

The Beginning of Human Life

The Bible affirms that God is the Lord and giver of all life.¹ Human beings are uniquely made in God's image,² and each individual human being is infinitely precious to God and made for an eternal destiny.³ The Christian attitude toward human life is thus one of reverence⁴ from the moment of fertilization to death.

Definition of human life

1. A living human being is a self-directed⁵, integrated organism⁶ that possesses the genetic endowment of the species *Homo sapiens*⁷ who has the inherent active biological disposition (active capacity and potency)⁸ for ordered growth and development⁹ 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)¹⁰. "Conception" is a term used for the beginning of biological human life and has been variously 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 division¹¹, 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 sperm¹² 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

1. Procreation is acknowledged in the Bible to be the gift of God.¹³
2. 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)

3. Human beings are created as ensouled bodies or embodied souls¹⁴ (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.¹⁵ A biological view of human life beginning at fertilization is therefore consistent with the Biblical view of human life.
4. From fertilization on, God relates to the unborn in a personal manner.¹⁶ Between fertilization and birth, which are regularly linked in Biblical language¹⁷ God continues His activity in the unfolding and continuous development of the fetus.
5. The Bible assumes a personal and moral continuity through fertilization, birth, and maturation.¹⁸
6. The Bible, the Church in all its formative Creeds¹⁹ and Ecumenical Councils,²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 made like us in every way.²² 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

1. 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.
2. 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.

3. 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.
4. 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.²³
5. 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.

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¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ Genetic identity with the species *Homo sapiens* alone is a necessary, but not sufficient, criteria for defining a human being.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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 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.

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¹³ Gen 4:1; Psa 127:3

¹⁴ “*nephesh*”

¹⁵ 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 if the “higher” (implying soul) functions of “personhood” or “rationality” are not present.

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

¹⁷ Isa 7:14

¹⁸ Psa 51:5; Psa 119:13-16

¹⁹ Apostolic, Nicean-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian

²⁰ Nicea (325 AD), Constantinople (381 AD), Ephesus (431 AD), and Chalcedon (451 AD)

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

²² Heb 2:17

²³ Matt 25:40; James 1:27