

THE BEING AND NATURE OF THE UNBORN CHILD

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“He is not far from each one of us for in him we live and move and have our being”.

That statement about God endorsed by St Paul applies to the unborn as well as to the born. Every human being has been created by God body and soul, addressed by his Word and made in correspondence to himself to reflect him through a unique relation to himself that transcends his/her creatureliness and is constitutive of his/her distinctively human being and nature.

This applies to each one of us from the very beginning of our conception and existence in the womb, not as a body and a soul, but as a body-soul unity, as an embodied soul and as a besouled body. Like all created things human being is corruptible, it may disintegrate and cease to exist. Nevertheless, human being is continuously sustained in existence by the beneficent will and creative presence of God, and is thus given immortality through the grace of a relation with God who only has immortality. God alone is uncreated, perfectly self-sufficient Being, eternally existing in himself in an utterly transcendent way that surpasses our power to comprehend. He is without beginning and without end: to be immortal is the natural and intrinsic property of his Being.

All other being is deficient in existence and naturally mortal with a finite beginning and a finite end, and is thus utterly dependent on the goodness of God, the Lord of all being, in the order and temporality of its existence. So far as human being is concerned, however, owing to the distinctive integration of his/her soul and body, a continuing personal life after death includes the body as a basic equation of existence. Hence in Christian theology immortality is inseparably bound up with the resurrection of the whole human being as a body/soul unity, and is described as a creaturely participation in the uncreated eternal Life of God.

The whole universe with its rational order to which human beings belong has been created by God out of nothing and is contingent. Far from being closed in upon itself it is open, and as such points beyond itself to the Creator. Within itself the universe comprises a hierarchy of different levels of creaturely existence and rational order. While each level is open at its boundary conditions to understanding from a higher level, all creation is open toward God in its nature and order. Along with all animal being, human being is a living organism or an animated body, but unlike animals human being is a rational constituent of the creation within its contingent rational order, and as such is ultimately to be understood not from an independent centre in himself or herself but only from above and beyond himself or herself in a unique relation to God. Unlike other creaturely beings human being is constituted a rational subject and agent, that is, a subject-being or person, living in inter-personal relation with others. Through his Spirit God sustains his human creatures and makes them open for fellowship with him, reveals himself to them through his Word, and makes it possible for each one in due course to respond personally to his address. God adapts his gracious presence to human beings all through their life, from their conception in the womb, as embryos, as children and as adults, in ways appropriate to the different stages of their earthly existence.

Our particular concern here is with the being and nature of the unborn child unborn child as a besouled body or an embodied soul from the very beginning of his/her existence in the womb of the mother, and as already a human being “in germ”, as it were, even though only the size of an apple pip. That is to say, the human being is already genetically complete in the womb from the moment of conception, when the body and soul of the new human being grow together within the womb of the mother and in living relation with her. The human genome thus come into being is laden by the Creator with all the information that is needed for complete development.

While that information is more than would fill the largest encyclopaedia, it is yet incomplete and indeterminate in itself, and is thus not explainable in terms of its components. However complicated it may be, it cannot of itself account for the way in which the embryo is shaped and develops. There is and must be some all-important factor, a regulative power, a controlling source of information which bears upon the human nature and life of the developing embryo from the beginning. This controlling factor may be spoken of as a some kind of “*metaplan*”, a term, which may be borrowed from the physicist Paul Davies in his book *The Cosmic Blueprint*. Where does the information content of the human genome come from? That must surely be related to the transcendent source and ultimate ground of the rational order with which we are concerned in the formation of all physical laws, for which physical laws themselves cannot account - which Einstein once spoke of as the supreme *Why*, or the ultimate justification of physical law.

There is an ultimate rational ground to what happens in the universe, which we cannot formulate in our physical laws. In all our scientific formulation of the laws of nature, we have to presuppose a transcendent order for which we cannot give any account, but which we have to assume in all attempts at proof or disproof. That is why we cannot but take into account a controlling source of information in the conception and orderly development of each cell in a human embryo, that is of some “*metaplan*” or “*metaorder*”, or an organising principle. Let me repeat here what I have written elsewhere in *The Soul and Person of the Unborn Child*. However wonderful and complicated the DNA may be, it cannot of itself account for the enormously greater complexity of the many parts of one's physical body. Where does the information content of the genome come from? It does not and cannot be produced by accident or through random self-organisation in natural processes, for the information is of such an intelligible complex nature that it must have an intelligent source. There is and must be regulative force, and indeed a controlling source of information, something over and above our genetic composition which bears upon the human nature and life of the developing embryo from the moment of conception, from the very beginning of its existence in the womb. This is the creative source which the Bible speaks of as the *Word of God* by whom all things were made, in whom was life and the life was the light of human being.

