

A Love Letter Regarding the Beginning of Life

My Dearest Wife,

I stand helpless as the congregation goes to prayer. Heads are bowed and eyes are closed, except for yours and mine. I can only watch helplessly as silently before 1300 people you wipe the tears repeatedly from your eyes. Yes, he is gone. Eight weeks ago, he came into existence, conceived in your womb. But now, we can only know him in heaven. And I believe his spirit is currently with the Father, who will restore his body to its intended wholeness at the resurrection.

Did I tell you of my dream? When you first told me two weeks ago that you were bleeding, I did not think much of it. We had seen that with a few of our current children, and they had survived. I was more concerned about how we were going to accommodate another person in our already crowded home. However, I had this uncanny dream, a walking dream. It was momentary, but the image stuck in my mind and seems more real now than this pen and paper in my hand. I was in heaven. I cannot tell you exactly why or how, but I know I was in heaven. And this tallish young man with dark hair came to me and introduced himself to me. The only words I can remember are, "I am your son." And then he smiled at me with a smile of purity and knowledge. And then I was gone. That is it. That is all I saw, but I will never forget it.

My dearest wife, God has given us seven children, and five have survived the travails of growth in the womb and childbirth. You, my lovely bride, are the image of God, as are all seven of our precious children. You are special, and they are special, every single one of them, including the two that have preceded us to glory. I do not know why God took two of our children so early, but He did. He is a just God; He is a God who is love itself; He is an all-powerful and all-knowing God. He can and does what is best, even when we do not understand. This is all I know; this is all we have; this is all we need.

Some would deny that the little body, who died in your womb, was even a person. Others, even some that would dare call themselves Christian, would deny that we know when life begins, even referring to our belief that life begins from the moment of conception as charming but insignificant. But true Biblicists, including Southern Baptists, know that we must "contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death" (*Baptist Faith & Message* 2000, Art. XV).

And why do we believe this, my love? Is it because of a dream, or because of a science, or a confession, or a loose emotion? No, for we know all of these things are fallible. Are the feelings of a mother and the dream of a father persuasive to us? Perhaps, but the existence of sin has taught both of us that our reason, our emotions, and our dreams may be false. There is only one thing that we can trust: God's Word. We must strive to take every thought captive to Christ, allowing Him to judge its truthfulness (2 Cor. 10:5). And the incarnate Word, by means of His apostle, reveals that we may not go beyond the written Word (1 Cor. 4:6). And what does His Word teach?

When I turn to God's Word, I am overwhelmed by the truth that human life and personhood begins at conception. Before considering this particular truth, however, let us remember the origin of life and human personhood. We are told in Genesis 1 that humans were created after the animals on the sixth day. Man is without doubt a creature like all other creatures. But our creatureliness is different than that of the beasts of the earth, and

the birds of the air, and the creatures of the sea. We have been specially created by God and endowed with life in a way that far surpasses that of other creatures (Ps. 8:5; Heb. 2:7).

While God created all that is in the six days, everything else is referred to as “good,” but the creation of humanity prompts God to say it is “very good.” Man is created and deemed “very good” because he is given the very “image” and “likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Moreover, a man’s life comes into him in a way that indicates a closeness to God unavailable to other creatures. God literally breathed life into the body of man, thus making him a “living soul” (2:7). What is interesting here is that that which makes man a living being is the combination of two things: the body formed by God out of the earth, and the breath of life breathed by God into the same body. Man is a unified being composed of body and breath; he is an embodied soul.

There is no idea here that somehow the soul is human while the body is a dispensable commodity. The idea that what is real in man is entirely immaterial comes from pagan philosophy. This belief that man’s body is less important and intentionally detachable from his soul has been called “the first heresy” (Gilbert Meilaender, “Conscience and Authority,” *First Things* 177 [November 2007], 35). Those who treat the body as if it were a mere pair of jeans reflect the influence of Gnostic dualism. This Hellenistic speculation treated man’s body as secondary, even harmful to the soul. Such dualism is still taught by some who claim the name of Christ, but they require correction, for God made man a living being by breathing life into the body.

The soul is indeed detached at death from the body. However, it should be remembered that death is a result of sin, and God did not create man to sin. Death and the concomitant temporary divorce of body from soul was not God’s creative intention. Death is due to man’s rebellion against God. Moreover, God overcame man’s rebellion by atoning for man through the death of His Son. And the Son subsequently rose from the dead so that He might resurrect the body of man, removing thereby the power of death and undoing the separation of body and spirit. Even those who reject Christ will receive their bodies again, but alas only to go to eternal damnation, also known as the second death (Rev. 20:4-6, 11-15).

