

When is a person? Christian perspectives on the beginning of life

This article is one of a series on the topic of abortion which are all available at the website

johnwyatt.com

The articles are:

Abortion in the modern world

Abortion and infanticide in the ancient world

Contemporary secular philosophers and abortion and infanticide

When is a person? Christian perspectives on the beginning of life

Abortion – ethical dilemmas and compassionate responses

When we turn from the complex and painful dilemmas raised by abortion to the world of the Bible, we are struck by the gulf between the biblical world and our own. We cannot look for proof-texts which will provide neat answers to these complex problems. Sometimes Christian writers and teachers have attempted to construct a complete edifice of teaching about abortion on a single text, such as the verses in Exodus 21:22-24, which deal with accidental injury to a pregnant woman. We will look at this passage later but it is not the place where we should start. Instead we must attempt to immerse ourselves in the biblical worldview, to view the world as the biblical writers saw it.

We start with creation design - the way we are made. In orthodox Christian thought we are all unique and we are all special in God's eyes because we are made in God's image. Each human being is a unique masterpiece of God's creation, flawed, imperfect, damaged but a masterpiece nevertheless. 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 has to pass a test before he or she is regarded as 'one of us', a member of the moral community. Are they aware of their own existence as a 'continuing self'? Are they able to choose, to exercise autonomy? Do they display what Singer has called 'morally relevant characteristics'?

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 creates us, remembers us and calls us to himself.

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

The biblical narrative is insistent that God's creative activity does not just start at the moment of birth. Instead, God is intimately involved in the hidden and mysterious process of fetal development within the womb. 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 starts with a profound awareness of God's presence, an unsettling sense that God has invaded every aspect of his life.

'O Lord you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O Lord.
You hem me in - behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.'

(Psalm 139:1-5)

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 claustrophobia. It is as though the psalmist is saying, 'This is all very well, but could you please get off my back, God. I need a little space.' So the psalmist 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.

'Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.' (verses 7-10)

If there is no place in the cosmos where the psalmist can evade God's presence, perhaps there is a place in his personal history. Perhaps if he goes back far enough into his personal origins he can find a space, a time when, for once, he was free from the claustrophobic presence of God. But no; even if he traces his life story back to his own mysterious origins in the womb, he discovers God's presence.

'For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you

when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the in the
depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.' (v13-16)

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. The fetus is woven together as on a divine loom, hidden in the depths of the earth. The psalmist was not a fool. He knew that babies were not dug up like potatoes from the soil. But in the Old Testament world, virtually nothing was known about the biological processes which occurred in the womb. In a world where abdominal surgery was unheard of and post-mortems were taboo, what was actually happening within the pregnant abdomen was a complete mystery. Of course, people knew that a man and a woman had intercourse and nine months later there was a baby, but what happened in between was an enigma, one of the greatest riddles of human existence. In the words of the Preacher:

'As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things'. (Ecclesiastes 11:5)

By contrast, we moderns know a great deal about the biological process of fetal development. Antenatal ultrasound in particular allows us the privilege of seeing what the psalmist could only dream of. Many parents, myself included, have experienced a mysterious thrill at the first glimpse of their unborn child. It is a glimpse into the hidden creation chamber where God is bringing another wonderful but flawed masterpiece into existence.

What then can we learn from Psalm 139 about God's involvement with the unborn child. How can we relate this ancient poetry to the world of the ultrasound scan and the assisted conception unit? John Stott in his book *Issues facing Christians today* helpfully draws out three headings.

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. Of course 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 implies that fetal development is impersonal, mechanistic and ultimately random. But in contrast, the language of the psalm emphasises that what is occurring 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.

It seems to me 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 the miracle of the creation of the universe. God's guiding hand is creating; God's voice is calling a unique being into existence and into relationship with him. God is the potter who is working the unformed clay, God is the artist weaving his unique tapestry on the divine loom. That is why we must treat even the unborn baby with wonder. The literal Hebrew of verse 14 is exuberant, 'I praise you because I am wonderfully, wonderful your works'. Each human being can say 'Because I am made by God, I am wonderful'.

Second is the theme of *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 an intellectual awareness, because of course God knows everything. This kind of knowledge implies a committed intimate involvement, as when Adam *knew* Eve in the act of sexual intercourse (Genesis 4:1 literally). 'Your eyes saw my unformed body'. 'You *knew* me, you were involved with me'. The emphasis is not on fetal awareness of God, as if the psalmist was saying when I was in the womb, I knew you were there God. No; what matters is that God knew the fetus. God was involved. God was calling me into existence and into a relationship with him. Here is an example of a unilateral covenant based on God's grace; a covenant of creation which God initiates and upholds to all eternity.

