conceives’ if the embryo implants in her womb. But this sleight of hand would overturn the authoritative scientific and medical opinion of hundreds of years, which has held that ‘conception’ and ‘fertilisation’ are synonyms. Just two examples from the medical literature should be sufficient to demonstrate this fact, defining ‘conception’ as: “The fertilization of the ovum by a spermatozoon...”<sup>41</sup> and “the act of becoming pregnant, by the fertilization of an ovum.”<sup>42</sup> That is concise and clear, is it not? ‘Conception’ and ‘fertilisation’ are the same – let no one drive a wedge between them. The real battleground here is over when ‘pregnancy’ begins.

# 6. The purpose of the 'new biology'

Why did implantation become such a 'hot button' issue during the 1980s? Because it was used by the then Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) to re-write basic human biology, as once we all knew it, and thereby to promulgate this 'new biology'. Advocates of the 'new biology' could now claim that conception and pregnancy were *not* the same. If a pregnancy cannot now be said to start until *implantation* has occurred, then drugs such as the morning-after pill which stop implantation by thinning the lining of the womb may be said to 'prevent pregnancy'.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, according to the 'new biology', a pregnancy does not now last on average forty weeks, but only thirty-nine weeks and one day. *Ipsa facto*, human life begins at day six, or thereabouts. Furthermore, this 'new biology' demands that the definition of the word 'contraceptive' be revised. Now a 'contraceptive' must include any substance or device that works up to six days after fertilisation. Now a 'contraceptive' can include anything that can destroy the human embryo prior to implantation. A verbal cloak has been used to cover up the truth about the beginning of human life. We should not be fooled.

This 'new biology' was a mischievous invention by the DHSS to ensure that the morning-after pill was no longer illegal. Because it can operate by preventing implantation, that is, as an abortifacient, rather than as a true contraceptive, its use would have contravened the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. Section 59

of that Act states: “Whosoever shall unlawfully supply or procure any Poison or other noxious Thing, or any Instrument or Thing whatsoever, knowing that the same is intended to be unlawfully used or employed with Intent to procure the Miscarriage of any Woman, whether she be or be not with Child, shall be guilty of a Misdemeanor...”.

It should be noted that the technical term ‘miscarriage’, as used here, is the equivalent of abortion – that precedent was enshrined in the 1803 Ellenborough Act, which speaks of ‘miscarriage or abortion’ as synonyms, and both denoting the forbidden deed. And it should be noted that the terminology, established by both the 1803 and the 1861 Acts, was unchanged by the 1967 Abortion Act. Furthermore, it should also be noted that ‘carriage’ is not the word used in the 1861 Act – rather the term used is ‘with Child’. So the word ‘miscarriage’ must mean ‘without Child’. Therefore a woman is ‘with Child’, a genetically unique human being, as soon as fertilisation has taken place.

Since the 1861 Act prescribes penalties of up to life imprisonment when “any Poison or other noxious Thing” is used to procure a miscarriage, and the morning-after pill fitted that description, the heat was on. In 1981 the DHSS was busy devising the ‘new biology’ in order to smuggle the morning-after pill past this 1861 Act. Why not say that pregnancy has not occurred until the embryo has implanted – then implantation, rather than conception, could be renamed as the start of a pregnancy. Then the morning-after pill cannot possibly be called an abortifacient – after all, how can it possibly procure a miscarriage, when there has been no pregnancy? ‘Early abortion’ can now be renamed ‘emergency contraception’.

And that is exactly what has happened – words have suddenly been given new meanings. Despite the fact that the embryo is carried by the mother before implantation, they now say that ‘carriage’ does not begin until implantation. In defiance of common sense, they say something cannot be carried unless it is actually attached to the person. But what about the pound coin in my pocket? And what

about the woman who is carrying an embryo between fertilisation and implantation – if, under the rules of the ‘new biology’, she is now not pregnant, then what is she?



