

The Word Became Flesh: The Ethical Significance of Incarnation For Embryonic Stem Cell Research¹



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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

—John 1:1 and 14

The gospel of progress . . . plays the Crucifixion backwards, as it were; in the beginning was the flesh, and the flesh became Word. In the light of this Logos in reverse, the quest for hope is the ultimate hopelessness; the pursuit of happiness, the certitude of despair; the lust for life, the embrace of death

—Malcolm Muggeridge²

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¹This article is an adaptation of a paper given by the author at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 20, 2009, entitled “The Word Became Flesh: What are the Ethical Implications of the Incarnation for Embryonic Stem Cell Research?”

²Malcolm Muggeridge, *Conversion: A Spiritual Journey* (London: Collins, 1988), 63.

Other things being equal, there is less reason for objecting to the use of an early human embryo—a being that has no brain, is not, and never has been conscious, and has no preferences of any kind—than there is for objecting to research on rats, who are sentient beings capable of preferring not to be in situations that are painful or frightening to them.

—Peter Singer³

I. “LOGOS IN REVERSE” VERSUS BIBLICAL INCARNATION

Last year, the cover of *Time* magazine promised to explain “How the Coming Revolution in Stem Cells Could Save Your Life.” As expected, the featured article happily announced “No more science in the shadows,” lamented “the dark days of the Bush Administration’s stem cell restrictions,” and celebrated Barak Obama’s campaign “promise to lift the research ban.”⁴

We have to admit that anything to “Save Your Life,” in the words of *Time*, sounds good on the face of it. But in this case, saving your life will require killing embryonic human life. Nevertheless, some say “it’s progress.” According to Malcolm Muggeridge, this “gospel of progress” is what we should expect from a materialistic milieu that has the “Logos in reverse.” Your life can be extended or enhanced, even if it costs the sacrifice of another human life, especially if the sacrificial human life can be explained away as potential, non-personal, tissue, leftover, etc. Seeking “the lust for life,” in this case extending one’s life at the cost of another human being’s embryonic life, actually results, says Muggeridge, in “the embrace of death.” It amounts to an ethic based upon incarnation “in reverse.”

The ethical implications of “reverse incarnation” are being played out now before us and are increasingly troubling. The disturbing results include destructive embryonic stem-cell research, abortion, and infanticide. Christians would do well to counter “reverse incarnation” by

³ Peter Singer, “Stem Cells and Immortal Souls,” *Free Inquiry* 20.2 (Spring 2000): 9.

⁴ The full cover title is more specific: “Diabetes, Heart Disease, Parkinson’s, How the Coming Revolution in Stem Cells Could Save Your Life,” *Time* (9 Feb 2009). Twice *Newsweek* magazine has featured similar language of “hope” and “promise” on its front cover. See “The Stem Cell Wars (Embryo Research vs. Pro-life Politics) There’s Hope for Alzheimer’s, Heart Disease, Parkinson’s and Diabetes. But Will Bush Cut Off the Money?” (9 July 2001), and “The Battle Over Stem Cells after Christopher Reeve: The Medical Promise and the Political Minefields,” (25 Oct 2004).

revisiting true incarnation, biblical incarnation.

The purpose of this article is to begin to explore how an incarnational ethic might inform the controversial issue of embryonic stem cell research. It assumes a three-fold concern. First, the debate over embryonic stem cell research is going to continue for the foreseeable future, in spite of the much-welcomed advances in adult stem cell research. Second, the 2005 Genetics and Public Policy Center poll revealed that half of conservative Christians favor embryonic stem cell research.⁵ Third, most Christian pro-life arguments have been based upon combating abortion and protecting the human fetus, not the embryo at the earliest stages. A new pro-life paradigm is needed to protect that life, which is based upon a macro-theme of the Bible (incarnation) and is also consistent with the micro-evidence of related texts on the same subject. This article is an introductory effort to identify a foundation for incarnational anthropology, to explore the application of that incarnational anthropology, and finally to survey some illustrations of this paradigm throughout the biblical record. It is assumed that the moral status of the fertilized egg, zygote, and embryo is the matter in question, and furthermore, that Christians need a scriptural and strong ethic to address that point.