Third is the theme of *continuity*. The psalmist meditates on his own personal history, the narrative of his unique, individual life. There is the past ('you have 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 psalmist looks back to his mother's womb and says, not that there was a mysterious being in there which later became 'me', a person. No, he says, 'that was me in there'. I, the adult human, am in direct continuity with the fetus. This is all *my* story, the narrative structure of a human life.

These same themes can be traced in many parts of the Bible. In the book of Job, the common creation of all human beings in the womb is used as a symbol of the need for equality and justice in human relationships. 'Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?' (Job 31:15). The suffering servant of Isaiah also refers to God's intrauterine call, 'And now the Lord says - he who formed me in the womb to be his servant...' (Isaiah 49:5). Here are the same themes of creation, covenant and continuity.

The fetus is an actor within the human drama

Luke the physician records in his Gospel a homely incident: the excited meeting of two pregnant women, to share their experiences (Luke 1:39). Mary, having just received the visitation from the angel and being in the earliest stages of pregnancy, hurries excitedly to visit her relative Elizabeth, also pregnant, but close to term. Luke records, 'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.'" (Luke 1:41-44)

I have sometimes wondered why, out of all the eye witness accounts of Jesus' life which Luke must have accumulated before he wrote his Gospel, did he choose to record such a common-place 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 that room in Zechariah's home. But Luke implies that in fact there are four. Elizabeth and the unborn John, Mary and the unborn Jesus. And perhaps what captivated Luke was the recognition that John leaps for joy at Jesus' presence, only a few weeks after his conception, in the same way that lepers and paralysed men and blind beggars will leap for joy as Jesus passes by in future.

Jesus shares the narrative of a human life - including all the stages of fetal life. He has become like us, as the letter to Hebrews says, 'in every way' (Hebrews 2:17). In fact to use a phrase of Paul Ramsey, Jesus was a fellow-fetus - or, in the words of Gilbert Meilaender, 'Jesus has been with us in the darkness of the womb as he will be with us in the darkness of the tomb'.

Luke uses the same Greek word, *brephos*, for the unborn John, as he does for the newborn baby Jesus (Luke 2:12) and for the little children who were brought to Jesus for his blessing (Luke 18:15). The consistent witness of the biblical writers is that the fetus is part of the human drama, a hidden actor on the human stage; one whom God is creating in secret, calling into existence and into relationship with himself. The same concept of continuity throughout all the stages of the human narrative is evident in the Apostles' Creed which states that Jesus was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried... [and] rose again'.

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

[This section is rather technical and can be omitted if you want to fast-forward to the following section on arguments for protecting the fetus and early embryo].

Some scholars such as Professor R.J. Berry have argued that the biblical material such as Psalm 139 can only be used 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 fetus. Berry says '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'. In other words Berry argues that we cannot use this psalm or other similar passages to argue that God is involved with *every* fetus or embryo, including the numerous embryos and fetuses which have been spontaneously lost during the early stages of prenatal development.

As Professor Berry and other distinguished commentators, such as Professor Gordon Dunstan have pointed out, there is a long-standing Christian tradition which made a distinction between the 'formed' and 'unformed' fetus. The story is rather tortuous but

it remains an important feature of contemporary Christian debate. The historical evidence suggests that ancient Judaism was strongly opposed to deliberate abortion except in rare cases which were performed in obstructed labour, in order to save the mother's life. The Exodus law however did contain a statute dealing with accidental injury to a pregnant woman (Exodus 21:22-24). A literal translation of the Hebrew is as follows:

'If men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart, and yet no injury follow: he shall surely be fined, according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any injury follow, then thou shalt give life for life,.....'

The problem is that the meaning of the text seems fundamentally ambiguous. The phrase 'her fruit depart', could refer to miscarriage leading to fetal death, but it could also refer to premature birth with survival of the baby (as in the New International Version translation). Similarly the 'injury' could refer to injury to the mother or to injury to the baby.

When the Hebrew text was translated into the Greek Septuagint version, in the third century BC, the Greek words for 'unformed' and 'formed' were substituted for the phrases referring to injury. Thus the statute prescribed a fine for the loss of an 'unformed' fetus, but the death penalty if there was loss of a 'formed' fetus. This fitted with the Greek philosophy of Aristotle who drew a distinction between (first) the early embryo which had a vegetative followed by an animal nature, and (second) the fully formed fetus which was recognizably a human being, and which therefore had a 'rational' or 'intellectual' soul.