It belongs to the very heart of the Gospel that the Word of God who was the eternal Son of God, of one being with the Father, and through him all things were made, chose in his love to become incarnate in Jesus Christ, was conceived through the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and became a true human being. It is surely to him who became a holy embryo in the Virgin's womb, and was born of her to be the Saviour of the world, that we must go, in order as Christians to understand what the unborn child is as an embodied human soul, and as one loved by the Lord Jesus who came to the Saviour of the human race. The eternal Word of God become incarnate was and is himself the *metaplan*, the creative and regulative force in the birth of each human being, come among us as one of us to be Lord and Saviour of the -human race.

The virgin birth of Jesus is an essential part of the Gospel of salvation, for through it Jesus was made one of us and one with us in such a way that he healed and sanctified in himself what he had assumed from us, thereby recreating, humanising, and personalising it. That is why leading theologians in the early Church, followed by John Calvin at the Reformation, rightly traced the root of our redemption, not only to the death and resurrection of Christ, but to his very conception and birth of the Virgin Mary. It was because in Jesus the Creator Word of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, that Christians came to regard the unborn foetus in a new light, sanctified by the Lord Jesus as an embryonic *person*. Hence already in the first century the Church added to the sixth commandment, “You shall not commit infanticide, nor procure abortion”.

Those early Christians took to heart the words of the Lord Jesus about little children: “Suffer the little children to come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever offends one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him to have a millstone fastened round his neck and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.” “See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

These teachings of the Lord Jesus about our behaviour toward little children were held to apply no less to the unborn than to the born, for in his incarnation the Lord Jesus had himself been an embryo in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of whom he was born as Jesus to be Immanuel, God with us the Saviour of humankind. Unfortunately more attention throughout the history of Churches in the East and the West has often been given to the Virgin Mary herself, than to the One conceived in her womb and begotten as our Lord and Saviour. That has contributed, like the neglect of the Virgin birth of Jesus, to a widespread failure to have due concern for the unborn child brothered by the Lord Jesus.

The Virgin Birth cannot be understood apart from the whole mystery of Christ, apart from the union of divine and human nature in his one Person already complete in the womb of Mary. The nature of Jesus' unborn Person was not different from the nature of his divine-human Person born of his mother at Bethlehem. His birth of the Virgin Mary may well be regarded as the outward sign, the historical form in humanity which the creative and saving entry of the Son of God took, when he assumed our human nature in union with his divine nature, but it was much more than a sign. The sign points to the mystery of Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, incarnate in the world of space and time, and bears witness to it, but the reality of the Virgin birth is more than the sign. The reality is the union of true God and true man in Christ the creative Word of God and redemptive activity of God. But if the Virgin birth is a true and appropriate sign, the outward sign of the inward reality belong together as form and content of the Incarnation. Thus the Virgin Birth attests and corresponds to the nature of what it signifies, and to the nature of the healing and redemptive work of the Saviour throughout all his life from his conception and birth to his death and resurrection.

It is highly significant that the earliest text of John 1. 13 refers directly to the Virgin birth of Jesus: “Who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”. (Other texts are in the plural, with “who were born...” qualifying “those who become children of God”). And it is in that light that the third chapter of St John's Gospel, about the need for us to be born from above or again through the Spirit, is to be understood. The birth of Jesus was of vicarious and redemptive significance. That means that our new birth is to be understood in relation to the birth of Jesus himself.

I believe that the doctrine of the Virgin birth of Jesus and its redemptive significance must be recovered for a proper understanding of the redemptive life and mission of Christ, but

also for our grasp of its import for us about the nature and status in his eyes of the unborn child. As he became a human being for us, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, as he lived and died on the Cross and rose again for our redemption, so, I believe, we must think of its importance for our understanding of, and regard for, the unborn child - every one of whom has been brothered by the Lord Jesus. In becoming a human being for us, he also became an embryo for the sake of all embryos, and for our Christian understanding of the being, nature and status in God's eyes of the unborn child in his/her body and soul. To take no proper thought for the unborn child is to have no proper thought of Jesus himself as our Lord and Saviour or to appreciate his relation as the incarnate Creator to every human being.

