

# The Beginning of Human Life

The Bible affirms that God is the Lord and giver of all life.<sup>1</sup> Human beings are uniquely made in God's image,<sup>2</sup> and each individual human being is infinitely precious to God and made for an eternal destiny.<sup>3</sup> The Christian attitude toward human life is thus one of reverence<sup>4</sup> from the moment of fertilization to death.

## DEFINITION OF HUMAN LIFE

1. A living human being is a self-directed,<sup>5</sup> integrated organism<sup>6</sup> that possesses the genetic endowment of the species *Homo sapiens*<sup>7</sup> who has the inherent active biological disposition (active capacity and potency)<sup>8</sup> for ordered growth and development<sup>9</sup> in a continuous and seamless maturation process, with the potential to express secondary characteristics such as rationality, self-awareness, communication, and relationship with God, other human beings, and the environment.

2. Thus, a human being, despite the expression of different and more mature secondary characteristics, has genetic and ontological identity and continuity throughout all stages of development from fertilization until death.

3. A human embryo is not a potential human being, but a human being with potential.

## BIOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN LIFE

1. The life of a human being begins at the moment of fertilization (fusion of sperm and egg).<sup>10</sup> "Conception" is a term used for the beginning of biological human life and has been variously

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 2:7; Psa 139:14-16; Isa 42:5; Jer 1:5, 10:23; Mat 10:29; Rom 14:9

<sup>2</sup> Gen 1:26, 27; 9:6

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16

<sup>4</sup> This is attested to by the whole of the Decalogue (not only the Sixth Commandment; Fifth Commandment in the Catholic and Lutheran traditions) and by the incarnation.

<sup>5</sup> Early zygote dependence on maternal genetic material does not argue against this, since the role and integration of this information into the organism's development are determined by the organism itself.

<sup>6</sup> The term "organism" is a biological concept that refers to the functional unity of the organism, specifically the functions of integration, control, and behavior (and in this case, development) of the organism as a whole, whether single cellular, multi-cellular, multi-tissue, or multi-organ. Implicit in this concept is the primacy of the functional unity of the organism as a whole and not merely the sum of the function of its parts. This definition is also univocal and can be applied to all forms of living organisms.

<sup>7</sup> Genetic identity with the species *Homo sapiens* alone is a necessary, but not sufficient, criteria for defining a human being.

<sup>8</sup> Both human genetic identity and active potential and capacity (an inherent disposition for development) define a unique human being. While somatic cells have genetic identity to human beings (they have a latent potency and capacity such as exists in all raw materials), they do not possess an inherent active biological disposition (active potency and capacity) for further development into a unique human being. Somatic cell nuclear transfer (cloning) artificially confers such an active potency and capacity on a cell with genetic identity resulting in a unique human being.

<sup>9</sup> Hydatiform moles (the result of abnormal fusions between egg and sperm) and teratomas (arising from the abnormal parthenogenic division of germ cells) lack ordered growth and development.

<sup>10</sup> Some scientists and theologians note that it is only at the end of the process of fertilization (the joining of the male and female chromosomes at syngamy) that a *substantive* change has taken place resulting in a new, unique, living, individual human *person*. According to this view, the substantive change inherent in the human diploid single-cell zygote is not yet present at the moment of fertilization (union or fusion of sperm and egg) or during the pronuclear

defined in the medical and scientific literature as the moment of fertilization (union or fusion of sperm and egg), syngamy (the last crossing-over of the maternal and paternal chromosomes at the end of fertilization), full embryonic gene expression between the fourth and eighth cellular division,<sup>11</sup> implantation, or development of the primitive streak. Scientifically and biblically, conception is most appropriately defined as fertilization. The activation of an egg by the penetration of a sperm<sup>12</sup> triggers the transition to active organismal existence.

2. It is artificial and arbitrary to use other proposed biological “markers” (such as implantation, development of a primitive streak, absence of potential for twinning, brain activity, heartbeat, quickening, viability, or birth and beyond) to define the beginning of human life.

## **BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN LIFE**

Procreation is acknowledged in the Bible to be the gift of God.<sup>13</sup>

The mandate for human procreation in Genesis 1:27-28 and 9:1,7 implies that the God-ordained means of filling the earth with human beings made in His image is the proper reproductive expression of human sexuality in marriage. Human beings do not merely reproduce “after their kind”; they beget or procreate beings that, like themselves, are in the image of God. (see CMDA Statement on Reproductive Technology)

Human beings are created as ensouled bodies or embodied souls<sup>14</sup> (Genesis 2:7). Together the physical and spiritual aspects of human beings bear the single image of God and constitute the single essential nature of human life.<sup>15</sup> A biological view of human life beginning at fertilization is therefore consistent with the Biblical view of human life.