The early church fathers seem to have been divided on whether to accept a difference in the significance of the destruction of an unformed or a formed fetus. Basil wrote that

'A woman who deliberately destroys a fetus is answerable for murder. Any fine distinction as to its being completely formed or unformed is not admissible among us.'

On the other hand Augustine accepted the distinction. 'If what is brought forth is unformed but at this stage some sort of living, shapeless thing, then the law of homicide would not apply, for it could not be said that there was living soul in that body, for it lacks all sense, if it be such as us it yet formed and therefore not yet endowed with its senses.'

The same tradition was accepted by Aquinas and other medieval theologians.

The subject remains a matter of painful controversy and debate between Christians. A number of modern theologians and Christian doctors have argued that this ancient moral tradition should be preserved. In their view the early embryo and fetus 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 during menstruation. Often the mother will not even be aware that she was pregnant. Some early embryos split spontaneously, leading to the formation of identical twins. Very rarely, two separate non-identical embryos which have formed at the same time may fuse to form a single embryo. Most of the tissue which makes up the early embryo does not even go to form the future fetus, but instead becomes the placenta and other supportive structures which are subsequently lost. Even the crucial step of fertilisation, when new genetic identity is formed, does not happen instantaneously, but takes place over a matter of hours as the nuclear material from the sperm and the egg remain separate within the one-cell embryo, and only fuse totally following division and formation of a two-cell structure.

In view of this evidence, how can the human embryo and early fetus be regarded as a unique human individual worthy of respect and protection? Professor Donald Mackay

argued that in the development of the fetus a critical level of complexity was required before the fetus 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, an 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 for the benefit of humanity (see further discussion below).

Arguments in favour of protecting the early fetus and embryo.

From a personal point of view, as a medical student and junior doctor in the 1970s I became convinced by the argument that early abortion, although always painful and less than ideal, may be a Christian action, the lesser of two evils, an act of compassion. But over the years as my clinical experience and theological understanding grew, I became increasingly uneasy. Could the intentional destruction of even the early fetus really be consistent with a Christian worldview? What were the arguments that led to my change of heart?

First, I have become convinced that the traditional distinction between the formed, human fetus and the unformed sub-human fetus is not a biblical concept, nor is it consistent with modern biological understanding. It derives ultimately from a dualistic Greek philosophy which regarded the essence of humanity as consisting in a rational, thinking, feeling soul. The soul is seen as a distinct immaterial entity which is implanted in a physical body at a certain stage of fetal development. However, this Greek Platonic way of thinking does not fit easily with the thought forms of the biblical worldview. The interpretation of the statute in Exodus 21 remains unclear, but in my view it cannot be

used with integrity to support this distinction. Further the statute in Exodus clearly deals with compensation following *accidental* injury, and cannot be applied to the morality of intentional abortion. It seems that Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas were using Aristotelian ideas of animation at a later stage of pregnancy, because that was the best empirical information that was available. Now vast improvements in scientific information have made the distinction obsolete. There is no stage in fetal development which represents a biological discontinuity and which might be interpreted as the transition from an animal to a human form. If there is any discontinuity in the formation of the human individual it is around the time of fertilization, when a unique human genetic code is created, or implantation in the wall of the womb, when the embryo starts to develop the essential support structures to survive and develop into a mature fetus.

Second, 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. Theologian Oliver O'Donovan argues that we cannot demonstrate that a person exists by scientific testing for various attributes or capacities, such as rationality or responsivity. Instead 'we discern persons only by love, by discovering through interaction and commitment that this human being is irreplaceable.' In order to know one another as persons we must adopt a mode of knowledge which is based not on objective scientific analysis, but on brotherly love. 'This implies a commitment in advance to treat all human beings as persons, even when their personal qualities have not yet become manifest to us'. We do not know whether any one particular embryo or fetus will survive the hazards of embryonic development and intrauterine life 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 fetus as though it was destined to manifest its personality in future. We must 'approach new human beings, including those whose humanity is ambiguous and uncertain to us, with the

expectancy and hope that we shall discern how God has called them out of nothing into personal being’.

O’Donovan has used an analogy in this regard, taken from an old art film., which I have found helpful. On a lonely beach, the back of a seated figure is seen, silhouetted against the ocean. The central character of the film walks towards the figure and places a friendly hand on his shoulder. The figure topples forward and crashes face first to the ground. The camera spins round to reveal it is not a living person but a rotting corpse. It is a sudden shock – a *coup de theatre*. Only by reaching out to the figure with friendship was its true character revealed. In the same way it is only by reaching out with a prior moral commitment of love and protection to the embryo and fetus will we discover whether or not there is a person there. ‘We discern persons only by love...’