# 7. Refuting the ‘new biology’

Those who espouse this ‘new biology’ are at loggerheads with the ‘old biology’. Typically, these new biologists raise what they consider to be four insurmountable problems with the ‘old biology’. They believe these prove, beyond all doubt, that pregnancy begins at implantation and not at fertilisation, and thus they eagerly reject the grand status of the early, unimplanted, human embryo. These four so-called ‘problems’ will now be examined.

## 7.1 THE NON-PROBLEM OF LIVING GAMETES

Some ask: “What is so special about fertilisation? If it were to mark the beginning of human life, then what about the precursors of zygotes, namely, sperm and ova? Surely they should be regarded as the real beginning? After all, they are human and they are alive. Why disregard them? Why not give them special protection too?”

While it is true that human embryos, sperm and ova can all be considered to be alive, this raw statement needs a crucial addendum. The embryo is alive *and* growing – indeed, the processes of cell division and differentiation are diagnostic of this new human life. On the other hand, sperm and ova are unable to replicate, or reproduce, or genetically express themselves. They will die rapidly unless they are kept alive artificially. And no matter how long they survive, sperm and ova will always remain as single cells. By contrast, the living human embryo is entirely different. It is already an embryonic member of the human race. It already possesses the

intrinsic powers and potentialities to become a mature member of *Homo sapiens*. Nothing else needs to be added – all that is required is nutrition and a non-hostile environment.

So the truths of the ‘old biology’ can never be written off by playing the ‘gametes card’.

## **7.2 THE NON-PROBLEM OF EMBRYO LOSS**

Another argument runs something like this – because not every human embryo results in a live birth, such natural wastage, they say, is indicative of a loss of some fairly unimportant human material.<sup>44</sup> ‘Mother Nature is prodigal’ is their typical slogan. Or put another way, they say: “If Nature can be so wasteful of early embryos, then surely so can we too. Why bother to protect something so tiny?”

This is a strange argument. At least three objections can be raised. First, just because something is minuscule does not make it without value – think of diamonds. Second, everyone knows that not all embryos result in born children – natural miscarriages occur. Is anyone therefore seriously suggesting that, because of such natural embryonic and foetal loss, we could, or even should, deliberately destroy the unborn at any time from fertilisation right up to birth? Third, the logical extension of this argument is that because we are all eventually going to die, why not legalise murder now?

It is also true to say that very little evidence has been produced to support the claim that many embryos are lost before implantation. The events occurring in the natural environment of a woman’s body between conception and implantation are not readily amenable to scientific study and therefore not much is known about them. Those who use this argument cannot be confident in what they claim.

## **7.3 THE NON-PROBLEM OF TWINNING**

Some have argued that the occurrence of identical, or monozygotic, twins, that is, when a zygote, or an early embryo, splits into two,

proves that we cannot be sure that we are dealing with just one individual until that twinning process has ceased to occur, which is generally considered to be at implantation. Therefore implantation, rather than fertilisation, should be regarded as the start of the life of any individual human being.

At least three objections can be raised. First, if twinning does occur at a time subsequent to fertilisation, why does that matter? Now there are two individuals, two embryonic human beings. But before that, what was there? Since conception there has never been none – there has always been at least one. Natural cloning has occurred and one has somehow become two. But the ‘original’ was always a true living, human being – it was never a nothing waiting to become two somethings: “There are clearly two embryos with two destinies in the embryo with twins.”<sup>45</sup> Second, implantation cannot be regarded as the determining event on the basis that the twinning process is complete by then because Siamese twins remain joined beyond implantation, and indeed beyond birth. Third, our understanding of the twinning process is poor. Twinning may take place as early as the two-cell stage on day one, or later. It may be that the ‘trigger’, or the determinant, for twinning is actually present at fertilisation. After all, it is clear that there is a genetic component in twinning, which must have been present at fertilisation. So what is more correct to say is that twinning is observable later on, not that it necessarily commences later on.