II. FOUNDATIONS FOR INCARNATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY: O'DONOVAN, LEWIS, AND BARTH

Without any doubt, Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order* has enjoyed a dominant position as one of the most celebrated and influential works in Christian ethics for almost a quarter of a century.⁶ As the title and subtitle indicate, his "Outline for Evangelical Ethics" is based upon the resurrection. Specifically, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, O'Donovan sees "the reaffirmation of creation" and proposes it as "the starting-point" for Christian ethics.⁷ The resurrection theme is a gospel theme; it is his ethical mega-theme. O'Donovan is rooting ethics in the main lines of the gospel.

What is often overlooked in O'Donovan, and what will be most helpful here, is his secondary emphasis on incarnation. At one point he notes "the foundation of Christian ethics in the incarnation" and argues

⁵ Tom Strobe, "Poll: Half of conservative Christians favor embryonic research," n.p. [cited 20 October 2005]. Online: <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=21863>.

⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

that because “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, transcendent divine authority has presented itself as worldly moral authority.”⁸ O’Donovan explains: “in Christ the Word of God became flesh and took the cause of the world as his own cause.” As with the resurrection/gospel theme, he also writes of the incarnation: “the Christian gospel does proclaim that God has made himself at home in the world.”⁹ The discerning reader will infer that *The Resurrection and Moral Order* necessarily entails, and even presupposes, incarnation and moral order. From this starting point, O’Donovan has much to say about embryonic human life and fetal personhood that will be noted later. However at this juncture, it is telling that he is not the only Christian thinker that grounds ethics, and specifically theological anthropology, upon the incarnation. Moving from the general to the specific, a cloud of witnesses emerges.

So how have others gone from the incarnation, to ethics, to the moral status of the embryo? Reviewing even a popular definition of the incarnation, the implications are obvious. In *Mere Christianity*, part of C. S. Lewis’s apologetic appeal is his emphasis on the big themes of the gospel. Along with the resurrection, Lewis sought to describe the incarnation. In his signature style of profundity though simplicity, Lewis’s description of the incarnation contains an explicit reference to fetal personhood and an implicit one to embryonic personhood:

The Second Person in God, the Son, became human Himself: was born into the world as an actual man—a real man of a particular height, with hair of a particular colour, speaking a particular language, weighing so many stone. The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman’s body. If you want to get the hang of it, think of how you would like to become a slug or a crab.¹⁰

Although Lewis is not arguing the point for fetal personhood, and certainly not a point against embryo destruction or even abortion, his explanation of the incarnation certainly implies the personhood of the fetus. Again, Lewis asserts that the incarnation means that “The Second Person in God, the Son became human . . . before that a fetus.” What about “before that” an embryo?

Some might protest this line of reasoning—projecting the incarnation of Christ, his personhood as fetus or embryo, upon other humans—

⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 140.

claiming one cannot deduce from Jesus' embryonic or fetal personhood to others in general. In rebuttal to this line of argument, Karl Barth's method of theological anthropology seems apropos:

In our exposition of the doctrine of man we must always look in the first instance at the nature of man as it confronts us in the person of Jesus and only secondarily—asking and answering from this place of light—at the nature of man as that of every man and all other men.¹¹

Barth's approach mirrors O'Donovan's incarnation paradigm. If we want to know what it means to be truly human we must look to the God-Man, as man. His humanity should determine our anthropology. It is no secret that for Barth abortion was nothing other than murder, since, as Barth insists, "the unborn child, is from the very first a child. It is still developing and has no independent life. But it is a man and not a thing, nor a mere part of the mother's body."¹² In this specific context, Barth roots his argument more directly in the fact that human life was given by God and therefore belongs to God, and it is in that connection that his language becomes most passionate:

[W]e must underline the fact that he who destroys germinating life kills a man and thus ventures the monstrous thing of decreeing concerning the life and death of a fellow-man whose life is given by God and therefore, like his own, belongs to Him.¹³

III. APPLICATIONS OF INCARNATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY: TORRANCE, GEORGE, AND CAMERON

Barth's anthropology from above caught the interest of one of his translators, Thomas F. Torrance. Torrance argued that one of the crucial parallels to be found in the virginal conception of Jesus is that God's only Son became human flesh precisely at the point of conception. Beginning with our genes as an embryo, the Word has become flesh. Torrance asserted, "The Lord Jesus assumed our human nature, gathering up all its stages and healing them in his own human life, including conception."¹⁴ If the incarnation includes Christ's sharing in "all" of the "stages" of human life, certainly this would entail embryonic human life.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. Harold Knight et al.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), III.2 (p. 46).