From fertilization on, God relates to the unborn in a personal manner.<sup>16</sup> Between fertilization and birth, which are regularly linked in Biblical language<sup>17</sup> God continues His activity in the unfolding and continuous development of the fetus.

The Bible assumes a personal and moral continuity through fertilization, birth, and maturation.<sup>18</sup> The Bible, the Church in all its formative Creeds<sup>19</sup> and Ecumenical Councils,<sup>20</sup> and the witness of the Holy Spirit attest to the beginning of the incarnation, wherein the second person of the Trinity took upon himself human nature, being conceived (“conceived” is to be understood as “fertilization;” see *The Beginning of Human Life, Addendum II: Conception and Fertilization: Defining Ethically Relevant Terms*) by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.<sup>21</sup> The uniqueness of the event and its mode does not affect its relevance to the question of the beginning of human life. From conception the Son of God is incarnate, his human nature

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stage of fertilization. However, these cells do contain within themselves the organizing principle for the self-development and self-maintenance of the full human organism.

<sup>11</sup> Up until this stage maternal mRNAs support all or most of the biosynthetic activities of the early embryo

<sup>12</sup> Or the equivalent event in nuclear transfer/cloning

<sup>13</sup> Gen 4:1; Psa 127:3

<sup>14</sup> “*nephesh*”

<sup>15</sup> Some Christians hold that Scripture describes human beings as composed of distinct parts, either body and soul (dichotomy), or body, soul, and spirit (trichotomy). CMDA is aware of this viewpoint but feels that the issue in clinical medicine should be approached viewing a human being as a functional unity. The body soul distinction could provide a rationale to those who would disrespect human life is the “higher” (implying soul) functions of “personhood” or “rationality” are not present.

<sup>16</sup> Job 10:8-11; Jer 1:5; Psa 139:13-16 (“*golem*” meaning “embryo,” i.e., first few weeks of gestation)

<sup>17</sup> Isa 7:14

<sup>18</sup> Psa 51:5; Psa 119:13-16

<sup>19</sup> Apostolic, Nicean-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian

<sup>20</sup> Nicea (325 AD), Constantinople (381 AD), Ephesus (431 AD), and Chalcedon (451 AD)

<sup>21</sup> Luke 1:31; Matt 1:20 (where the term “*gennaō*” stands unambiguously for conception)

made like us in every way.<sup>22</sup> It follows that authentic human existence begins at conception or fertilization.

## **THE MORAL WORTH OF HUMAN LIFE**

1. The moral worth of a human being is absolute and does not consist in possessing certain capacities or qualities—e.g., self-consciousness, self-awareness, autonomy, rationality, ability to feel pain or pleasure, level of development, relational ability—that confer a socially-defined status of “personhood” (a quality added to being). A human being consists in the entire natural history of the embodied self. A human being is a person.
2. The moral worth of a human being at all stages of development consists not merely in a) the possession of human chromosomes nor b) the fact that he or she may someday grow and develop into a more mature human individual. In fact, he or she already is the same individual being who may gradually develop into a more mature human individual.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Every individual from fertilization is known by God, is under His providential care, is morally accountable, and possesses the very image of God the creator.

Since human life begins at fertilization, the full moral worth afforded to every human being is equally afforded from fertilization onward throughout development. Vague notions of “personhood” or social utility have no place in decisions regarding the worth, dignity, or rights of any human being.

Because all human beings derive their inherent worth and the right to life from being made in the image of God, standing in relation to God as their personal Creator, a human being’s value and worth is constant, whether strong or weak, conscious or unconscious, healthy or handicapped, socially “useful” or “useless,” wanted or unwanted.

A human beings life may not be sacrificed for the economic or political welfare or convenience of other individuals or society. Indeed, society itself is to be judged by its protection of and the solicitude it shows for the weakest of its members.<sup>23</sup>

Human life, grounded in its divine origin and in the image of God, is the basis of all other human rights, natural and legal, and the foundation of civilized society.