## **7.4 THE NON-PROBLEM OF IN VITRO FERTILISATION (IVF)**

Others claim that in assisted reproductive technologies, like IVF, because fertilisation occurs outside the womb, the mother cannot be considered to be pregnant until the embryos are transferred and they implant in her womb. Hence fertilisation and pregnancy must be different.

At least two objections need to be considered. First, it should

be noted that in IVF fertilisation has occurred (after all, it is called in vitro *fertilisation*) and a human life has indeed begun, albeit outside of the mother. So although she has not conceived in the conventional manner, a living human embryo has certainly been conceived, otherwise just what is it that the embryologists are so carefully transferring to the mother a few days later? Second, consider what might one day become a technological reality – total extra-uterine gestation, the artificial bringing to term of a child outside the womb. The entire pregnancy would take place in artificial conditions, yet the child would still be a child from his or her conception.

Most will agree that these four ‘new biology’ arguments are pretty feeble. They are certainly not sufficient to rewrite basic human biology and re-educate us all.

# 8. Conclusion

There is no school of thought, no religion, no book, no worldview that expounds the nature and status of all human life from womb to tomb like Christianity and its Bible – providing a cohesive, robust and entirely reasonable set of answers. Biblical truths are reinforced by evidence from science, though philosophies often misuse science to contradict the Bible. That should surprise nobody – truth often has this uncomfortable habit of clashing with the thoughts and ways of men.

If all human life is made in the image of God and therefore special and intrinsically valuable from conception, then there is much in our society that Christians must challenge. All deliberate destruction of human life is wrong, whether by abortion, embryo experimentation, contraception, euthanasia, or any other means.

Yet what do we find in our society today? Over 200,000 abortions are performed each year in the UK.<sup>46</sup> Unknown thousands of human embryos are frozen, stored and destroyed by assisted reproductive technologies. In addition, human embryos are either specifically created, or obtained as excess ‘spares’ from IVF procedures, for use in destructive experimentation. Embryonic stem cell technology also means that human embryos are routinely destroyed in order to harvest such cells. More and more sophisticated prenatal screening techniques, including preimplantation genetic diagnosis, have been developed to implement a eugenic ‘search and destroy’ mission against the unborn who are suspected of being disabled. Non-reproductive human cloning, including the creation of animal-human hybrids, is now lawful as long as all such embryos are killed before 14 days. The State promotes and supplies morning-after

pills to schoolgirls under the pretext of ‘emergency contraception’ yet knowing that one of its modes of action can be abortifacient. There is a vociferous, well-funded campaign to change the law and permit acts of euthanasia. This is a sad, sad list. Some have called our society ‘a culture of death’.<sup>47</sup> It is an apt title.

This ‘culture of death’ demands an informed and caring Christian response – a response of principled compassion. Principled compassion is that combination of credenda and agenda, of thinking and acting, that is deeply rooted within the ethical framework of the Bible. And it is the Bible that calls us to pray to God for His mercy, and wisdom and the courage to act accordingly.

These pages began with the one great question: “When does human life begin?” and the challenge to answer it carefully and satisfactorily. You may now agree with this booklet’s basic proposition that there is only one truthful answer, namely, conception. But this seemingly simple one-word answer has far-reaching consequences. Consider just three. First, there is our obligation to be in awe at how we, and all human beings, are “fearfully and wonderfully made” in God’s image (Psalm 139:14; Genesis 1:27). Second, there is the need for us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we will know how God wants us to live for Him (Romans 12:2). Third, there is the call for us to practise principled compassion – to protect, defend and cherish all human life. May it be so!