¹² *Ibid.*, III.4 (p. 415).

¹³ *Ibid.*, III.4 (p. 416).

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Test Tube Babies* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).

Torrance is not alone. Timothy George also finds the “central New Testament text” on the issue of abortion in the Johannine prologue. He mirrors Barth and cites Calvin as well on the method of defining anthropology via Christology. George turns to John 1:14:

“And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” This verse has tremendous implications for Christian anthropology for, as John Calvin wisely noted, the full meaning of the image of God can be nowhere better recognized than in the restoration of our corrupted nature in the incarnate Son of God, the second Adam, in whom alone our true and complete humanity is restored. (*Institutes* 1.15.4)¹⁵

George relates how much the phrase “the Word became flesh” would have contradicted the Greek and gnostic notions that disparaged matter as evil and thought it impossible for the Logos to become *sarx* (flesh). Yet the radical biblical claim of incarnation was so prominent in the New Testament that “Christians are admonished to regard as antichrist anyone who denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3).”

In contrast to this biblical motif of incarnation, George notes a modern “revival of gnostic anthropology in the modern movement for elective abortions.” He classifies Warren F. Metzler as a current day neognostic. As evidence, George produces this quotation from Metzler’s letter “Why Abortion Isn’t Murder,” in *First Things*:

Humans are actual spirits. The spirit exists prior to birth and will go on existing after the body dies. I propose that the spirit of a particular human enters the body along with the first breath of air. Not until the voluntary breath of the child is the full-fledged human present.¹⁶

Questions about the “voluntary” nature of the first breath aside, the above quote reveals one truth. George’s claim about current Gnosticism is not overkill. Perhaps if he is guilty of anything, it is understatement. On at least one level, first century Gnosticism was not as radical as its twenty-first century counterpart. While the Gnosticism confronting the early church claimed that God was too “great” spiritually to become

¹⁵ Timothy George, “Southern Baptist Heritage of Life,” in *Life at Risk: The Crises in Medical Ethics* (eds. Richard D. Land and Louis A. Moore; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 93.

¹⁶ Warren F. Metzler, “Why Abortion Isn’t Murder,” *First Things* 31 (March, 1993): 4, in George, “Heritage,” 94.

human, today's pro-abortion version claims that the human is too "great" personally to be present in an embryo or fetus. Surely, the distance between the human embryo and adult is not so great as the distance between God and man.

In any case, George documents that "In the face of the Gnostic disparagement of human reality, the early church pointed to the centrality of the Incarnation, confessing that Jesus Christ was truly (*alethos*) conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit; He was truly born in the manger of Bethlehem . . ." George's conviction is that today's church should do no less. When faced with "contemporary theories of human development which marginalize the sacred value of unborn human life," George insists the church ought to proclaim all the more firmly with Paul: "When the time had fully come God sent forth His Son, born of a woman (Gal 4:4 NIV)."¹⁷

Nigel Cameron applied this theological method when responding to the infamous pro-embryo destruction proposals of the Warnock Committee. Cameron maintained that "the fundamental Christian argument" for the pro-life position was based upon "an understanding of the status of embryonic human life; that it was at this point that the Son of God took human flesh, becoming incarnate *in utero* and in embryo."¹⁸ In addition, Cameron extended the point to include the notion of *imago Dei*:

If we accept a classical Christology we will of course want to go much further and affirm that since our Lord took human flesh first as a zygote, so in every zygote there is 'one of us' who bears the *imago Dei*.

On top of the image of God motif, Cameron adds the category of personhood:

In terms of Christian theology, the personhood of the early embryo as of the mature adult is rooted in the personhood of God—which is part of what possessing the 'image of God' means, that image which Christians believe to be coterminous with the genetic constitution of *Homo sapiens* in defining human being.