Third, 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. It is not necessary to assess what the fetus can do, to look for central nervous system functionality or responsivity, in order to discern the evidence of God's involvement or covenant commitment. God's grace revealed in the Christian Gospel is precisely love towards the unresponsive. The covenant relationship of loving commitment does not depend on reciprocity. As parents we commit ourselves in love to our children long before they are able to respond with self-awareness to that love. As we saw in our brief exploration of Psalm 139, the critical issue is not whether the fetus is aware of God, but whether God is aware of and committed by grace to the fetus.

Fourth, 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 of God calling us in any way other than in a personal way. Similarly we cannot think that there was a time in our personal history when we were outside the call of God. In other words, within the

confines of our human existence there was never a time when God was not calling us. As Brendan McCarthy puts it, 'If God calls us, as the Christian faith asserts, then he must have called us, as well as the Old Testament prophets, while we were still in our mother's wombs'. (In fact since God is outside of time he knows and calls us even before our conception, as in Jeremiah 1:5). So our unique human personality derives from God who calls us by name, and God's call is present from the beginning of our human existence, a call to enter into fellowship or communion with him. It is a strange thought that even the human embryo has a name, a unique identity, in the sense that no animal or inanimate object has a name, but it is consonant with the biblical worldview.

Fifth, 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 early fetus seem to represent *par excellence* those vulnerable human strangers to whom we owe a special duty of care and protection.

Sixth, from the point of fertilisation the human embryo has a mother and father. Even if she is unaware of the fact, the person from whom the egg derived has become a mother, the man from whom the sperm came has become a father. In some mysterious way their identity is changed by the existence of this new being. Within the mystery of the Trinity, the persons of the Godhead are constituted by their relations with each other. The Father cannot be who he is without the existence of the Son and vice versa. Perhaps the personhood of the embryo, too, can be seen as being constituted by its relations with its parents.

Finally, if we recognise a deep uncertainty and ambiguity about the moral significance of the embryo or early fetus, we have to ask the question, 'What is an authentically Christian response to this deep ontological uncertainty?' Surely an appropriate response

is to vote in favour of protection and against intentional destruction. It is a standard principle of medical ethics that if there is any significant degree of uncertainty about life and death issues, for instance in deciding whether to withdraw life sustaining treatment where the prognosis seems to be hopeless, then we should 'play safe'. We vote in favour of life, and against death. It is only if we are certain *beyond any reasonable doubt* that there is no hope of survival, that the outlook is hopeless and there is no reasonable hope that our therapy can be helpful, that we can consider the removal of supportive treatment. In the same way, it seems to me that if there is reasonable doubt about the moral status of the embryo or early fetus, then we should vote in favour of protection. Perhaps we can never know with any certainty how God regards any individual embryo or fetus. That profound uncertainty does not give us licence to treat the embryo as a being who is at our disposal. We need an authentic Christian response to uncertainty.

Theological themes and the human embryo

The human embryo is a unique type of being. It is *sui generis*. We cannot think of it simply as a baby who happens not to have been born yet. Neither can we think of it as a merely a biological mechanism, a collection of genetic material and intracellular apparatus, 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. It is neither an unborn baby nor a blob of jelly. It is a human embryo - unique, different in kind from anything else in our experience.

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, (they are constructed out of the physical stuff of genetic codes, biochemical engineering, intricate plumbing and miles of electrical wiring) 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. We are, *at one and the same time*, fully physical and fully immaterial. The existence of a physical human body, all that plumbing and biochemical engineering, is a physical sign that an immaterial person is present. That's the way God made us - as 'disgusting hybrids' (in the words of CS Lewis's fictional devil Screwtape) with the different and apparently contradictory aspects of our being locked together. The reductionist says that human beings are *really* sophisticated self-replicating survival machines who happen to have achieved self-consciousness. On the other hand the philosophical dualist says that 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. We hold the two realities in tension.

It is a tension which is familiar to biblical theology. We see it in the doctrine of the Incarnation; Jesus was at one and the same time completely human and completely divine. We see it in the doctrine of inspiration; 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 pointers to a hidden spiritual reality. We see it in the doctrine of divine providence; wicked men chose to crucify God's Son, and yet it was all part of God's plan.

