

Contraception and the Start of Life

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Personal history

I started at medical school forty years ago, the month the Abortion Act was passed. Four years later I was asked to assist in a hysterotomy, an operation to terminate a pregnancy at 24 weeks. I joined the surgeon at the taps and asked why it was being done. He said, "She already has four children." Sometimes enormous ethical dilemmas have to be faced in a moment. I turned the tap off and refused to help. He screamed at me to get out of the theatre. I was hauled up before the Professor who explained that this woman was already anaesthetised and my action in causing delay was very serious. Such an operation is nowadays illegal.

In 1977, I started an obstetric post not initially realising that I was covering for gynaecology at night. At 6pm I was called to give the next dose of Prostaglandin to terminate a 16-week pregnancy. I searched the woman's notes to find a reason to justify it. Finding nothing recorded, I refused. The registrar had to come in from home and was furious. In a loud voice he explained that it was not my decision to make, the procedure had already begun and I was merely acting as a technician. "That", I said, "was they said in Nazi Germany." He never spoke to me again.

Over the last 30 yrs, only once have I signed my authorisation for an abortion under the Act and that was when a mother's life was clearly in danger.

The Pro-Life Position

It is from that stance, that I want now to argue that the commonly held Pro-life position is seriously mistaken.

The logic of their position is that all life, from the moment of conception to the grave, is of equal value. The fertilised egg after one day is as valuable as the developing embryo after implantation, the developing embryo at 6 weeks, the fully formed embryo at 10 weeks, the child which can survive outside the womb at say 24 weeks, the baby born normally at 40 weeks and indeed an infant who is one month old. They maintain we should draw no distinction between them.

Pro-lifers overstate the teaching of Scripture

As a student I was taught by Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones never to be more dogmatic on an ethical matter than the Bible itself is and by Prof. Duncan Vere, one of CMF's ethical and theological leaders that "We must not read into Scripture more than is necessarily there."

So what does the Bible teach on the value of a fertilized egg? Professor Gordon Wenham, a highly respected biblical scholar and Pro-Life advocate has written, "The Old Testament says nothing about deliberately induced abortion." He then states, "The New Testament says nothing about abortion." With nothing explicit to go on, we are left with a number of texts, most of which can be interpreted as saying more than

they obviously do say, which is Prof. Vere's point. For instance, Psalm 139 speaks of David being formed in his mother's womb. It is a powerful passage. But of course, everyone of us can look back and see that we were formed in our mother's womb. There is no denying that. More importantly for our discussion, there are passages that speak of people being called by God while they were in the womb. And yet it is explicitly stated of Jeremiah that he was set apart by God before he was formed in the womb, while the apostle Paul tells us that all Christian people were chosen before the foundation of the world. There are long discussions to be had here, and we may look at other specific texts at question time, but these passages seeing our calling and formation in retrospect, actually tell us nothing as to how embryonic life itself should be viewed. The Biblical silence on this matter is all the more significant in the light of the fact that abortion was widely practised in the Graeco-Roman world. Why therefore was it not roundly condemned in Scripture?

Living with our Conclusions

I have a second guiding principle to apply, which is that we must be able to live with our ethical conclusions in the face of hard cases. Gynaecologist Rex Gardner wrote to medical missionaries around the world. He asked, "If it could be proven that the IUD does in fact work after fertilisation, would you stop using it?" They replied unanimously that they would have to carry on using it. In their situation, with a population too large to be fed and watered, with high maternal mortality and infant death, with many uncared for orphans and where it is unsuitable to use contraceptive pills, they have no other effective means of intervention.

During the Balkan wars, a refugee from Kosovo fled with her child to a refugee camp. She told the catholic chaplain that she had been attacked by four men the day before, who murdered her husband and then all raped her. She feared she might be pregnant and desperately wanted help. She was told that Emergency Contraception such as an IUD, which is highly effective if inserted within 5 days of unprotected intercourse, may cause an early embryo to miscarry and therefore could not be recommended on religious and ethical grounds. The opportunity was lost and this poor woman had to carry the child of her husband's murderer.