*Passed by the CMDA House of Representatives  
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<sup>22</sup> Heb 2:17

<sup>23</sup> Matt 25:40; James 1:27

# **The Beginning of Human Life, Addendum I: Conception and Fertilization: Defining Ethically Relevant Terms**

## **SUMMARY**

Scientifically CMDA understands that human life begins at fertilization (See CMDA Statement: The Beginning of Human Life). The Bible states that human life begins at the absolute “beginning or inception” using the term “conception.” Because the term “conception” has been variously (re)defined in the current scientific, medical, and bioethics literature. Christian’s may become confused over the Church’s creedal, doctrinal, biblical, liturgical, traditional, and cultural language of, “Life begins at/with conception.” CMDA affirms that it is appropriate to maintain the traditional biblical and creedal language of the Church without accommodation, remaining biologically precise and accurate, with the understanding that “conception” refers to the absolute “beginning or inception” of life, which is determined scientifically and upheld by CMDA to be fertilization.

## **ARGUMENT**

Questions of morality and ethics are frequently questions of language and definition. The terms “conception” and “fertilization” are central and critical terms in any definition of the beginning of life. In traditional ways of speaking conception was assumed to be synonymous with fertilization and, as used in traditional orthodox Christian language, marked the very beginning of individual human life. This is no longer the case. Presently these terms are being used in different ways by different organizations for the purpose of promoting certain ethical agendas. In particular, the previously univocal term “conception” is now open to multiple definitions and interpretations. For instance, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology has now (re)defined conception as “implantation.”<sup>24</sup> The scientific and medical literature no longer defines conception in a manner consistent with Biblical and traditional use of this term in reference to the beginning of human life. The current CMDA Position Statement on The Beginning of Human Life correctly and precisely defines the biological beginning of individual human life as fertilization. Recognizing that a multiplicity of competing definitions may generate some confusion, there nonetheless remain good reasons for the Christian community to retain the language, “Life begins at/with conception” (understanding that the use of the term “conception” means “beginning” which is at the point of “fertilization”).

## **TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

The traditional language of Conservative and Evangelical Protestants, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic believers has always been, “Life begins at/with conception” (Cf. *Euangelium Vitae*).<sup>25</sup> This has traditionally meant “beginning” and was assumed to be at the moment of fertilization.

## **CREEDAL LANGUAGE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

The strongest argument in the CMDA Statement on The Beginning of Life, and for any Christian, is the incarnation (Isa 7:14<sup>26</sup>; Mat 1:20; Luk 1:31). The foundational language for this

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<sup>24</sup> EC Hughes and Committee of Terminology of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, *Obstetrics-Gynecologic Terminology* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1972).

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter: The Gospel of Life (Euangelium Vitae, Vatican Translation)*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1995).

doctrine is that of the historic ecumenical Christian creeds, primarily the received text of the Apostolic Creed in which the term “conceived by the Holy Spirit (Ghost)” is used throughout in all English translations to designate the inception, or beginning, of the incarnation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> The use of the term “conceived” in these passages is not to be confused with current scientific and medical definitions but is to be understood as referring to the absolute “beginning or inception” which is scientifically defined as fertilization.

## BIBLICAL LANGUAGE

In all predominant English translations of the Bible (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NAS, NIV, NAB) the terms “conception” and “conceived” are employed to translate Hebrew and Greek words that have the specific connotation of “beginning of life” or the “inception of life.” “Conception” or “conceived” are used to translate the Hebrew *hrh* (“harah”) and either the Greek *gennaw* (“gennao” in Mat 1:20, which can mean “conceive,” “beget,” “to father,” but unambiguously “to conceive” in this context;<sup>28</sup> Cf. also John 8:41; 9:34 and the translation in BGD: “you were altogether conceived in sin”<sup>29</sup>) or *sullamba,nw* (“syllambano” Gen 4:1; 30:7 in LXX, and Luke 1:24, 31, 36; figuratively in Jas 1:15, which can mean “to seize,” as with child, or “conceive”<sup>30</sup>). *Harah* is used in Gen 4:1; 16:4,5; 19:36; 25:21; 30:7; 38:18, etc. (and see especially Isa 7:14; LXX: *gastri. e[xei*, “conceive” or “become pregnant”) and its semantic domain is consistent with the traditional use of the term “conception” meaning “to beget,” “to

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<sup>26</sup> It is sometimes alleged that the phraseology of Isa 7:14 is found in Ugaritic texts (UT 16: nos. 77, 11.5, 7), and that it is only a formula announcing the arrival of a royal heir to be born naturally. In the Ugaritic passage the verb *hry* “be pregnant” is not used at all, while the text does speak of a virgin (*bilti*) who will later bear a child naturally. Interestingly, the Ugaritic line in poetic parallelism uses the word for “virgin” cognate to the Hebrew *hm' l. l.* [; “*alma*” (q.v.) of Isa 7:14. The case in Isa 7:14 is different. In this verse the prophet speaks of a *pregnant virgin*, using the participle (or adj.) of *harah*. The announcement is similar to Gen 16:11 addressed to Hagar who had conceived and was pregnant. As far as the grammar goes, this could refer to a pregnant virgin either contemporary or in the future, but the reference to virginity shows that the pregnancy is miraculous. See HG Stigers, “*hrh*” in RL Harris GL Archer BK Waltke (Eds.) *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT), Volume 1* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 223.