Let us consider the being and life of the unborn child as we now know of him/her in relation to some of the things we have been learning in recent years about the human foetus. This is particularly significant for us today, for our relation with the Lord Jesus in his conception began with our own conception, and our relationship with him in his birth began with our own birth, not only with our new birth - although that is to be understood, as we have noted, in its ultimate root in the birth of Jesus himself "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God". He is himself the transcendent source of information become flesh as one of us, the creative Word of God become man, in accordance with whom each of us was conceived and formed in the womb of our mother. In accordance with this purpose each of us is given birth and life through our mothers and fathers. As such the Lord Jesus is also our incarnate Saviour who has a fellow feeling with us in all our infirmities, and whose healing and redemptive power we must not forget when we learn from our medical scientists, gynaecologists and physicians about what they tell us of the life and experience of the human foetus.

It is significant that the term "compassion" so often ascribed to the Lord Jesus in the Gospels (and echoed by St Paul), is a rendering in Greek of the Hebrew expression for womb (*rahamim*). As Saviour the Lord Jesus bears toward all those in weakness, pain, and need, but in a divinely intensified degree, something like the visceral feeling which a mother has toward the babe in her womb. He, the creative Word and transcendent source of the all-important information in the formation of every human being in body and soul, the Lord and Saviour of mankind, who was born flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, is himself the incarnate "metaplan" in continual dynamic relation between the Creator and every living human person.

Here are some of the facts which research has brought to our attention by gynaecologists, paediatricians, and other medical scientists, which must affect our attitude to the human foetus. As Albert Einstein showed us, in the advance of our science, the damaging dualist fallacy which has affected so much modern thought, especially in the psychological and sociological sciences, is being steadily rejected for a more holistic approach. Thus a non-dualist unitary conception of human being is being reached, supporting the Jewish/Christian understanding of human being as embodied soul and ensouled body.

Far from being little more than a bundle of living tissue, the unborn or preborn child early reveals evidence of a consciousness of his/her mother, with sufficient self-awareness to react through bodily movement to her hands and her voice in loving care, and also to that of the father along with the mother. Indeed, already within a few weeks of its life, the foetus gives evidence, discernible in movements of the brain, of recognizing and having a memory of parental behaviour, in emotion and sound, and reacts in response. Thus the child in the mother's womb responds with evident delight and memory to the caressing and singing of the mother. Moreover it is now known that any tune repeatedly played to the baby in the womb is learned by the baby who recognises it after his/her birth. It is particularly interesting to find that

the unborn child reacts especially to the mathematical music of Mozart rather than to loud cacophonous sounds, as it does also to discord between the mother and father! Moreover, he/she has the ability even to sense the mother's withdrawal of love, and has enough self-awareness to sense abortion attempts on the part of the mother, with the will to react to them. Even at twenty weeks gestational age the unborn child quite definitely responds to pain and suffering and reacts in distress.

What I have written here is only a very little of the greatly increased knowledge we now have of the life and behaviour of the unborn child, but it is enough to prompt us to consider two very important points.

1 The kind of interrelation discerned between the preborn child and his/her mother indicates the development already of what must be called *personal relations*. The unborn child is *in parvo* a personal being. The concept of person was not known in ancient culture, in the East or in the West, but comes from Christian theology. It derives from the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: one Being, three Persons. In him the divine Persons are who they are through their interrelations in being and act with one another. While nature of God, it came to be applied to creaturely human beings, in such a way that the relations between human beings constitute what they are as persons. Persons are what and who they are in the interpersonal relations of their one being with each other.

Unfortunately that concept of the person and of the personal within dualist patterns of thought, ancient and modern, came to be defined in individualist and rationalist patterns of thought, and then in legal and psychological ways when its profound ontological significance became submerged. That is particularly evident in the romantic and subjectivist notion of "personality". As a result the personal became excluded from scientific thinking, so that even the personal participation of the scientist's mind, as Schrödinger and Polanyi lamented, was excluded from scientific thought, although it is actually through the mind of the scientist as person that all scientific research takes place and scientific knowledge is achieved.

There is another side, however, to the history of the person and the personal evident in the scientific work of James Clerk Maxwell. When faced with the problem of explaining the behaviour of the electromagnetic field he found that he could not do that in a mechanistic way. Then he took over the idea from Trinitarian theology that relations between persons belong to what persons actually are, and applied that dynamic onto-relation to explain how particles of light are what they actually and dynamically are. And in so doing he advanced the epoch-making concept of the continuous electrodynamic field, which Einstein claimed brought about the greatest change in the rational structure of science, and on which his own and all subsequent science rests. Why, then, should we not think of the personal being of the unborn child in that kind of dynamic and ontological way, in interrelation with his/her mother?