The Two Books of Revelation

A third principle applies. There is a long Christian tradition that says that God has revealed himself in two books, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature; what he has said and what he has done. As both books have the same author, we need to read both books alongside each other if we are to understand the mind of God. Most famously, Galileo pleaded with the theologians of his day not to interpret the scriptures in a way that was made nonsense by the observable universe. It took 400 yrs before the Roman Church apologised.

Learning from the Book of Nature

When the female egg is fertilised by the sperm, it forms a zygote. At that stage all the genetic information for the new human life is encapsulated inside one cell. This cell then starts to divide. By the second day it is beginning to form a small cluster of cells called a morula. In fact it can divide to form an identical other morula which then

develops into an identical twin. By 4 days, it has become a cluster of 20-30 cells. At this stage, all these cells are identical but none is itself essential. A cell or two can be removed from this cluster without doing any subsequent damage to the foetus. It is just replaced by further cell division. Not only are these cells identical but they all have the potential of generating cells to form any of the human tissues required.

These totipotential cells go on dividing to begin to form a blastocyst on the fifth day. This is the beginning of a differentiation. There are now two types of cell beginning to separate out. The larger group will go on to form the placenta and support structures around the embryo; the smaller group, the inner cell mass of germ cells, will form the embryo but at this stage these germ cells remain identical to each other and retain the full range of potentials for the future embryonic tissues. After about 6 days, the blastocyst which has been floating freely in the Fallopian tubes, begins to fasten on to the lining of the uterus. Only after about 12-14 days, do these germ cells begin to assume specific roles, an early sign of which is the development of the Primitive Streak, the beginning of the nervous system. Before implantation, such differentiation has not begun. In the first five days, any cell might be the forebear of cells that will make the placenta or the person.

Now we don't have any romantic or theological notions about the preciousness of the placenta. It is always discarded. I have heard that some people fry it and eat it for breakfast - and that it is particularly good with an egg on the top – allegedly!

So how then should we regard these identical cells before they differentiate into the beginnings of a placenta or a person?

Nature gives us a further clue. It is estimated that at least 40% of them fail to implant and therefore miscarry, being washed away in the next menstrual period. These have never been attached to the mother and she is totally unaware that any fertilisation has occurred.

For these reasons, the lack of differentiation between person and placenta, the possibility of twinning and the high natural wastage, I think it is very difficult to assume that this collection of genetic data can be considered a tiny human life. It is, I suggest, potential life (and indeed potential placenta) but it is not an actualised one or other. It is rather the genetic information for both.

Building Plans

Let me offer analogy. I have a friend called Rob who is a naval architect. Recently he was asked to chair an Independent Review Committee to check through the assembled plans for two huge aircraft carriers. In the course of time, his committee found everything to be satisfactory and reported this back to the Ministry of Defence. The question was presumably taken back to the Cabinet. Does Britain still need two aircraft carriers? Would one be sufficient? Can the nation still afford them? If so, can construction now commence? This was the last call to scrap the project. Once construction had begun, it would be a national scandal to abandon it.

Now it seems to me, the morula stage of identical, totipotential cells is an assembly of all the data required for a human life, without the construction of a human being having actually commenced. Identical cells: some would lead to the formation of discarded placenta, others to the organs of the child but all identical at this stage.

It is not until implantation has taken place that construction begins with cells differentiating for different purposes.

Now stay with my metaphor a moment longer. Rob checked one set of plans. The Government had to confirm whether it wanted a single or twin aircraft carriers. This is the situation with the fertilised egg. The genetic data is the same for one - or two - people, so we cannot say the spiritual nature of a person is uniquely defined at fertilisation.

Furthermore, suppose construction on the aircraft carriers had begun and for whatever reason the Government had cause to change its mind. There would be enormous benefits for making that decision sooner rather than later. The more developed the construction was, the more damage would be done to the Government which had so crucially dithered.