So life comes to man as an embodied soul. And that life is special, not only because God breathes spirit into man to give him life, but also because God gives to humanity His image. The *imago Dei* (“image of God”) is given to both male and female (Gen. 1:27), thus making sacred every human person. The *imago Dei* is providentially transmitted from father to son through or alongside generation itself (5:3). The *imago Dei* is what gives to human beings our special dignity: to murder the image is to draw down the wrath of God in the form of execution (9:6). God loves His image and does not countenance its diminution or destruction.

This is why it is so important to affirm the proper time of the beginning of life. If one murders a man, that one shall die, for man is made in the *imago Dei*. Baby, our children are all made in the *imago Dei*, and that image is brought to them at the beginning of life. So, when does life begin, according to the Bible? Life, the Bible teaches, begins with conception; the human person comes into existence when he or she is conceived in the womb of a woman.

This truth is seen both explicitly in how the Bible treats the conceived person and in the penalty laid upon a man for damaging a child in the womb. First, the Bible

consistently treats the one who is conceived in the womb as a person. Conception in the womb, and birth from the womb, are two important moments in the life of a person. At conception the human being—although manifestly hidden from the world—is known as a person by God. In birth, the person, who has hitherto existed in the nourishing and protective environment of the mother’s womb, is manifested openly to the world.

The Bible most certainly treats conception and birth as distinct moments, but it does not treat them as the world often does. The world, because of its limits and perversions, tends to treat the conceived but unborn child as a thing, a “fetus,” an “it.” But Scripture treats the conceived child and the birthed child as the same subject. In the very first entrance of human child into the world, that of Cain, he is treated equally in his conception and in his birth. Eve, it is said, “conceived [*harah*] and bore [*yalad*] Cain” (Gen. 4:1). There is no distinction here between the one who was conceived and the one who was born—the same person, Cain, is the subject of both states of existence. And Eve’s response to Cain makes no distinction between the one conceived and the one born: she simply acquired a “man” from God in conception as in birth.

Subsequently, the twofold subject of conception and birth is treated of a singular person throughout the Old and New Testaments. For instance, Cain’s wife “conceived and bore Enoch” (4:17). Again, Hannah “conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel” (1 Sam. 1:20). There are numerous other Old Testament references coupling conception and birth with a singular subject; and the subject is always a full human, for there is no hint that the conceived child is somehow not fully a child, nor is there any hint that the name of the child applies to the born child rather than the conceived child. The reason humans have generally waited to officially name a child is that we typically have not known whether the child is male or female prior to his or her manifestation to the world outside the womb.

In the New Testament, the same coupling of the two moments, conception and birth, to a singular subject continues. Moreover, some children are even named prior to their birth, as a result of divine revelation. A virgin, Mary, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, was told she would “conceive in your womb and bring forth a son.” This son was both conceived and brought forth with the name of Jesus (Luke 1:31). And Elizabeth conceived a son, too. Note that the human subject is identified as a human without reference to birth, but only with reference to conception (1:36). The child in the womb is even said to experience and express emotion. Elizabeth said that John “leaped in my womb for joy” upon hearing the voice of the Savior’s mother (1:41, 44). Note, finally, from the Lukan birth narrative, that the Lord Jesus Christ is “He” who “was conceived in the womb” (2:21).

The Matthean birth narrative speaks similarly, but here it is concerned to relay the birth of Christ from the perspective of Joseph. Joseph was informed that “that which is conceived” in Mary is “of the Holy Spirit,” who is “a child” (Matt. 1:18, 20). And the child that is conceived is “a Son,” who will be born and named “Jesus, for he will save His people from their sins” (1:21). Malcolm Muggeridge, in a powerful essay, noting the current denigration of the human being, perversely in the very name of “humanism,” said

In humanistic times like ours, a contemporary virgin—assuming there is such—would regard a message from the Angel Gabriel that she might expect to give birth to a son to be called the Son of the Highest as ill-

tidings of great sorrow and a slur on the local family-planning centre. It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable, under existing conditions, that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary's pregnancy, in poor circumstances, and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and here talk of having conceived as a result of the intervention of the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment, and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger. Thus our generation, needing a Saviour more, perhaps, than any that has ever existed, would be too humane to allow one to be born; too enlightened to permit the Light of the World to shine in a darkness that grows ever more oppressive (*Vintage Muggeridge: Religion and Society*, ed. Geoffrey Barlow [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 40).