When we think of the embryo within a biblical worldview then, we have to view this strange being as having both a physical and an immaterial reality. Indeed, I wonder if we cannot think of the embryo within a version of sacramentalist theology. At one level the embryo is just biology. It is a collection of genetic material and cellular machinery. But at the same time it is a physical sign of an immaterial or spiritual reality, a sacrament of a hidden covenant of creation – a sign that God is bringing forth a new, Godlike being, a unique reflection of his character, a being to whom he is locked in covenant

commitment. At the same time that the biological mechanisms are ticking away, the divine artist is creating a unique masterpiece. God is bringing into existence another person and calling him or her into relationship with himself. So we cannot treat the human embryo with contempt because it is 'just' a minute blob of jelly, any more than we can treat the written words of the Bible with contempt because they are 'just' human words. These particular physical words are special; they have a unique spiritual significance. This particular physical blob is special; it is a sign of God's creative covenant.

This way of thinking has implications for the way we think biblically about the human genetic code and the molecules of DNA from which it is constructed. The biblical revelation views human beings as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. Modern population genetics suggests we must treat the biblical narrative with due seriousness. Human beings are both theologically and, it seems, in genetic reality, a single extended family. Not only do we carry the mysterious image of God, we also carry the image of our distant grandparents, Adam and Eve. We have an *organic solidarity* with Adam. There is an unbroken line of descendants through which each of us can trace their origins to a single human ancestor. But what is the physical counterpart of this organic solidarity? How was Adam's image passed on through each generation down to us? The answer is the human genetic code. DNA is the physical means by which God has enabled Adam's likeness to be passed faithfully on to each generation.

Of course the biblical concept of being 'in Adam' implies much more than just possessing a particular genetic code, but nonetheless in the physical and spiritual unity which comprises a human being, it is the human genome which is the physical sign that we are Adam's offspring, that we are 'in Adam'. This particular configuration of DNA molecules is the physical counterpart of a human person, a physical sacrament which points to a hidden spiritual mystery. And it is at fertilisation that the particular configuration of the human genome is created. It is at fertilisation that the image of Adam is passed on to the next generation. Even the early embryo is a being 'in Adam'.

The thinking which draws a distinction between the embryo or early fetus and the later mature fetus tends to verge towards dualism. It implies that the early fetus is merely a physical being and therefore of little consequence until the spiritual bit, the soul, or the responsive mind enters. In other words it splits the indissoluble biblical link between the physical and spiritual realities. A very early human being can be just a physical entity with no spiritual element. Since it is only the spiritual bit of humanity that really matters, the purely physical stuff of which the embryo is constructed may be regarded as disposable or used for research. I am increasingly convinced that we should resist the creeping philosophical dualism which splits the physical aspect of the fetus from the spiritual.

The second familiar biblical tension that we have to retain 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. John Stott quotes the words of ethicist Paul Ramsey, 'The human individual comes into existence as a minute informational speck... His subsequent prenatal and postnatal development may be described as a process of becoming what he already is from the moment he was conceived.' Seventeen hundred years previously Tertullian expressed the same thought, 'The future man is a man already; the fruit is already present in the seed'. Again this is a familiar tension in Christian theology. 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. We are becoming what we already are.

Even the language we use reflects our understanding. The language of the scientist and clinician is that of the 'human embryo'. Embryo is the noun and human is the adjective. There are human embryos, monkey embryos, mouse embryos and fruit fly embryos. And guess what; they all look the same under the microscope. They are embryos.

But if we talk about 'embryonic humans' the focus changes. There are embryonic humans, fetal humans, adult humans, geriatric humans and resurrected humans! And guess what? They are all human beings in the process of becoming what they already are. It's another illustration of the power of language in moral discourse.

The language of potentiality, when applied to the embryo tends to be confusing rather than helpful. What does it mean to be a 'potential person'? When used by philosophers it tends to mean 'not yet a person'. Because the fetus is not yet a person we don't have to treat it as if it was a person. This kind of thinking cuts between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. It breaks the biblical understanding of human life, that all human beings are in a process of becoming what we already are. In the embryo we encounter something which is the same as ourselves, although not yet the same. But why should this be so? Why should human beings be caught in an indissoluble link between the already and the not yet? The answer lies in the grace of God. In John Stott's words, 'It is God's grace which confers on the unborn child, from the moment of its conception, both the unique status which it already enjoys and the unique destiny which it will later inherit. It is grace which holds together the duality of the actual and the potential, the already and the not yet.'

This material is adapted from *Matters of Life and Death* (2nd edition) by John Wyatt, published by IVP