# References

- <sup>1</sup> Schaeffer, F A and Koop, C E, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980, page 125
- <sup>2</sup> Sproul, R C, 'Radical Corruption', *Table-talk*, July 2005, page 6
- <sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 8, para. 2 (1646)
- <sup>4</sup> McCarthy, B, *Fertility and Faith: The Ethics of Human Fertilization*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1997, page 91
- <sup>5</sup> Lecky, W E H, *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne*, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1877, vol. 2, page 22
- <sup>6</sup> Torrance, T F, 'The Being and Nature of the Unborn Child', *Theology Matters*, 6(4), 2000, page 2
- <sup>7</sup> Noonan, J T, 'An Almost Absolute Value in History', in Noonan, J T (Ed.) *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives*, Harvard University Press, 1971, pages 3 and 4
- <sup>8</sup> "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious:- sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and *witchcraft*; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Galatians 5:19-21 (emphasis added)
- <sup>9</sup> Noonan, J T, *Op cit*, pages 8-9
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pages 4-5 and footnote 4 on page 5 (parenthesis in original)
- <sup>11</sup> *Loc cit* (parenthesis in original)
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, page 11 (parenthesis in original)
- <sup>13</sup> Urmson, J O (Ed.) *The Concise Encyclopædia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, Hutchinson and Co., 1960, page 32
- <sup>14</sup> Dunstan, G R, 'The Moral Status of the Human Embryo: A Tradition Recalled', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 1, 1984, page 39
- <sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, VII.3.583b, see Smith, J A and Ross, W D (Eds) *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 4, Oxford University Press, 1910
- <sup>16</sup> Jones, D A, *The Soul of the Embryo: An Enquiry into the Status of the Human Embryo in the Christian Tradition*, Continuum, 2004, page 31
- <sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Politica*, VII.16.1335b, see Ross, W D (Ed.) *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 10, Oxford University Press, 1972
- <sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, VII.3.583b, *Op cit*. A distinction between 'effluxion' and 'abortion' is of course an artificial one. The modern-day claim that pregnancy only begins a few days after conception (at implantation) is surprisingly reminiscent of Aristotle on this point.
- <sup>19</sup> Dunstan, G R, *Op cit*, page 39 (italics in original)
- <sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, chapter 85, see Schaff, P (Ed.) *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the*

*Christian Church*, vol. 3, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956, page 265; Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, book 1, chapter 17, see Schaff, P (Ed.) *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956, page 271

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 64, Article 7, see, [http://www.ccel.org/aquinas/summa/SS\\_Q64\\_A7.html](http://www.ccel.org/aquinas/summa/SS_Q64_A7.html) as at 11 March 2011

<sup>22</sup> Ford, N M, *When Did I Begin? Conception of the Human Individual in History, Philosophy and Science*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, page 39. Aquinas distinguished Christ from all other humans, stating that Christ was conceived instantly by the power of the Holy Spirit whereas in all other cases conception is not completed until the fortieth day for males or the ninetieth day for females. Aquinas much developed the philosophy of Aristotle. Norman Ford has shown how Aquinas was responsible for the belief that a male child, as well as being differentiated, receives a 'rational soul' at forty days, whereas a female receives a 'rational soul' at ninety days. According to Aquinas, therefore, it is possible to say that a woman has conceived after forty or ninety days – depending on the sex of the child. *Ibid*, pages 39-43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pages 43-47

<sup>24</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology*, Department of Health and Social Security, July 1984 [subsequently referred to in the text as, *The Warnock Report*], page 66

<sup>25</sup> Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, Section 3

<sup>26</sup> Jones, D A, *Op cit*, pages 47-48

<sup>27</sup> Waltke, B K, 'Old Testament Texts Bearing on the Problem of the Control of Human Reproduction', in Spitzer, W O and Saylor, C L (Eds) *Birth Control and*

*the Christian – A Protestant Symposium on the Control of Human Reproduction*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1969, pages 10-11. Subsequently Waltke changed his view and opposed abortion – Waltke, B K, 'Reflections from The Old Testament on Abortion', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 19(1), 1976, pages 3 and 13. Waltke still believed that his interpretation of Exodus 21 is the proper one (that the passage does not equate foeticide with murder), but admitted: "The case I presented, however, is less than conclusive for both exegetical and logical reasons." He went on: "A more serious objection to the way in which I used the passage, however, is the illogical conclusion I drew from it. It does not necessarily follow that because the law did not apply the principle of *lex talionis*, that is 'person for person,' when the foetus was aborted through fighting that therefore the foetus is less than a human being. The purpose of the decision recorded in this debated passage was not to define the nature of the foetus but to decide a just claim in the case of an induced abortion that may or may not have been accidental." *Ibid*, page 3