Thank God that the ancient Jews were not as wicked as modern man, and that Joseph was there to be a provider.

The witness of the Old and New Testaments is consistent that life begins at conception in the mother's womb. Finally, in the Old Testament prophets, we learn something of the character and process of conception and birth. The Lord told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer. 1:5; cf. Gal. 1:15). The word for "formed" is *yatsar*, which theologically indicates the creation of something with pre-existent material. God formed Jeremiah in his mother's womb out of the matter that he created. One may assume that the matter that God formed was provided through Jeremiah's father and mother.

And this is the critical point with regard to the time of conception, God says he knew Jeremiah "before" he was formed in the womb. Before! Before the growth began to occur! Before the matter began to be formed! Before this, God "knew" Jeremiah! God knows persons and Jeremiah was a person from the very split second of his conception. Jeremiah was a person in that moment before the cells of his body began to multiply. At the point of conception, Jeremiah was a person known by God. Jeremiah's life began at conception, and his life was sanctified while he was yet in the womb.

Again, David, in Psalm 51:5, considers both his conception and his birth. At his birth, he was already a sinner: "I was brought forth in iniquity." This reflects the biblical truth that sin is somehow passed from father to son (Rom. 5:12-21). And pertinent to our case, it should be seen that David's sinfulness comes not only upon him at his birth but also at the time he was conceived: "And in my sin my mother conceived me." How can sin be accounted to impersonal biological matter? The Christian who discounts life at the moment of conception has no intelligible and biblical answer to contradict that truth. And if the detractor wants to say that the mother's iniquity is under consideration, he counters the explicit focus of the surrounding psalm itself, which recounts David's internal wickedness. Only a postmodern reader could interpret the text otherwise. Because the text has no substantive meaning to the deconstructionist, his interpretation will always be subject to impiety.

Finally, let us consider the penalty of the law for the harm or murder of a child in the mother's womb. In Exodus 21:22-25, we learn that if a pregnant woman is hurt in a scuffle between men, then a penalty must be paid. If the pregnancy is prematurely brought to an end, then a judge must consider the life of the child. If the child is born

without harm, then the punishment of the offender can be set by the father. Presumably, the punishment would be a fine of some type. However, if the child is physically harmed, then the offender must pay the same price as the child has suffered. “You shall give life for life.” If the child’s life is lost, then the offender’s life is also lost. Why? Because God honors His image, an image He has endowed upon every human being. The penalty for killing the *imago Dei* is, from early on, the loss of the offender’s own life (Gen. 9:6).

There are other passages that refer to the life in the womb as a person. God knew David before he was “knit together” in his mother’s womb, and He looked upon him even when the latter was “formless” (Ps. 139:13-16). God called and named the prophet Isaiah before he was born, while he was yet in his mother’s womb (Isa. 49:1). Even from a moment of deep despair, Job recalled that he was identified as a human being in the very night he was conceived (Job 3:3). And Jimmy Draper notes that the Greek New Testament refers to an infant (*brephos*) as human, whether living inside or outside the womb:

Clearly, God considers the baby more than a clump of tissue. God considers the *brephos* as much a human being as the child who is already born and playing, running up and down the street. God says that the unborn child in the womb is *brephos* just as much as the toddler in the playpen. He uses the same word to identify them both (James T. Draper, Jr., “The Three Victims of Abortion,” in *Messages for the Journey*, ed. Barrett Duke [Nashville: Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2007], 12).

Oh, my love, I have belabored the point that life begins at conception, not to add to our pain, but to relieve it. (And perhaps to help others who struggle with a decision between saving and ending a precious life.) For we know that the tears you shed were not merely caused by your fluctuating hormones. And we know that the dream I had was not merely a function of my deep but shattering hope. We know that God knows our child and has indeed known him from the time he was conceived in your womb, because this is what His Word teaches. And we know from God’s Word, moreover, that God is love, and that He is just, and that He is all-powerful and omniscient.

On the basis of these truths, which are all we have, and all we need, I know that we have a child currently in a place that we long to be. Whether this child and the one we lost years ago are male and female, we cannot be sure. But we can be sure of this: God loves those two children as real persons, and we will meet them again one day. Until then, we have each other, and we have five children that have survived the dangers of conception and birth. Oh, the world and our bodies groan under the weight of our sin (Rom. 8:22), but we have the hope of the resurrection. We shall again meet our children who have preceded us in death, and the second death shall never part us from our bodies, from our children, and from our God (1 Cor. 15:20-28, 42-49).

I pray God will give you peace in the midst of your very real pain.

In Christ,
Your Beloved Husband
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