Clearly Cameron places great weight upon the ethical and doctrinal significance of the incarnation, expanding it to include not only

¹⁷ George, "Heritage," 94.

¹⁸ Nigel M. de S. Cameron, "The Embryo Debate," *Ethics & Medicine* 6.1 (1990): 4.

personhood, but also the *imago Dei*. From Torrance to George to Cameron, a practical pattern emerges for applying the theological method of incarnational anthropology.

Some specialists on the Trinity or the councils, especially Chalcedon, may wince at where this could lead. It is true that “The Word” who “became flesh” (John 1:14) was none other than the same “Word” who “was God” (John 1:1). If the incarnate Christ *in utero* was the second Person of the Trinity, is it heretical to argue from his personhood to the personhood of other human beings at the same stage? Is it a problem if we speak of Jesus as a human person at conception and a divine person? Does this threaten the Chalcedonian formula, “one person with two natures”? The answer is no.

However strongly one proclaims Chalcedon, Gordon Clark was right also to say about *the one person*, “Jesus Christ was and is both God and man, a divine person and a human person.”¹⁹ Carl F. H. Henry confirmed Clark’s view with great care and detail, embracing Chalcedon, but adding, “Christian orthodoxy has been convinced that two centers of knowledge and action in Jesus Christ need not mean dual personality, any more than three persons in the Godhead mean tritheism.”²⁰ Affirming the human personality of Jesus at conception does not equal Nestorianism. On the contrary, upholding the human personality of Jesus is an essential. Michael Drippe makes the fine point of distinction when he writes “Christ is the Person and hypostasis not only of His Divine nature, from all eternity, but also of His human nature from the moment of the incarnation.”²¹ As the Son of Man and the Last Adam, after the miraculous virginal conception, what was true of His status as human person *in utero* is true of us.

IV: ILLUSTRATIONS OF INCARNATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY: O’DONOVAN AND MITCHELL

So far, the basis and application for an incarnational anthropology has been proposed upon a theological method that turns on John 1:14, worked out as theological theory. It would be one thing if that was all one had. But it is quite another thing to look at specific scriptural

¹⁹ Gordon Clark, *The Incarnation* (Jefferson, IN: Trinity Foundation, 1988), 75.

²⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Identity of Jesus of Nazareth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 113.

²¹ Michael Drippe, “The Christian Theological Understanding of the Human Person,” *Epiphany Journal* 14.4 (1994): 38.

accounts about conception, embryonic life, and fetal life concerning Jesus and other Bible characters.

“*And Who is a Person?*” That is the fundamental question of O’Donovan’s other relevant text, *Begotten or Made?*²² He answers using Scripture, along with other classical sources, to say that the *persona*, as “the agent,” is the one who could “appear in the public realm.” O’Donovan shows that Jeremiah, Pharaoh, and Cyrus were all recognized and appointed by God as players on the stage of history, when conceived and in the womb. Another Old Testament idea fits the identity/history motif of personhood: having children and grandchildren “and so contributing to the history which God designed for his people.”²³ He sees this biblical role of the person identified in history as “set in opposition to the qualitative analysis of what gives us our identity.”²⁴

The next obvious question, then, is, when does a person begin to be a person? O’Donovan points to Isaiah 7:14, which has its immediate fulfillment in a promised child during the reign of King Ahaz, yet a later fulfillment as well in Jesus. Like John the Baptist, that promised child’s beginning on the stage of history begins not at birth, but at conception. O’Donovan believes that “these theological observations do not of themselves yield any precise view of the beginning of individual identity.”²⁵ But added to the fact that a new genome results from the fusion of a sperm and ovum, he sees also an indication of “the beginning of a new personal history at conception.” O’Donovan states that “genetics can only indicate, and cannot demonstrate, personal identity,” but he goes on to say that nevertheless genetics seem to show “an appearance of a human being which has decisive continuities with late appearances.”²⁶ O’Donovan concludes by saying that “such science as we have today speaks to us of this point of new beginning at conception.”