<sup>28</sup> Cottrell, J W, 'Abortion and the Mosaic Law', *Christianity Today*, 16 March 1973, pages 6-9; Davis, J J, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, P&L Publishing, 2004, page 159; *Report of the Committee to Study the Matter of Abortion: Presented to the Thirty-Eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, May 1971, pages 8 and 9

<sup>29</sup> Implantation is a hugely complex process. Before physical attachment actually commences, there is a cascade of changes occurring within, and between, both the embryo and the mother. It has been likened to the preparation required for a rendezvous between an orbiting satellite and the mother spaceship. Early on, complex communications are established between the two. Genes are activated and various hormones and cell surface receptors are produced (synthesised) in order

- that the embryo matures in tandem with an increasingly receptive endometrium so that the embryo can ‘dock’ successfully. See Horne A W, White J O and Lalani, E, ‘The Endometrium and Embryo Implantation’, *British Medical Journal*, 321(7272), 2000, pages 1301-1302.
- <sup>30</sup> See for example Matthew 10:28
- <sup>31</sup> Sproul, R C, *Essentials of the Christian Faith*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1992, page 134
- <sup>32</sup> See Genesis 2:7 (KJV)
- <sup>33</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology*, *Op cit*, page 66
- <sup>34</sup> Kuhse, H and Singer, P, *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants*, Oxford University Press, 1985, page 195
- <sup>35</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology*, *Op cit*, page 65
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, page 60 (italics in original)
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, page 62
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, page 63
- <sup>39</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1979, vol. 1, page 500
- <sup>40</sup> British Council of Churches, quoted in *The Sunday Times*, 20 September 1981
- <sup>41</sup> *Butterworths Medical Dictionary*, Second Edition, Butterworths, 1978, page 400
- <sup>42</sup> *Baillière’s Nurses’ Dictionary*, 24th Edition, Elsevier, 2005, page 90
- <sup>43</sup> For more information on the mode of action of the morning-after pill see Ling, J R, *The Morning-After Pill – Uncovering the Truth*, The Christian Institute, 2007, pages 18-24 see <http://www.christian.org.uk/resource/the-morning-after-pill> as at 25 May 2011
- <sup>44</sup> See for example, MacKay, D M, ‘The Beginnings of Personal Life’, *The Journal of The Christian Medical Fellowship*, 30:2(118), April 1984, pages 9-13
- <sup>45</sup> Saunders, P, *Personal Submission from the General Secretary of The Christian Medical Fellowship to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing ‘Pre-Implantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD)’*, 1999, see [cmf.org.uk/advocacy/submissions/?id=31](http://cmf.org.uk/advocacy/submissions/?id=31) as at 18 May 2022
- <sup>46</sup> *Abortion Statistics, England and Wales: 2020*, Department of Health, June 2021, Table 13; House of Lords, Hansard, 28 April 2021, col 2269
- <sup>47</sup> Smith, W J, *Culture of Death: The Assault on Medical Ethics in America*, Encounter Books, 2000; Ling, J R, *Responding to the Culture of Death – A Primer of Bioethical Issues*, Day One Publications, 2001; Gormally, L, (Ed.) ‘*Culture of Life - Culture of Death: Proceedings of an International Conference on ‘The Great Jubilee and the Culture of Life’*’, Linacre Centre, 2002

# When does human life begin?

Christian thinking and contemporary opposition

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Dr John R Ling has lectured, debated, broadcast and written about bioethical issues for the past 35 years and more. His latest book is *Bioethical Issues – Understanding and Responding to the Culture of Death* (2014). He was a lecturer in biochemistry and bioethical issues at Aberystwyth University, Wales. His personal website is: [www.johnling.co.uk](http://www.johnling.co.uk)

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