The Gradualist View

By analogy, I assume on the basis of the gradual formation of the foetus in the womb, that it is right and proper to see the value of the foetal life increasing as it develops. For instance, in the first few months there is a significant chance that the pregnancy would miscarry spontaneously. At least 40% by 10 days and a further 15% loss subsequently. At six weeks, many organs have still not been laid down. At 9 weeks, it is fully formed. At 24 weeks, the child could survive outside the womb.

Now I am not for a moment suggesting that this increasing value of a foetus with the passage of time should be represented as a straight line graph. I would see its value as rising dramatically at implantation.

If we see the foetus as having full value from conception, we would then see no difference between ending that life before implantation, by a medical termination at 8 weeks, by suction termination at 12 weeks, by prostin termination at 16 weeks or 24 weeks or even infanticide after child birth. Yet instinctively we feel that if a termination has to be done, it would be very much better to do it at 8 weeks than 38 weeks. I think that instinct is a properly basic belief. I cannot prove it on other grounds. It is an appropriate response to what we know about that developing life. And it is interesting that Pro-Life groups campaign for lowering the upper age limit for legal abortions. Why would they do that? Because it intuitively makes sense.

Ethical Contraception

However, that is by the by. The question before us now is, 'What contraceptive methods might a Christian use in good conscience?' The Pro-Life view, because of recent research which retains just an element of doubt about the occasional mode of action, is that none of the most effective modern contraceptions can now be justified. The combined pill, the mini-pill and the IUD are all technically capable of preventing implantation whether or not they ever do so. Giving the early embryo the benefit of the doubt of this small risk, leaves us only with barrier methods such as cap and condom, spermicidal creams, tricycling of the COCP (meaning taking it every day for three months then allowing only 4 days of breakthrough bleeding), hormone implants if they are given more frequently than normal recommendations, sterilisation which is irreversible and natural methods, which are well down the list – about 14th - in the

reliability stakes. Now I think you need very sound reasons to adopt this stance, for none of these Pro-Life contraceptives compare favourably with the best. The IUD today can be inserted and left alone for 10 years, with very few problems associated with it and gives results as good as sterilisation, but unlike sterilisation, it is easily reversed, as my wife and I found to our delight. Hence it is so widely used in the developing world. Such clear reasons to justify ruling it out are not found in scripture nor are they found in science. I cannot emphasise enough that if you are going to withhold such important practical help from, say, the African village of Nkunga and the female population of China where 60 million women use the IUD and only one child is allowed, you need to be on very solid ground to justify it.

But there are wider implications. The Pro-Life position excludes Emergency Contraception which is often needed by children as well as adults, It excludes I.V.F. even for married couples using their own egg and sperm, because some fertilised eggs would be wasted. It rules out pre-implantation diagnosis of Cystic Fibrosis and excludes further research to identify similar horrendous genetic defects before implantation.

It rules out embryonic stem-cell research, the importance of which has just been underlined by this year's Nobel Prize for Medicine, where their work on mice has been seen as the most far-reaching and beneficial breakthrough in contemporary medicine. Such research on human embryos is currently allowed up to 14 days, that is, until the Primitive Streak begins to form.

And perhaps more important than any of these, Pro-Life thinking robs the world of all of its most widely used and effective methods of reversible contraception as it faces Global Warming which is directly related to the vast, uncontrolled population explosion of our generation.

Christ's Uncomfortable Words

Jesus offered these uncomfortable words to those who created burdens for other people to bear. "How terrible for you who put loads on other people's backs which are hard to carry but you yourselves will not stretch a finger to help them." Luke 11:46

Furthermore, he warned of those who fuss over small matters but "neglect the weightier matters of the Law – justice, mercy and faithfulness". (Matt 23:23) In a less than perfect world, we may have to choose the lesser of two evils. If we don't identify the lesser evil, we could be guilty of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. (Matt 23:24). I put it to you that the benefit of any lingering doubts in the Christian mind should be decided in favour of people who desperately need help and not for the protection of our sometimes hypersensitive and overly precious consciences. This debate has implications for the entire planet.