O’Donovan is not unaware of those who disagree. To those who argue from fetal wastage or spontaneous abortions, he counters that no “statistical argument can give us a sufficient indication of discontinuity in individual identity.” Responding to those who set brain-function as the threshold for personhood, O’Donovan replies that their argument “rests on a philosophical preference rather than a scientific one.”²⁷

Christian ethicist C. Ben Mitchell takes a different approach than

²² Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

O'Donovan. Without neglecting the Logos passage, Mitchell also carefully describes the 23 chromosomes from a father's sperm and the 23 from a mother's ovum and the resulting union of a one-cell human zygote, containing 46 chromosomes. "The human zygote is already a 'he' or 'she' and contains all the information he or she will ever have or need. The event is known as fertilization or conception."²⁸ From here Mitchell moves from the embryo, to the fetus, to the infant, and so on. And he is clear to affirm the incarnational approach suggested earlier:

The miracle of Jesus' incarnation took place through the agency of the Holy Spirit and a human ovum—Mary's ovum, to be precise. From fertilization to birth, Jesus' embryonic development proceeded just as has been outlined above. In this way the "Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).²⁹

But Mitchell shifts from the larger theological theme to specific birth narratives like Luke 1:41. Here John the Baptist "leaped" in the womb of Elizabeth his mother when she was visited by Mary, who Mitchell says (perhaps too precisely) was only two weeks pregnant with Jesus.³⁰ Mitchell asks, "At what stage of development did Jesus become a human person? John knew—and we know—that Mary's embryo was as much the incarnate Christ as the adult man who hung on Calvary's cross and who arose from that borrowed tomb."³¹

Of course other elements of this narrative fit the O'Donovan theme of the pre-born human as a player on the scene of history. John the Baptist is already pointing the way as a prophet to the Messiah, leaping with "joy" (Luke 1:44). As well, John is named and assigned a task before his birth (Luke 1:13-17). Of course all of these examples are in close proximity, as birth narratives, to the incarnation theme. But O'Donovan's "player in history" paradigm is found elsewhere throughout the text of Scripture.

A summary of some of the pre-birth players on the stage of biblical history is telling. The *in utero* actors include: Isaac (Gen 18:9-15, 21:1-7); Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:22-23); Samson (Judg 13:2-7); Samuel (1

²⁸ C. Ben Mitchell, *Was Jesus an Embryo? The Ethics of Human Embryo Research and the Brave New World* (Nashville, TN: The Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1995), 2.

²⁹ Mitchell, *Was Jesus an Embryo?* 4-5.

³⁰ It is doubtful whether the New Testament evidence can provide such precision in dating. In any case the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth probably took place quite early in Mary's pregnancy.

³¹ Mitchell, *Was Jesus an Embryo?* 5.

Sam 1:1-28); David (Pss 51, 139); Solomon (2 Sam 7: 12-16; 12:24-25); Job (Job 3:3; 10:8-12); and Paul (Gal 1:15). Already mentioned in O'Donovan are Pharaoh, Cyrus, Jeremiah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. The pattern emerging is not one of exception, but a kind of general rule. The major players of biblical history are typically introduced, described, called, or named long before their birth. The incarnational anthropology in general is confirmed by many particular individuals in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from O'Donovan, Barth, and the classic understanding of incarnation (John 1:14) it seems theologically sound to base our understanding of anthropology upon Christology, specifically the humanity of Jesus. This includes assessing the moral status of any human embryo on the same basis as that of the incarnate Christ. Given this approach, a compelling case exists for the personhood of the embryo, considering as well the other theological and biblical evidences for incarnation at the point of conception or fertilization.

The Word became "flesh," not an adult, teenager, child, or even an infant. The story of Jesus begins, as do other biblical biographies, with conception and announcement—not with birth, preferences, or self-consciousness—*contra* Metzler and Singer. From the moment of fertilization on, the sanctity of human life is based upon the incarnation of Christ, as well as the *imago Dei*. Christians should make this case to one another and bear witness to a culture of death, which affirms incarnation "in reverse." With Muggeridge, we can critique and correct the reigning zeitgeist of Logos "in reverse" with its resultant quest for life that ends in death. The final question in the great debate is not about who cared more for Ronald Reagan or Christopher Reeve, or who is more compassionate toward Michael J. Fox. The ultimate question at hand is whether we ought to engage in embryonic manipulation that results in the destruction of our youngest human beings. The answer to that question is clear.