<sup>27</sup> The “received” form of the Apostles’ Creed (ultimate text of the Western Creed from Priminus, A.D. 750, but dating back to Rome circa A.D. 340) reads in Latin as “*qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria virgine*” and in Greek as “*to, n sullhfqe, nta e; k pneu, matoj agi, ou, gennhqe, nta ek Mari, aj thj parqe, nou*” (“*who was conceived by the Holy Ghost/Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary*”). These texts are taken from the *Psalterium Graecum et Romanum*, erroneously ascribed to Pope Gregory the Great, first published from a MS. preserved in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, by Archbishop Usher: *De Romanae Ecclesiae Symbolo Apostolico vetere*, London, 1647. An old Roman form given by Rufinus (*Forma Vetus*, A.D. 390) reads as, “*qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et Maria virgine*” (“*was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*”) and an African form (*Symbolum Augustini Hippo Regius, Africa* Circ. A.D. 400) reads, “*qui natus est per Spiritum Sanctum ex virgine Maria.*” The earliest Greek form, probably used as a baptismal confession (St. Irenaeus, A.D. 200), reads, “*to, n sarkwqe, nta thj hmete, ras swthria j a; nqrwpoj e, ge, neto*” (“*was incarnate as our Savior, and became man*”), while the text of Marcellus, *Professio Fidei Marcelli Ancyran* (A.D. 336-341), reads, “*to, n gennhqe, nta e, k pneu, matoj agi, ou kai. Mari, aj thj parqe, nou*” (“*was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*”). Sources found in: Philip Schaff (Ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom, With a History and Critical Notes, Volume II: The Greek and Latin Creeds with Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990 reprint of the 1931 edition).

<sup>28</sup> W Bauer, FW Gingrich, FW Danker (BGD), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (translation and adaptation of W Bauer’s *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur, Fifth Edition, 1958*) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> BGD, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> BGD, p. 776-7; DH Field, “Conceive, Apprehend” in C Brown (Ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT), Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), pp. 343-4; G Kittel and G Friedrich *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), abridged in one volume by GW Bromiley* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), p. 1101.

become the parent of,” “to cause something to come into existence,” “to conceive.”<sup>31</sup> It’s also important to appreciate this term’s use within the redemptive-historical language of YHWH’s “conception” of a people before “giving birth” to them in actual history (Cf. Num 11:12). In particular, Hos 9:11 implies that conception (!Ayr’h “herayon” a unique, single, one-time event, not a process or state of being; the inception of pregnancy; result of sexual intercourse, etc.) is to be distinguished from and precedes the state of being pregnant (!j,B,ḤmiW “yum-baten” “from,” “of,” or “on account of the womb”; “state of being pregnant”) or of giving birth (dl;y” “yalad” “bear, bring forth, beget”; “to birth”).

On the other hand, Psalm 5:7 uses the terms lyx (“chul” “writhe in pain” or “birth pains associated with labor and giving birth”) and ~xy (“yacham” “conceive,” used only in this instance in the Bible with respect to human conception or becoming pregnant by an act of sexual intercourse, otherwise used in respect to animals in heat). “Three words are used in relation to the birth process: harah “conceive,” yalad “bear, give birth” and chul “to labor in giving birth.” Another word for conceive is yacham, used more, however, of animals in heat (but cf. Ps 51:7). The first describes the inception and the latter two the termination of the process.”<sup>32</sup>

Recognizing that these Hebrew and Greek terms were not used in the context of a modern biological understanding of human reproduction, the term “conceive” (or “conception”) is consistently used to translate those Hebrew and Greek terms that have the specific connotation of “the very earliest beginning,” “inception,” or “the very bringing into existence.” Consequently, “conception” and its cognates, as they are understood in the context of these passages, refer to the biological point of fertilization.

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<sup>31</sup> F Brown (Ed.) *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), pp. 247-8; V Hamilton, “hrh” in WA VanGemeren (Ed.) *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDOTTE), Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), pp. 1057-60; *TWOT*, p. 223.

<sup>32</sup> HG Stiger in *TWOT*, p. 223.