If that kind of interrelational way of thinking was so effective in the scientific account of the behaviour of inanimate light particles with one another in a continuous dynamic field, why should we not think of it as applying effectively to a deeper understanding of the interrelation of the body and soul and personal life of the foetus in relation to the mother? It is surely now evident that it is through loving personalising relation with the mother that the tiny personal being of the foetus is nourished, and its embryonic response to the mother, in recognition of his/her voice. Is that not after all what we read in the Gospel account of how the embryonic being of John the Baptist leapt in the womb of his mother Elizabeth when she was greeted by the Virgin Mary? I believe that through fuller understanding of the unborn child in the unity of body and soul, and in the personal relatedness of the child to the mother particularly, we can deepen and advance what we learn from the researches of medical scientists in our

understanding of the personal life and behaviour of the unborn child. In that event is not abortion an act of murder, and a grave sin against the Lord Jesus?

2 We return now to the fact that the unborn baby feels pain and reacts to it, for example when a needle is plunged into his/her body or when he or she undergoes an operation in the womb.

There are people who question whether the unborn baby actually *feels* pain. That seems to be an equivocal question governed by conceptions of what the self and self-consciousness are in their own psychological perception of child or adult experience. However, as the distinguished nurse Margaret Sparshott in Britain has pointed out, it has now been found that a foetus is actually able to feel pain, and does in fact react sharply to it. It is now established that foetuses have all the necessary central nervous equipment for pain experience, and that their experience of what is called pain is painful. Even at twenty weeks gestational age, the unborn child definitely reacts to distress, pain and suffering. And, as I have already pointed out, the unborn child has been found to have enough self-awareness to sense abortion attempts by the mother, and actually react to them.

If the Lord Jesus is the Creator Word of God by whom each one of us has come into being, and is indeed the source of information governing the conception and formation of each of us in the womb of our mother, then we cannot but conclude that to kill the child in the womb is a *sin against the Lord Jesus himself*. From the moment of conception every human being is infinitely precious to the Lord Jesus, and is the concern of his redeeming love. Civilised countries enact laws protecting animals from the infliction of pain. Surely they ought to enact laws protecting the foetus from pain, even if in law the foetus does not have the status of personal being!

However as Christians our regard for the pre-born and post-born alike must surely be governed by our commitment to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Creator and Lord of every human being, who was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and born to be the brother and Redeemer of humankind.

*The Redeemer's Tears.**

“And when Jesus drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But they are hid from your eyes.”

Luke 19:41,42

Sitting on the Mount of Olives, Jesus looked over the valley to see Jerusalem and wept over its coming desolation and the slaughter of its inhabitants, men, women and children, by the Roman army. It was, we know from historians, a fearful slaughter in which Jesus' fellow Jews were mercilessly butchered, and the Holy City was set on fire and utterly destroyed.

This event belongs to the very heart of the Gospel of salvation and peace, the Lord God himself weeping over Jerusalem, shedding tears over his loved ones with whom he had become united in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and of whom he was born to save his people from their sins, God with us become one with us and one of us, the Saviour of the world. Let us not forget that he who shed tears of compassion, out of the same fountain of love and mercy, shed blood too. The calamity that overtook Jerusalem was far greater in Jesus' eyes than it can be in ours, but his compassion for all those he came to save, and for whom he died, was and is infinite. Jesus was none other than God himself, God incarnate among us and one with us. He it was who shed those tears over Jerusalem and its people, the believing and the unbelieving alike. “Daughters of Jerusalem”, Jesus said to those who bewailed and lamented him on his way to the Cross, “do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children”.

The destruction of Jerusalem and its people was a veritable *holocaust*. Those tears, the tears of the Redeemer, were the very tears of God himself. And they have flowed and flowed again over the fearful *holocaust* of millions and millions of Jews in our own time. But what of the abortions of unborn children that have been taking place and continue to take place throughout the world, even in “Christian” countries? Is that not the most incredible *holocaust* being perpetrated, even now, in countries where people have heard and believe the Gospel, and where millions and millions of people, as in the United States of America and in the countries of Europe, not to speak of Asia and Africa, profess to follow the Lord Jesus? Can we not allow the tears that continue to flow from the compassionate pleading eyes of the Lord Jesus, the *Redeemer's tears*, to quench the flames of *holocaust*? Let us listen and listen to him: “Daughters of Jerusalem”, here and everywhere, “do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children”.

* This was the title of a famous book by John Howe, perhaps better known in a later edition with an introduction by Robert Gordon